

Desperado

In the dwindling daylight, a young American couple argued at a lonely bus stop in Guaymas, Mexico. The man gestured at the woman with a guidebook and then opened the book and snapped through the pages while the woman sulked.

They'd argued earlier in the day as well. That time they fought about the very guidebook the man was so intently consulting. The woman had demanded he put the book away; it was ruining their day. Where was the spontaneity? The joy of discovery? She proposed that they roam about the little fishing village of Guaymas, letting whatever sights that interested them be their guide.

He agreed; she was good for him in that way.

However, the only sights they found in Guaymas were the rusted and reeking remnants of the lost fishing industry, empty shops, and moldering old neoclassical buildings. One of these old, stained, rotting buildings was a bank, and it had two soldiers, armed with machine guns, posted up outside the door. Neither of them had ever seen a machine gun in 'real' life. These guns were not ceremonial props, slung over a shoulder to add dash to a uniform, but oily, dark weapons. Weapons that were being held muzzles up, at the ready.

A month ago the Mexican peso had crashed, fallen to record lows. The US State department cautioned Americans that this was not a time travel to Mexico in search of bargains. But a luxury beachfront resort for \$35 a night was too tempting. And the resort, as advertised, was paradise; an ocean-view villa, free breakfast and a wandering mariachi band in the evenings.

However their day trip into the nearby town of Guaymas had been disappointing, hot, and confusing. They were lost most of the time and could not find anyone who spoke English, or at least anyone who admitted that they spoke English.

Then, after a frantic zig-zagging run through the town, they finally reached the bus stop just in time to see the taillights of the last bus to their resort disappear over the hill.

“Jesus, Ryan how did you *not know* there were no buses after 8?” Josephine said.

“It was in the guidebook,” Ryan said, then smacked the book on his palm. He left the rest of his thoughts on that topic unspoken, and they swirled around in his head like dry leaves.

“I suppose we could walk...” she said.

“It’s 25 miles,” he replied.

“A cab?”

“No cabs.”

“Hotel?”

“All our stuff’s at the resort, our train for home leaves at 8 in morning,” he said. “No way will we able to get to the resort and back in time.”

“Then screw our stuff.”

“Passports.”

Ryan sat down next to Josephine and clutched the guidebook. The sun, a large orange blob, sunk into the Sea of Cortez. The fishermen on the docks had cleared out and their boats, moored for night, were dark and gently rocking on water.

“Oops,” Josephine said and smiled. She took Ryan’s hand in hers and kissed his wrist.

“Yeah, oops,” he said and brought her hand up to his lips and kissed the tiny diamond ring on her finger.

The ‘tiny’ diamond had sparked another fight, their first real fight. She had selected the ring, the smallest and least-costly option in the jewelry store. He pleaded for her to pick a ring that wouldn’t make him look like ‘such a cheap asshole.’ She argued that she’d rather have new kitchen cabinets than a shiny rock. And wasn’t what she wanted more important than what his friends thought?

Ryan looked at the ring and his resolve to ‘get over’ this latest spat dissipated, and he remained secretly annoyed.

But sitting together at the bus stop, their hands entwined, they looked every bit the happy young lovers. As the last bit of sunlight faded, a streetlamp turned on and cast a cold blue cone of light on them.

“Buena noches,” a man said as he emerged from the darkness.

“Buena noches,” Josephine replied.

“The bus is no more tonight,” he said. “The resort, si?”

“Si,” she said.

“I take you. Come.”

“How much?” Ryan asked.

“Para nada, Senor,” the man said. “I practice my english, you ride, si?”

Josephine began to rise; Ryan put his hand on her shoulder.

“No,” Ryan said.

“Please Senor, my girl is in hospital in America, I go there soon. I need to talk to doctors. My english...not so good.”

“Aww...” Josephine said. “She’s sick?”

“Si, very sick, her heart,” the man said and tapped his chest.

“Do you have a picture? Of the girl,” Ryan asked.

