

Barriers

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1

He slogged through loose desert sand and silt, following the old path that led home. There were other routes, of course, more convenient and faster, but Jacob Ramirez had chosen this way as a symbolic return to his origins. As the closing of a circle. Perhaps even as the completion of a poem. For this was the path he had taken when he left.

He had no difficulty finding his way, though he was returning for the first time in years. His feet still recognized the track through the ancient landscape of his youth. The sandy swales. The scrambles down and up little caliche ravines. The gravel piedmonts, shiny with desert varnish, where the footing was firm. The particular mesquite grove where the course turned south. Then the familiar old saguaro, miraculously still standing, whose broken arm still reached down as if in greeting to an old friend. And at last the artesian pond, surrounded by willows, where the ancient, half-dead cottonwood had not fallen, but still spread its branches over the sky-blue water.

Jacob paused to reminisce and drink from one of the plastic water bottles in his backpack. He and his brother had spent many hours here. But those special days were now long past. Things had changed irreversibly. Jacob slung his pack over his shoulder and began the slow ascent up the shallow draw between ridges festooned with greasewood and cactus, anticipating his first long view southward.

At the crest he stopped and stared at the dull reddish scar off in the shimmering distance. It had not been there the last time he passed this way. He lifted off his sombrero and wiped his forehead with a shirt sleeve. A blinding sun blazed down on his shoulders and bare head, magnifying the sense of irreality. Not quite believing it to be real, he shuffled his sneakered feet through another kilometer of burning white sand until they crunched at last across a new gravel road. His hand reached out and touched the hot, ferruginous structure.

Hollow square steel posts, ten inches in cross section, had been rammed deep into the earth and filled with concrete. They sprouted every five feet, alternating in height between five and six feet. A single heavy railroad track rail had been welded to the north side of the posts, with periodic expansion joints, to prevent passage of any vehicle. The posts had already weathered to a rusty reddish brown. Three taut strands of shiny new barbed wire stood off the dragons-tooth barrier to discourage pedestrian and cow.

A hundred feet beyond, paralleling the barrier, a new barbed wire fence had been erected on white metal posts with a white metal cap pipe to define the international boundary and further impede the progress of cows and humans. Between lay a no-man's land of undisturbed desert. The twin obstructions stretched east and west in dead-straight lines that would never meet, through the mesquite and greasewood, dropping into distant dips and climbing the rolling foothills as far as his eyes could see. They appeared to be a modern-day Maginot Line, and were probably no more effective. Altogether, this new swath of quick-and-dirty industrial construction stunned him as an ugly monument to American insensitivity and misunderstanding.

Jacob shook his head and pressed his fingers against the hot metal rail. This thing was an abomination. Its rusting straight line was a scab. The male force had sliced into the desert's rounded mounds and pliant shrubs as a razor cuts into the belly of the female. A grackle perched on a post, laughing, and hawks soared indifferently overhead. The tortoise would hardly notice the barrier as he crawled beneath it. The mountain lion and bobcat and javelina would slither between the strands of barbed wire. He wondered what the wise coyote would make of such foolishness.

Jacob thought back to the ejido where he grew up. He and his brother had never paid much attention to the old, broken-down barbed-wire fence which split the reservation in two like a dull knife, severing north from south. Those political boundaries were of no consequence to the people living there. In school he had learned that the 1853 Gadsden Purchase had brought Papago lands into the United States, but by its terms the United States agreed to honor all land rights of the area held by Mexican citizens, which included indigenous people. But such imaginary lines had little reality here in the heart of the desert. They were conceived and negotiated and agreed to and paid for by others, far away, who had never set foot among the People of the Desert. His people enjoyed a common history and culture, a common language, and a deep respect for the land and its many sacred places. The Tohono O'odham were one and indivisible. They could not be cloven in two by a rickety old rusting fence.

Until this.

He set down his pack and drank deeply, emptying one water bottle, as he considered his options. He was born on this side of the imaginary boundary line. He had an Arizona birth certificate to prove it. Thus, he was a U.S. citizen. Unlike his brother. Franklin had been born on the other side, after the family moved to the village a few miles south so his father could find work. There, in that little farming community, they had both been raised.

But Jacob *was* a U.S. citizen. And as such he had a right to slip through this ridiculous vehicle barrier and walk right over to the international boundary fence. He would still be within the United States. There were no warning signs prohibiting him from entering the enclosure. And once he had crossed it, if he just happened to climb over the boundary fence, well, then he would become a Mexican problem, and of no further concern to the Border Patrol. Wasn't that right? It made sense to him. And besides, there was no one around to see him.

Jacob took his time surveying his surroundings, then kicked his backpack under the bottom strand of barbed wire. He glanced around again, but saw nothing but a white-tailed rabbit dodging through the creosote bush. It was not too difficult stepping over the lowest strand while bending beneath the heavy rail, but he did manage to catch a barb and tear his new khaki trousers. "Damn," he muttered, probing the flesh beneath the tiny rip. At least the barb had drawn no blood.

