

Forsaken

Adrian stepped off the dark bus and into the bright shock of the Puerto Vallarta afternoon. He'd asked the driver to let him off early, at the Oxxo near Emi's house on the outskirts of town. A shimmering blur hung over the buildings below, but up here, the air was clear. Adrian blinked away the shining whorls stamped on his eyes and ordered an Uber. When Fernando's silver Camry parked in front of him, Adrian held up his duffel, and the trunk unlatched. When Adrian tried to open the back door, however, he found it locked.

"Front seat, please," called Fernando through the passenger window.

"Here too?" asked Adrian, sliding in up front.

"Unfortunately," said Fernando. He wore a starched polo and fingerless gloves, and looked like the sort of Uber driver who expected a promotion any minute. There was a basket of miniature water bottles between the seats. The tread-marks of a recent vacuum striped the carpet. "241 Via Alvarado?" asked Fernando, dragging an index finger over his phone to see the suggested route.

"That's it," said Adrian, taking a water bottle. Adrian prided himself on always accepting complimentary offers. "So there have been some problems?" For the past year, newspapers had followed a rise in assaults against Uber drivers in cities like Oaxaca and Morelia, as clients grew scarce and taxi drivers turned to violence.

"A few," said Fernando. Adrian waited, but Fernando didn't continue. Emi had told him that Vallartenses had grown tight-lipped and cautious, after the latest wave of arrests opened a vacuum in the city's power structure.

"Too bad," said Adrian, pitching his voice an octave higher. He glanced around the car. An anime character dangled from the rearview mirror. The stereo played a DJ set he didn't

recognize. After a moment, Adrian asked, “From dust to dust, huh?” He pointed to the tattoo on Fernando’s forearm: *Génesis 3:19*.

Fernando looked at him, impressed. “You got the whole book memorized?”

“Just a few parts,” said Adrian. “I teach Sunday school, and the kids love that story. Naming the animals and all that.”

“Kids are weird,” said Fernando, slowing down at a stoplight. “I think it’s about the freakiest thing ever written.” They watched a young man crutch out into the intersection and start juggling a soccer ball with his only leg. “So are you getting back from somewhere?” asked Fernando. “Or is this vacation?”

“My brother lives out here,” said Adrian, watching the teenage amputee balance the tattered ball on his forehead, then flip it onto his back. “You from Vallarta?”

“No,” said Fernando. “I came a few years ago, to help my cousin manage her hotel. But I’m originally from Metepec.”

“Really? I’m from Toluca,” said Adrian. He rolled down his window and handed the kid ten pesos as he crutched by. “We’re neighbors, carnal.”

“Neighbors,” repeated Fernando, smiling as he shifted into first. They came over a small rise, and the sea stretched before them, flashing as facets formed, then vanished, then formed again. “How’s Toluca? Have they paid the garbagemen yet?” Over the past couple weeks, the police, firefighters, and trash collectors had been protesting in Toluca. They hadn’t received their salary for months on end, and images of black plastic bags piled three meters high across Paseo Colon had gone viral on social media. So had videos of federal agents arresting municipal police officers after the local cops set a city bus on fire. The memes had been ruthless.

“Who knows. I moved to Guadalajara after high school,” said Adrian. A taxi pulled even with them, and Adrian wondered how he could contribute to the illusion that he and Fernando were friends, not driver and customer. He decided to plane his hand through the air rushing past his window. “So is this what you do on your weekends, then?”

“And my weekdays,” said Fernando with a sigh. “The hotel went under during the pandemic. People stopped traveling, and we couldn’t afford the taxes.”

Adrian was puzzled. “Taxes?” he asked. “But they stopped...ah.” Fernando slowed down as they passed the charred remains of a gym. He glanced at Adrian, then back to the road. The blackened skeletons of squat-racks still stood among the wreckage. “*Those* taxes,” said Adrian. He pulled up his sleeve and showed Fernando the verse tattooed on his own arm: *Ecclesiastés 12:14*. “Well. God brings everyone into judgment.”

Fernando rolled to a stop and held out a business card. “He could be a little quicker about it,” he said. “Message me if you need another ride. You can’t be too careful these days.” Adrian thanked him and got out. An alert on his phone informed Adrian that he’d been dropped off. He gave Fernando five stars. After a vision of Fernando getting yanked from his car by vengeful taxistas flashed across his mind, Adrian also gave him a 30-peso tip. Then he called Emi. “Hey. I’m out front.”