“Que?”

“Your daughter, a picture of her.”

The man nodded and pulled a photo out his wallet.

The girl was about 7 with black curly hair. She was dressed in a school uniform, a white blouse and dark blue sweater. Her smile was broad, joyful.

“Mi Camila,” he said.

“She is beautiful,” Josephine said and handed the picture back to him.

Ryan questioned him. Where in the US was the girl? Who was her doctor? How long had she been there? The man answered each query without pause until Ryan asked where the girl’s mother was.

He looked up the road for a long moment before murmuring: “Muerto.”

“Okay,” Josephine said, standing up. “Let’s go.”

Ryan was still not so sure. His instinct was to send this man on his way, to be cautious, but that was always his instinct. Boldness was Josephine’s nature; her confidence, her clarity, her way of always knowing, and forcefully insisting on *her way* was what he had first liked most about her. His friends called him whipped, but Ryan sensed that whipping was just what he needed when they met. Hadn’t she been the one to push him to finish school? She got him up off the couch and back to class when his parents had just about given up on him. She was the one that suggested he change his major from History to Engineering. And didn’t he have a high paying, if excruciatingly boring, job? She

masterminded the purchase of their small house in Mesa. Meanwhile, the rest of their friends were still paying crazy high rents just to live in cracker box apartments in Tempe.

Ryan sighed, then followed Josephine and the man as they walked towards a beat up Dodge Dart Swinger. The man opened the passenger door. Ryan jogged the last few steps to the car and held Josephine back as he pushed the seat forward.

“You ride in back,” he said and whispered: “It’s safer.”

“Oh come on,” Josephine whined, but climbed into the backseat anyway.

The bus stop was on the very edge of town and they were quickly out in the lonely desert where not one light burned in deep darkness.

With the windows down the desert air blew through the car and filled their ears with the roar of hot wind.

Josephine leaned up from the back seat, and hooked her chin on the seat between them.

“When do you go to San Diego?” she asked.

“Que?” the man said, then switched to English. “What?”

“WHEN DO YOU GO TO SAN DIEGO?” Josephine shouted.

The man looked puzzled.

“SAN DEE-EGG-O” Ryan shouted. “When do you go?”

“QUE?” the man asked.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” Josephine said. She rolled up the back windows, and climbed over the seat to sit between them.

With less wind noise and Josephine snuggled up right next to him the man was able to tell them he was traveling to the US at the end of the month, his name was Miguel Ángel Hernandez, his daughter was going to have an operation of some sort on her heart.

After a confusing back and forth between Josephine and the man, she finally turned to Ryan and asked: “Transplant?”

“What’s that word?” Miguel asked.

“Transplant, is she having a transplant?”

“Si! That’s it. Trans-de-plant-ay,” he said and nodded happily.

Josephine looked at Ryan and shook her head. She was a nurse and maybe she knew too much to be an optimist about medical stuff, but Ryan thought she enjoyed being a doomsayer than more an angel of mercy.

“When does your daughter come back to Guaymas?” she asked.

“No, she no come here no more,” Miguel said. “America’s her home, she has a new mamá and papá.”

Josephine raised her eyebrows at Ryan.

Ryan turned to the window and peered into the darkness. Beyond the sandy berm of the road there was nothing. That morning on the bus ride from the resort into Guaymas, he felt overwhelmed at the brown desolation of the Mexican countryside. There were no saguaros or prickly pears or barrel cati, only scrubby, twisted looking bushes. The bushes were spaced far apart, each one sucking up every bit of moisture for itself and leaving not one drop of water for any other plant to grow within 20 feet. These, and only these leafless, scraggly plants pocked the undulating hills. Not a house, not a telephone pole, not a shred of anything manmade could be seen except for the single lane of black top road that ran

dead straight for miles up and over the rolling hills. Like ripples on the surface of water, the hills rose and dropped, 20 feet up, 20 feet down.