Once on the other side, he straightened up slowly, a bit lightheaded from the heat and glare. Cautiously he crossed toward the second fence. Beyond it lay an entirely different culture, spread out like a brushy carpet across a broad basin to the foot of distant, but familiar, mountains. He paused to see if he could recognize any landmarks. With an almost magnetic allure the shallow valley tugged at his memory and his upbeating heart. The only thing moving was the speck of an overloaded hay truck crawling down an invisible road in the glistening distance.

Maybe it was the intense brightness, or the desert heat, or the way the creosote bush

shimmered in the breeze that made Jacob feel disoriented. As if an electric current were passing through his mind. He was suddenly unhinged. Disconnected from reality. From *three* realities, actually. Realities that opened around him in vivid clarity, rooted in the three languages that divided his mind. Temporally and physically, each reality was sovereign in its own memories and desires. The feeling was almost auditory, like a choir of angelic music drawing him forth. Spread out before him lay two cultures, the Native American and the Mexican, each hopelessly intertwined and embedded in his past. And behind him, in a strange convergence of recent past and present, there loomed a harsh, rectilinear, male culture that he now dreaded to turn and face.

Oh, yes, these are barriers too, he thought.

Invisible barriers.

Inside my mind.

The roar and rattle of a truck startled him. Jacob turned to see a white pickup plummeting down the gravel road at the head of a thick rooster tail of dust. The vehicle was white like the dust that exploded from beneath its wheels. "Border Patrol" was stenciled boldly below the light bar on the side of the steel detainment shell. To Jacob the speed seemed excessive for the conditions. The truck slalomed and fishtailed in the loose gravel before skidding to a stop with its nose a foot from the barrier. Jacob was impressed with the driver's skill.

Out sprang the driver and stepped quickly to the fence. To his surprise, the figure in the gray-green uniform was a woman. She was tall and bulky above with a short blond ponytail poking out the back of her Border Patrol baseball cap. She withdrew a small black automatic pistol from its holster and pointed it skyway as she called to Jacob, "Sir, stop right where you are."

Her partner, older and less agile, was a heavy fellow with a weathered, lopsided face and brown hair beginning to gray at the temples. He too had withdrawn a pistol from the holster on his belt and was pointing it at the ground. The incongruity struck Jacob. What was supposed to be the standard operating procedure here? Point your gun into the air, or at the ground. For no good reason he suspected the man to be wrong. Not that it made any difference, under the circumstances.

"Sir, raise you hands over your head," called the young woman with careful articulation, so that there could be no misunderstanding.

Jacob studied her, and then her partner, and then he turned to the barbed wire border fence only a few yards away, calculating his chances of making it over before they could reach him. He concluded that he probably could. But the firearms muddled the equation. He doubted they would actually shoot at him. But they could. They could shoot him dead as he climbed over. Or even after he was on the other side.

So Jacob sighed and turned back to face the agents, holding his hands out to his sides. "What do you want with me?" he yelled.

She faced a confused young man, dressed in a black shirt and khaki pants, caught in the restricted area between the two barriers like a deer in headlights. Beneath his tattered straw Mexican sombrero, unkempt black hair spilled down his forehead and over his ears. His cheeks were as round as a rabbit's and covered with a bristle of short black whiskers. A pair of black-rimmed spectacles bisected his face like a bandit's mask and imparted a comical, nerdy appearance. His stubby nose was a bright brown triangle, and his narrow mouth turned downward in

what appeared to be a perpetual pout. Though the impression was of roundness, his stout legs and arms appeared solid, not flabby. He was obviously conflicted, and the last thing she wanted was for him to run.

She gave him her warmest smile and repeated as pleasantly as she could, "Please place your backpack on the ground and raise your hands over your head."

Jacob stared at her for a while longer, then removed his backpack from over his shoulder and set it by his feet. He raised his hands.

"Now walk towards me." she instructed. "Slowly."

Jacob glanced down at his pack.

"You can leave your pack where it is."

Jacob began moving slowly toward her. She holstered her gun and performed a quick little acrobatic twist that brought her inside the no-man's land. She sidled to meet him in a roundabout loop, keeping clear of her partner's line of fire. The male agent just stood there with his pistol pointed down and a silly grin on his face.

"Nice trick," Jacob smiled as she approached. "They teach you that in Border Patrol school?"

"Keep your hands over your head," she said, all business. "Now remain where you are while I retrieve your backpack."

Jacob complied, following her with his eyes. She was attractive, with clear skin and wide-set eyes, probably in her late twenties. The bulky appearance of her upper body came from a bullet-proof vest.

She squatted down and zipped open his pack, rummaging through his water bottles, clean underwear, notebooks, and toiletries, then returned everything to the bag and walked back to him. She set his backpack on the ground behind her. "Sir, I'm going to pat you down for weapons now." She withdrew a pair of white latex gloves from a pouch on her belt and pulled them on. "Is that alright with you, sir."

"Sure. No problem."

"Spread your feet please, sir."

Jacob complied. Her hands were expert and quick, and Jacob didn't mind her touching him at all. Up close, tiny creases at the edges of her eyes made him rethink her age. Probably mid-thirties.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Cell phone."

"And this?"

"My wallet."

"Please take them out of your pockets and place them on the ground."

Jacob followed her instructions. When she was finished, she straightened up and called over to her partner, "He's clean, sir." Then she turned back to Jacob. "Can I see some identification, sir?"

"It's in my wallet."

"You can pick up your wallet and phone now."

Jacob flipped through his thin wallet and handed over his Arizona driver's licence. She inspected it, but did not hand it back.

The male agent yelled over to him with what sounded to Jacob like an east coast accent, maybe New Jersey, "You an Indian?"

"Actually, I'm a citizen of the United States of America," Jacob called back.

"Ya look like a fuckin' Papago t' me."

"I am a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, if that's what you mean," Jacob responded. He had taken an immediate dislike to the man. "We changed our name back in 1986. But maybe you weren't paying much attention back then."

"Smart ass," grumbled the agent. "Bring 'im back over this side, Gwen. Let's see just how smart this guy is."

She walked him back and showed him the twist move that got him through to the north of the barrier. Jacob felt he had learned something for the day.

The male agent wore the same gray-green uniform as his partner, but without the flak jacket. It looked a whole lot better on her. His was ruffled and had a single silver bar on the collar. They both wore U.S. Customs and Border Protection patches on their shoulders. His name tape read "Nomellini, T. I."

"What's your name?" Nomellini growled.

"Jacob Ramirez." The female agent wrote it down in her notebook.

Nomellini compared the name to the driver's licence he had just been handed. "You got a passport?"

"Not with me," replied Jacob. "Never thought I needed one as long as I stayed inside the country."

"Where were ya born?"

"Where?"

"Yeah. *Where?*"

"Not far from here. The village no longer has a name. But it was north of the border. I have an Arizona birth certificate."

"With ya?"

"No."

"What was your business crossin' into the United States?"

Jacob laughed. "I wasn't crossing *into* the United States. I was thinking of crossing *out* of the United States. Into Mexico. But I didn't do it."

Nomellini smirked. "Can ya prove that?"

Jacob considered. "Probably. I have a friend who dropped me off on the trail this morning."

"What's 'is name?"

"Laurie McDougal."

"A lady, huh?"

"Yes." He thought of adding "sir," but just couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Sounds Irish. She your girlfriend?"

"An associate."

Nomellini smirked. "Zat what you call 'em now? What's a white girl see in a fat Papago like you?"

Jacob held his tongue.

“Where’s she live?”

“Saguarito.”

“Address?”

Jacob recited an address and telephone number, slowly to make sure the female agent got it down correctly.

“Zat where you live?”

“No. I live in Tucson. My address is on my driver’s licence.”

“What d’ya do for a livin’?”

Jacob hesitated, then told him the truth. “I’m a poet.”

“A what?”

“A poet.”

“A *poet*?”

“That’s right.”

Nomellini snorted and turned to his partner. “Ya hear that? Guy thinks he’s a fuckin’ *poet*? Does it for a *livin’*.”

She remained silent, eyes cast on her boots.

Without prompting, Jacob added, “I earn my living writing and publishing books of poetry. You can look me up on the internet. I’ve got some pretty good reviews. It’s what I do for a living. Therefore, I’m a poet.”

Nomellini glowered. “How long ya been in the U.S.?”

“I was born here.”

“Ever been south a the border?”

Jacob considered his response. “I grew up there . . . on Indian land . . . about five kilometers south of here . . . until I went away to high school in Sells . . . then I was awarded a scholarship to the University of Arizona . . . and I’ve been living and working here ever since I graduated.”

“Why’re ya back?”

“Back . . . ?”

“Don’t play stupid. You said you were headin’ back t’ Mexico.”

“Oh.” Jacob wondered whether it was any of his damned business, but decided this was not a fight he could win. “Because my younger brother is dying of cancer.”

“What’s ’is name.” Not a hint of sympathy.

“Franklin.”

“Franklin? First name or last?”

“His given name. First.”

“Franklin what?”

“Ramirez. Like me.”

“You a Mexican citizen?”

“No, I just told you, I’m a U.S. citizen.”

Nomellini glared at him, but couldn’t think of anything more to ask. He led his partner a few steps away. There was no attempt to keep Jacob from hearing. “Well, whaddaya think we oughta do with ’im?”

She thought about it for a while. Shrugged. “I say we let him go.”

“Humph. I don’t know. I think we oughta hold onto ’im for a while. Check out ’is story.”

“Save us a lotta paperwork if we let him walk.”

Nomellini nodded. Considered the problem. “Yeah . . . but ’e’s a smart ass. I don’t like his fuckin’ attitude.”

She shrugged. “No evidence of criminal activity.”