Ryan's stomach heaved a bit at each dip and he blamed Josephine for insisting he eat some of potato chips she'd bought from a street vendor. The vendor had dug into the bin of golden chips with his bare hands, put them in a paper sack and, before handing them over to Josephine, squeezed a lime and shook an ancient bottle of Tabasco sauce over them. Droplets of lime juice clung to his fingers, which he deftly licked and wiped on his pants.

Though he pretended it was pre-wedding jitters his almost constant irritation with her, in his heart he knew; it was something she said, something he'd overheard.

She had her bridesmaid over to the house; they were drinking, laughing, tying mints up in pink netting for the engagement party. He'd snuck in the backdoor, just to grab his soccer cleats and go without disturbing them—or getting cackled at by a bunch of drunk ladies.

And then he heard his bride's voice rising above the din: "Mr. Right or Mr. Right Time, what's the difference?"

Now, Ryan, Mr. Right Time, slumped against the car door and focused on the blackness of the desert whizzing past, trying to look through his own sullen reflection in the glass and tried not to listen to Josephine's prattle.

"We couldn't believe how cheap everything was!" Josephine said to Miguel. "For lunch we bought a jar of peanut butter and five of these rolls—

"No tacos?" Miguel asked.

"I don't like Mexican food," Josephine said. "Anyway these rolls were like so big—
Josephine held up her hands to indicate the softball-sized rolls.

“—and they were called ‘un peso’ rolls, cause they only cost ONE peso!”

“Si?”

“A peso is like way less than a penny, way less,” Josephine said and poked Ryan in the shoulder. “Hey Ryan, Ryan how many peso to a dollar right now?”

“350,” Ryan murmured.

“350! I could buy 350 of those rolls for a dollar!”

Ryan jerked out of his reverie and sat up alertly: “What was that?”

“What, señor?”

“That light, did you see it? On the hill. A sweep of light,” Ryan turned to see if there was a car behind them, but the road was empty.

Miguel checked in his rearview mirror and said: “No one behind us.”

“Well, I saw it,”

“Maybe light from a ship? The ocean is there,” Miguel said and pointed to the left.

“I think it was behind us, but where did they go?” Ryan said and continued to gaze out of the back window. Finally he turned and settled back into his seat. He was uneasy not just from the light, but from Miguel’s sudden proficiency in English.

Suddenly the car jerked almost to a stop.

“Maldición!” Miguel shouted and the car lurched forward, swerved and bucked forward again.

Miguel steered the car off the road, driving almost a hundred feet into the hard packed desert before the engine stalled.

“Coche estúpido!” Miguel said and got out of the car. He lifted the lid of the engine and smoke and steam poured out.

“Senor, ayúdame? Help?”

“Get over there,” Ryan said and pushed Josephine into the driver’s seat,

“Quit shoving me.”

Ryan reached behind her and quietly pushed down the lock on the driver’s side.

“Lock this door too when I get out,” Ryan said and then stood by the door until she, lips pursed, and locked the door behind him.

Miguel was leaning into the car, propped up on both arms as steam and smoke continued to bellow from the engine. He was muttering in Spanish and shaking his head. Ryan stood back a few feet and watched him cautiously. He didn’t want to get too close, he wasn’t quite sure what he was afraid of, but he was afraid.

Miguel wore a white cabana shirt, a thin cotton, short sleeved tunic that hung straight down almost to the tops of his legs. The back of the shirt pulled in a funny way, Ryan was sure there was something tucked in the waistband of Miguel’s pants.

“Gun?” Ryan thought and looked for some kind of weapon, a rock or a stick, anything.

Ryan spotted a jagged rock about the size of a brick and then out of the darkness he heard a call: “Hola amigos!”

Two men appeared from behind the car.

“Miguel!” One of the men greeted the driver and then went on in rapid Spanish, smiling and joking as though they were old friends. Miguel responded in the same friendly manner and Ryan relaxed a bit. But then suddenly a third man appeared right next to Ryan;

he had come from a completely different direction, from out of the desert. He held a gun. Though gun was just resting in his hand, he wasn't pointing it or even especially showing Ryan that had it —the gun was there.