“I don’t *like* ’im. Fuckin’ poet. *Come on!* Acts like he’s better’n us. An’ he’s just a fat little fuckin’ Indian.”

She said nothing.

Nomellini continued, “I say let’s hold ’im under the FSDC. Use it or lose it. It’ll teach ’im a lesson an’ we’ll get ’im outta our hair. Very little paperwork that way.”

“He says he’s a U.S. citizen.”

“Don’t matter. What you have ta understand, Gwen, is ya can’t be a fuckin’ bleeding’ heart out here. If ya learn anything from me, it’s that part of our job is ta inflict a little pain on these greasers. So they can take the message back to the other greasers. We don’t want ’em here.”

His partner nodded. “Whatever you say, sir. You’re the instructor.”

“Bet you ass.” He gave it some more thought, then said, “Okay, let’s do it. Go ahead and cuff ’im”

She turned to Jacob. “Sir, turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

“Is this really necessary?” he protested. “I’m a U.S. citizen!”

“Sir, please put your hands behind your back and turn around,” she repeated more forcefully, while Nomellini just watched.

Jacob turned around, and she deftly affixed disposable zip ties to his wrists.

Nomellini stepped over to inspect, slipping a finger under the restraints. “Could have been a little tighter,” he said.

“Sorry, sir,” she replied. “You want me to take them off and do it again?”

“Naw. He’s just a fuckin’ Papago.” He smirked. “What’s a *poet* gonna do? Go ahead and take your vest off. I’ll call it in.” He headed for the cab of the truck with Jacob’s driver’s license in hand.

Defeated, Jacob watched as she unzipped her kevlar vest. Sweat stained the arm pits of her uniform. Her neck glistened with perspiration. He read her name tape.

“Moody,” he said.

She nodded, then turned and carried her vest and his backpack over to the truck, stowing them behind the front seat. The radio crackled and Nomellini seemed to be arguing with someone.

When she returned, Jacob asked, “Is he your commanding office?”

In a hushed voice she said, “Training officer.”

Jacob thought about it. “Well . . . don’t let him train away your humanity.”

She looked up with a sad smile, her head dipping slightly in acknowledgment. This was not easy for her either.

“Thanks for trying anyway, Moody,” he said.

“Not my call.” They stood about the same height. Five-ten, he guessed. Eyes at the

same level. Hers were a striking pale-gray blue. “And I’m sorry about your brother,” she added softly. “But I think you should be out in plenty of time to see him. Soon as your story is verified. Doesn’t look like you’ve broken any laws. Not yet, anyway. But I am going to advise you, next time you should cross at an official port of entry. Okay? Nogales. Or maybe Lukeville.”

Jacob dropped his gaze and shuffled his feet. “What’s this FS . . . FSC . . . something, he was talking about?”

“FSDC?”

“Yeah.”

“Federal-State Detention Compact,” she explained. “You’re going to a county jail rather than a federal detention facility. We’re kind of overcrowded right now.”

Jacob wanted to ask her more, but Nomellini shuffled back with a grin on his lopsided face. “We’re good to go. Santa Cruz and Pima are all full up, but they found room for ’im up in Graham County.”

“Graham County? So we’ll have to transport him all the way up to Safford?”

“No way. We’ll drop ’im off at Sells and the van’ll take him on down to Nogales. Sheriff’ll have a bus there t’take him the rest of the way. He’s their problem after we drop ’im. Have ya read ’im ’is rights?”

“I was waiting to see what you found out.”

“Okay. Go ahead an’ do it then.”

Jacob tried to catch her eye, but Agent Moody was already pulling a laminated plastic card out of her cargo pocket. Without looking up she read him his Miranda rights. All about having the right to remain silent. The right against self-incrimination. The right to an attorney or to have one appointed. Jacob barely listened. He knew it already from the television shows.

When she was done, Jacob turned to Nomellini and asked, “Weren’t you supposed to read me that before you questioned me?”

“We did,” Nomellini snapped without missing a beat. He turned to Moody. “Make sure ya show it that way in your report.” Then he wheeled back on Jacob, smirking. “You’re under arrest, smart ass.”

2

This had been the worst day of his life. Jacob tried to put the horror and the injustice out of his mind, but thoughts of it all kept swirling back, stirring up vivid images and recalling sensations. He couldn’t help himself from reliving it all as he dangled his feet over the edge of a top bunk. He gazed around for diversion. Everything seemed a foul-smelling orange. Not really orange. But it all *felt* orange, like the jumpsuits they wore. There were thirteen of them, and the pecking order had been established long before he arrived. Jacob was at the bottom, scarcely worth acknowledging. And that suited him just fine.

He was in a holding cell with no bars and no windows. The barriers here were just four concrete block walls, painted a dirty dull sand color, and a gray steel plate door. And his own fear. His fear was the greatest barrier.

We cannot live without barriers, he thought, half-heartedly searching for poetry. *When*

the barriers are too few, we create our own. He couldn't continue.

Nine double bunks were arranged in two semicircles at one end. Five in the outer loop and four inside. At the other end were four toilets surrounded by low walls that provided no privacy. And two showers. In between were two metal tables with attached bench. Enough to seat five. Eating was done in shifts. The room measured 24-feet by 24-four feet. Exactly. Jacob knew that because he had stepped it off again and again until his pacing seemed to make the other inmates nervous. No one asked him to stop, but he could see it in their eyes. So he climbed up to his bunk and sat with his legs dangling over the edge.

His neck and shoulders were sore from trying to brace himself with his hands laced behind his back as the pickup truck bounced and jolted over the washboard surface and the dips and bumps in the gravel road. Without a seat belt, he had been pummeled by the steel walls and unpadded benches. His glasses had been jarred off his face and he had been helpless to retrieve them as they bounced and ricocheted around the foot well. There was no air conditioning in the back, and his clothes were soaked with sweat by the time they pulled him from his cage at the field office north of Sells.

Agent Moody retrieved his glasses. One lens was pitted and the other cracked in the corner. "I'm sorry," she said as she gently slipped them over his nose. They hung there bent and askew. "You can make a claim for a new pair."

Then she had turned him over to the local sheriff's deputies, who snipped off his zip ties and replaced them with metal bracelets, which were attached in front to a belly chain. Jacob had to bend his neck to punch his glasses back onto his nose. They led him to an old gray Santa Cruz Sheriff's Department school bus. It was a worn and weathered antique with steel mesh welded over the windows. Waiting inside were half a dozen other sullen detainees, already on board. They were all seated apart from each other, and no one bothered to speak to him. The driver and a guard barked orders and seemed to be in a great hurry to be rid of them all. At least the seat was cushioned and there was a hint of cool air through the grillwork separating him from the front of the bus.

In Nogales deputies removed his handcuffs and belly chain and replaced them with an identical set. The old set apparently stayed with the bus. Paperwork seemed to change hands beyond his horizon, but no copies were given to him. They locked him into a small holding cell with a seatless metal toilet in one corner. There he waited for a long time.

"Don't I get a phone call?" he asked a deputy who passed his cell, but the man warned him to keep his mouth shut. He didn't ask again.

The sun was already setting when the van from Safford arrived. Again they changed his handcuffs and belly chain before ushering him into the back. There were no door handles on the inside. He was the only prisoner. A plate aluminum wall separated him from the deputies up front. Wire mesh covered the windows. For hours he felt utterly alone as they drove through the darkening desert.

In Safford the van pulled into the yard of the Graham County Sheriff's Adult Detention Center. Through spirals of concertina wire atop the chain link fence, Jacob had read the lofty words painted in grand gold letters high on the wall. He had never actually seen the inside of a jail, and the highfalutin language gave him hope that the facility would be better than what he routinely saw on television cop dramas. But the reality turned out to be much worse.

Inside two jailors, one young with buzz-cut strawberry blond hair, and the other white haired and elderly, had removed the handcuffs and chains and relieved him of his wallet and cell phone and the other possessions in his pockets. He was ordered to take off his shoes, and they stripped him of his clothing. They handed him an orange jumpsuit and slippers to put on. The suit was too tight around the chest. They tried several sizes, but none fit right. Finally they settled on an extra large to accommodate his girth, but he had to roll up his sleeves and cuffs. The younger man grinned. "Makes ya look like a clown." Then they had him sign a receipt for his things, rolled his finger prints, and photographed him.

"You ain't eaten dinner yet?" the older deputy asked.

"No, sir."

"How long you been in custody?"

Jacob calculated. "Maybe about twelve hours."

"Shit. You gotta be fed."

"That's okay. I'm not hungry."

"Don't matter. It's the law. I'll have some dinner sent over to your cell."

The young deputy had handed him a thin mattress pad, a towel, a threadbare cotton blanket, and the stub of a toothbrush. Together they lead him down a long cement block hallway and unlocked a steel door. Jacob stepped inside and the jailors closed and locked the door behind him. A television blared out the voices and canned laughter of an inane sitcom. The inmates turned to eye him, but quickly lost interest. Jacob was just another worthless sad-sack clown who had strayed into the spider web. He wandered around aimlessly with his mattress and towel and blanket until one of the Caucasians, an emaciated druggie he later learned was called "Hump," jabbed his thumb at an upper bunk and snapped, "That's yours up there."

Jacob spread out his mattress and climbed up. Trying to avoid eye contact. Trying to be even more invisible than he already was. One glance told him that these fellows were not the sort of folks he was accustomed to associating with. They scared him. Even their disinterest scared him. *Especially* their disinterest scared him.

Jacob drew a deep breath and thought about what he had said to Agent Moody. *Don't let them train away your humanity.*

Five minutes later the lock snapped and a trustee in a gray jumpsuit pushed his way in with a tin plate in his hand. "Ramirez?" he barked.

After a pause, Jacob said meekly, "Here."

All eyes turned to him, as if he were a lone sheep in a pack of wolves. As if he were disturbing the order of the place.