Soon the other two men also drew guns and then Miguel reached behind him and pulled a gun from his waistband, a gun he pointed at Ryan.

“Senor,” Miguel said, eyes cold but with a pleasant smile wrapped across his face. “Prepare to fight for your life.”

Then without taking his gaze off Ryan, Miguel swung his arm to the right and shot one of the two men standing by the car. The man fell to the ground instantly. Stunned, the man next to Ryan, stared at his compadre on the ground and remained frozen just long enough for Ryan to crash into him and knock them both to the ground. The man's gun flew off into darkness.

Meanwhile the other man by the car ducked behind the vehicle. He braced his arm on the trunk and fired at Miguel. Miguel dove to the ground and fired under the car at his assailant.

Josephine had watched the whole scene unfold through the car windows as though it was an unreal event of which she wasn't quite a part. But when the second gunshot flew from the back of the car, the bullet piercing through the upraised hood, she started the car. By the time the third shot roared and flew under the vehicle, she had put the car in reverse. She stamped on the gas and the car flew backwards and bumped up in the air and back down as it rolled over the gunman. She pulled forward, over the man again, and knocked Miguel to the ground.

Ryan had knocked the wind out of the man he'd tackled and pinned him down with his knees on the man's shoulders. The man bucked and cursed, twisted his head and bit into the flesh of Ryan's thigh.

Screaming with pain and fury, Ryan punched the man's face until he released his bite and then closed his hands around the man's neck. As the shots rang out behind him, Ryan braced for bullet to penetrate his skull. For a fleeting second he wondered, would he see his brains spray onto the sand or would he be dead before they hit the dirt? Fear and horror fueled his strength and he squeezed. First the left and then the right side on the man's neck gave way as the windpipe collapsed. Suddenly the man was still; his blank eyes stared up at the inky sky.

Ryan leapt off the man and rubbed his hands up and down on his thighs erase to sensation of the bones crushing beneath his fingers. He ran a few steps into the desert towards where he had heard the gun skitter. It was dark but he spotted a faint glimmer of metal and dashed for it. He ran just two steps and then tumbled into a hole; he scrambled out on his hands and knees and grabbed the gun.

When he returned to the car, Josephine was sobbing into Miguel's shirt. Miguel was patting her back and comforting her in Spanish.

Ryan pointed the gun at Miguel and asked: "Who are these guys? Amigos? Huh? Amigos of yours?"

"No, no not amigos," Miguel said raising hands. "I know them. Men from the town."

"How'd they just happen upon us out here, in the middle of nowhere?"

"They followed us," Miguel said. "These are desperate times in Guaymas."

"Ryan, put that gun down," Josephine said. "Miguel saved us."

“Did he?”

“Yes, he did,” Josephine insisted.

Miguel stepped away from Josephine and lowered his arms. He turned his palms out to show they were empty, and then raised his hands in supplication.

“Senor, we should go,” he said, glancing at the felled men strewn about them.

Nobody spoke on the ride to the resort. Josephine stared straight ahead and, though she did not make any noise or change her expression, tears continued to well up and spill out of her eyes. Occasionally she would wipe her wet cheeks with the palm of her hand.

At the resort Josephine dug all of the cash out of her purse and tried to hand it to Miguel. He would not take it so she dropped the wad of cash and piece of paper with their address in Mesa into his lap.

“When you come North, stay with us, we’ll help you get to San Diego, we’ll help in any way we can,” she said. “Ryan give him all your cash, we don’t need it.”

Ryan walked slowly over to the car, and threw the gun in the back seat.

Ryan leaned into the window and whispered. “Took me a couple of minutes to figure out why there was hole dug out in the middle of nowhere, but then it came to me— it was the grave, a grave you dug for us.”

odbye at Ryan.