"Your dinner," The trustee announced, rattling the plate on the nearest metal table and retreating. The lock clacked after him.

Jacob climbed down and stepped over to inspect a viscous pile of something green and black with tan specks in it. His stomach clinched at the aroma. What was it? Maybe it had some green beans mashed up in it. Some rice. Maybe some kind of ground meat, god knew what. A spoon and a slice of moldy bread lay next to it. His appetite evaporated.

"Yo."

Jacob turned around and met a slight, jittery young Apache fellow who looked too young to be in the adult lockup. He was not much older than a boy, with thick black hair trimmed short

and a stubby chin that gave his head a squashed look.

“Ya gonna eat that?”

“No,” he said. “Doesn’t look fit for human consumption.”

“Tha’s a fac’.” A quick smile flicked across the youth’s narrow lips, revealing a gold front tooth. “Can I have it?”

“Yes. Sure. Go ahead.”

Instead of eating it, the fellow scraped the plate into a couple of blank sheets of cheap writing paper and folded them up.

Jacob asked, “That for later?”

“Not for me.” The gold tooth flashed again. “Summa these boys gets hungry later on. It be nice t’ be able t’ help ’em out when I can.”

“What’s you name?” Jacob asked.

“Grijavla,” the young man announced proudly. He smiled broadly, his gold tooth glistening in the fluorescent lighting.

Jacob couldn’t tell if it was his given or family name. Or an alias. It didn’t matter. But he liked him. “I’m Jacob.” He held out his fist.

Grijavla bumped it, clearly pleased to have made a new friend. “Wha’cha in for?”

Jacob frowned. “I’m not sure. I was picked up by the Border Patrol. But I was bussed up here by the sheriff’s department. Nobody ever told me what I was charged with.”

Grijavla scowled. “Thass bad, bro.”

“Bad? How is it bad? I never crossed the border. It was all a mistake.”

Grijavla laughed. “It’s *all* a mistake, bro. That for sure. Yeah? We don’ get many border crossers up here. How come they sent ya up here, anyhow?”

Jacob just shrugged.

“I think they fuckin’ with ya, man.”

Jacob’s spirits sank. “Why would they want to do that?”

Grijavla shook his head, then came the gold-studded grin. “Cause they *can*. They *can*, bro. They the *man*.”

Jacob spent the rest of the evening on his bunk, dangling his legs and punching his twisted glasses back on his nose. At ten o’clock the lights went out, but Jacob couldn’t sleep. The time passed glacially. He lay still, forcing himself not to dwell on what had happened today. Or where this was all going.

Instead, the image of his brother filled him with waves of guilt and remorse. Alone in his bedroom at the back of the old house, Franklin lay dying. Jacob saw the room in all its detail. He envisioned the homestead that his father and his brother and he had scratched out of the harsh alkaline desert. The irrigation ditches. The planting and tending of corn and beans and squash and tomatoes. The booming monsoon rains. The smell of the greasewood afterward. And the wonderful adventures he and Franklin had had there together, exploring, fishing the ponds, laughing, imbibing their heritage infused on the dry desert air.

The guilty truth was that Jacob had not been a good brother. Oh, he had sent money. But not enough. Never nearly enough. It was all so clear now. Since he left for the university, he had not been back to help his brother with the work, because Jacob had grown enthralled with the possibility of fame and fortune in a foreign land.

By morning the cell had grown cold. Daylight filtered in from four round ports in the ceiling, one in each corner, too small to crawl through. Otherwise there was no way to tell if it was day or night. The steel door opened with a clang. A trustee rolled in a cart and began setting out mops and scrub brushes and rags. Everyone folded their mattresses and carried them over and stacked them on the empty cart. It all seemed to follow rules that everyone knew, but no one had bothered sharing with him. Jacob jumped down, folded his mattress, and placed it on top of the stack as the trustee was wheeling out the cart.

Grijavla intercepted him on his way back to his bunk. He carried two mops and a bucket of sudsy water. "Gotcha on mop duty, ya lucky dog."

"We have to swab the floor?"

"Better'n scrubbin' the toilets, dawg."

"How did you manage that?"

"I jus' a'ksed Brodie, an' Jefe heard me an' nodded."

Jacob understood none of it, except there was a hierarchy here. And rules that these men had created, or perhaps those who had passed through before them. Rules which ordered life and made it endurable. He took hold of a mop, and for the first time felt an inkling of community here.

Grijavla prattled while they mopped. He was serving thirty days for being drunk in public. He had pled guilty. It was his third time, and next time he might qualify as a trustee. He lived over on the San Carlos reservation with his mother. The bottle was his curse.

When they were through and the equipment had been returned and counted and wheeled away, Jacob asked Grijavla what came next.

"Breakfast."

Jacob punched his broken glasses up on his nose. "How does that work?"

"You gonna eat last, bro. You at the bottom. Don't go pushin' yer way in. Wait'll there's an empty seat at the table."

"Okay."

"An' if ya can't finish your food, I wouldn't min' takin' your leftovers."

Jacob couldn't eat. The gruel they called oatmeal was lukewarm and vile. The toast was burnt. The last apple, passed over by every other inmate, was bruised and encrusted with scale. He left it all for Grijavla, who flashed a gleaming tooth in thanks.

After breakfast Grijavla sat next to him on the low tile wall by the toilets. They watched Scruggs, a wiry Latino from Douglas, collect all the Bibles that had been strategically placed throughout the cell. Scruggs tied them up in his blanket and began lifting and swinging them around as if he were pumping iron.

"Why all the Bibles?" Jacob asked.

"Baptists," Grijavla shrugged. "Mormons couldn't get their own Book in here." Then he nodded toward Jefe, a stocky Mexican with a thick tattooed neck and shaved head who had turned to look the other way. "That's Jefe," he whispered. "Don' mess with him." He explained that Jefe was half-way through a year's sentence for beating his brother nearly to death. He was *numero uno* in here, and even the guards feared him. No one talked directly to him, except

Brodie and Knife.

Jacob asked about the other inmates.

Most were in for driving violations, his friend told him. Drunk driving. Driving on a suspended license. Lee, a burly, hairy man, had beaten his wife and was now facing domestic abuse charges. It was unlikely they would stick, because his wife would never testify against him. If she did, she was as good as dead, and she knew it. Some were awaiting a disposition hearing or trial. Some were already serving time. Usually thirty days. Sometimes as much as six months. A few were waiting to be arraigned.

“Arraigned?” Jacob asked. “Will I be arraigned?”

“They gotta arraign ya, bro. Least I think they do. Don’t know much about this federal shit, though.”

“What do they do?”

“They jus’ tell ya what they chargin’ ya with. It’s the law. Gotta do it within twenty-four hours, I think. They’ll prob’ly call ya this mornin’.”

“I’ll go up to court?”

“Naw. They do it on a video link. Just down the hall. Judge Claridge’ll talk ta ya.”

“Then what happens?”

“Usually they set bail. Or a disposition hearing. But I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout how they do it with fed’ral pris’ners.”

Mostly it was waiting. Jacob lay on his towel in his cold metal bunk. The radio pounded out tinny rock music at a deafening volume. Everyone seemed to keep their distance. Their own thoughts. Their own counsel. Four times a deputy clanged open the door and called out a name. The named inmate would follow the deputy out and return in five or ten minutes. Finally the deputy called out, “Ramirez!”

Jacob dropped to the floor and followed him down the cement block corridor to a small converted cell with a desk holding a video monitor with a face on it. The guard motioned him to the chair in front of it, and Jacob sat down.

“Good morning,” said the face. It was a handsome young man with a full head of thick chestnut hair combed straight back. He wore a string tie, but no coat or robe. “I’m Wendell Claridge, Justice of the Peace. Can you hear me alright?”

“Yes,” said Jacob.

“Good. What is your name?”

Jacob stated his name.

“It looks like they’ve got you on a federal hold, Mr. Ramirez.” He appeared to turn pages below the screen. Jacob presumed it was his file. “But I can’t find any charges filed.” Claridge looked up. His eyes suggested intelligence. “What were you arrested for?”

“I don’t know.”

“They didn’t tell you?”

“No. For being an Indian, I think.”

Claridge smiled. “Tell me what happened.”

Jacob told him everything. How his brother was dying of cancer. How Jacob had taken the old path home, but found it blocked. How he had crossed the first barrier, but had not reached the border fence. He described the confrontation with the Border Patrol agents and his

arrest and his convoluted transportation to the jail.

“And no one advised you what you were being detained for?”

“That’s correct, sir.”

“Are you a United States citizen?”

“Yes, sir.”

Claridge glanced down and nodded. “Yes, I see you have an Arizona driver’s license.” He paused in thought. “Do you remember who the arresting agent was?”

“His name tag said Nomellini, sir,” Jacob answered.

“Uh,” Claridge grimaced. “Okay. I wish he wouldn’t keep doing this.” He sighed. “I’ll look into it. And put you on for a plea and disposition hearing tomorrow morning.”

“*Tomorrow?*” Jacob punched his glasses back on his nose. “I’ll have to stay in here another day?”

“It’s all I can do.”

“No bail?”

“Not with this federal hold.”

“But my brother is dying. I should be there with him.”

Claridge drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “I know. I’m sorry. But today my hands are tied.”

Jacob couldn’t remember walking back to the cell. Or climbing up to his bunk to dangle his legs into the void.

“Ya gotta pull yourself together, bro,” Grijavla told him after Jacob explained what happened. “You be outta her tomorrow, for sure.”

But Jacob wasn’t sure about it at all. The hours dwindled by in a slow-motion dream. Depressed, he ate nothing for lunch, and Grijavla folded away his food. A couple of Grijavla’s friends drifted over and bumped fists trying to cheer him up, but there was really not much to say. “Where’re ya from?” “Whacha in for?” “Know a good cheap attorney?” Jacob didn’t feel like talking. Instead he sat on his towel and let his feet dangle.

Dinner was inedible. Jacob had no appetite. Grijavla folded that away too. When the cart with the mattresses returned, he took one and lay quietly on it until the lights were turned out, and then the memories returned to engulf him. He didn’t sleep for a long time.

4

The next morning they called his name shortly after breakfast. “Justice Claridge wants to see you up in the courtroom.” In booking they reattached the handcuffs and belly chain before driving him over to the basement of the courthouse. They lead him up a narrow flight of metal stairs and through a steel door into the courtroom. A uniformed bailiff met them there and said, “You can take off the restraints, Hal. Judge says we don’t need them.”

Jacob gazed around the otherwise empty courtroom as the deputy found the right key and removed the cuffs and chain. At one end of the room stood the bench, raised only slightly above a long desk with six chairs and microphones. At the other end, behind a railing, were a dozen or so folding chairs and the main doorway.

“Justice Claridge will see you in chambers,” the bailiff said. He opened a door at the side

of the bench, but stayed outside as Jacob entered.

Claridge rose from the desk and offered Jacob his hand. "Please sit down, Mr. Ramirez."

Jacob sat opposite the judge.

"I talked to one of the agents who detained you."

"Nomellini?"

"No, the other agent."

"Moody," Jacob said, punching his glasses back on his nose.

"Yes. Very observant of you."

"I liked her."

"Yes, well . . . she liked you too . . . anyway, she looked you up on the internet. She's cancelled the federal hold. There are no other charges pending. Your record is clean. So I am ordering your release. Effective immediately."

Jacob stared at him. "I'm free to go?"

"Yes." Claridge smiled.

"That's it then?"

"Yes . . . after you've been processed out by the jail."

Jacob was a little confused, but elated. He started to his feet.

Claridge held up his hand. "There *is* one other thing."

"Oh?" Jacob sank back onto the chair, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Yes . . . ah . . . can you keep a secret, Mr. Ramirez?"

"A secret?"

"Yes." Claridge lowered his voice. "Agent Moody wanted you to know something. I ordinarily wouldn't be telling you this, but she specifically authorized me to. Now that the investigation is complete."

"Investigation?"

"This information cannot leave this room. Do I have your word?"

Jacob considered the ramifications. But he had no idea what Claridge was talking about. His curiosity got the better of him. "Yes, sir. You have my word."

"Agent Moody is not a trainee."

"She's not?"

"No. She's been with a special unit of the Border Patrol for over ten years, and when you met her she was working an undercover assignment for internal investigations." He paused to let it sink in. "There have been complaints."

"About . . . Nomellini?"

"Yes. And she thinks she's got him now for falsifying reports and unprofessional conduct toward detainees."

"But . . . *she* was writing the report, not Nomellini."

"He had to sign off on it. And he did."

"Well, won't that just be her word against his?"

Claridge leaned forward and whispered, "She was wearing a wire. It's all recorded."

Jacob's pout curled into a round smile.

"Looks like Nomellini's days as a field agent are over. He'll probably be retired."

Jacob just sat there smiling.

“It was important to Agent Moody that you be told all this. She also wanted to apologize for the grief you’ve been caused by this investigation. She wanted you to know that you will have played a big part in removing this bad apple from their ranks.”

Jacob’s head swam in a sea of conflicting emotion. Relief. Pride. Anger. Satisfaction. Slowly he rose to his feet.

“By the way,” Claridge smiled, “she also told me she bought one of your books online.” He held out his hand. “Now you get out of here and look after that brother of yours.”

At the jail they returned his property. Jacob pulled on his clothes. Laced his shoes. Received his driver’s license and wallet. No cash missing. His backpack. His cell phone. While he waited for the jailer to prepare the receipt, Jacob flipped open the phone. There was one voice message. He punched in the code and waited.

“Sign here,” the deputy said.

Jacob signed the receipt.

The message was from his cousin Carlita in Mexico. Franklin died last night.

Jacob was utterly empty. Empty of purpose. Empty of direction. Empty even of the righteous anger he should have felt. His trip had been in vain. There was nothing left to be done.

The old jailer unlocked the steel door and pulled it open. The last barrier.

Jacob didn’t move.

“You alright, son?” the jailer asked. “Ya look a little shaky.”

“My brother died.”

It took a moment for the words to register. “While you was in *here*?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Jacob could see that he really was. He nodded his appreciation, and had to punch his glasses back onto his nose. But still he didn’t move. Franklin was gone. There was nothing for him out there.

The jailer stepped away. “Take your time, son. I’ll keep an eye on ya from the cage and be back to close the door.”

The door stood wide open before him.

Jacob understood at last. *A barrier is only a barrier if I am trying to cross to the other side. There are no barriers, except the ones I create in my mind. And if there are no longer barriers in my mind . . . then there are no barriers at all.*

Slowly he stepped out into the blinding sunlight.