Emi unlocked the gate and the two brothers hugged. Victor stepped out from behind Emi and wrapped his arms around both of them. “Reunited and it feels so good,” Victor sang in clumsy English.

“Are you guys already drunk?” asked Adrian. “Really celebrating having the house to yourself, eh, flaco?” Emi’s face was rosy beneath a few days of stubble. He’d grown thinner with

each FaceTime, and now, standing before him, Adrian tried not to stare at Emi's scooped-out cheeks. At the strands of muscle bulging from his neck.

"You think it's a joke, pendejo," said Emi. "But this place is a warzone. Turns out the boys just needed a common enemy to bring them together, and since the move, they found one: me." Emi had written the December cover story for *Sociedad*, about executives at PEMEX selling maps of their company's subterranean infrastructure to huachicoleros. The article included emails from board members offering the thieves advice on when the gas flowed and where to puncture their pipelines. After the story came out, the chief of police advised Emi to leave Guadalajara, at least for a couple years.

"And you," said Adrian, turning to Victor. "You're still fat as ever, thank God." He pulled Victor in for another hug.

"Fatter," said Victor. He'd shaved his beard into a brambly chinstrap, and Adrian could already hear the argument the two of them were going to have about this decision later on. Victor grabbed Adrian's shoulders and stepped back. "You, on the other hand, managed to stay handsome, you son of a bitch." The trio walked through Emi's small house and out into the backyard. Emi handed each of them a beer, and they sat at the small table on the patio. A high wall, crowned with loops of concertina wire, encircled the yard.

"So did the boys march yesterday?" Adrian asked. Ale, Emi's wife, had sent photos of Marco and Luis dressed in robes to their family's group chat.

"No chingues," said Victor, pinching his eyebrows together. "He just calmed down, man."

Emi scowled. "Oh, they marched," he said. He scooted closer to Adrian and showed him a jerky video, of Marco dragging a wooden cross through a crowded barrio. Colorful stalls along

the sidewalk sold food and trinkets. Overhead, amusement park rides whirled gigantic metal arms. Marco hobbled from one patch of shadow to another, tears streaming down his face. From behind the phone, Ale called out, “Fuerza, mi’jo!”

“They still don’t let ‘em wear shoes, huh?” asked Adrian, taking a sip of his beer. He turned to Victor. “It’s like walking on a frying pan. Me and Emi thought we were smart, tried duct-taping the bottom of our feet one year. Melted off in like half an hour.” Emi brought up another video, of Luis tripping beneath his cross and opening a red hole in his knee. “It’s a character-builder, that’s for sure,” said Adrian.

“It’s medieval,” said Emi. “Why do we keep worshiping the guy who fucked this place up so bad? It’s like we’re a bunch of prisoners, worshiping the warden.”

“Woah,” said Adrian. He leaned away from Emi. “You wanna catch a lightning bolt to the head? It’s the day before Easter. He’s listening extra hard right now. At least wait a week or two before you pop off with your blasphemy.” Victor and Adrian laughed.

“Blasphemy? You wanna talk blasphemy?” asked Emi. “I’ve been working on article about the Nesausser lawsuit. Remember that one? Where they proved the runoff from the plant in Monterrey was giving kids cancer? Well, part of the settlement was that Nesausser had to buy chemo for anyone who got sick. All the medicine got delivered to the alcalde’s office, and this hijo de puta switched the labels. Sent bags of saline to the local hospitals and sold the chemo to China. 400 kids died before anyone found out. Know where the alcalde is now? Me either. Some mole told him la Guardia Nacional was coming to arrest him, and he fled the country. Probably on a beach in Venezuela right now, laughing his ass off.” Emi pulled up another video Ale had sent. Each year, someone from Iztapalapa was chosen to play Jesus, and once all the teenagers had marched through the neighborhood, everyone gathered at el Cerro de la Estrella to watch the

reenactment of the crucifixion. After struggling through las viacrucis, the actor playing Christ was bound to a massive cross and his hands were nailed to the wood. Emi showed them this year's Jesus, hanging above the crowd and screaming, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" as blood ran down his arms.

"That's where the whole story should have ended, far as I'm concerned," said Emi. The video evaporated, replaced by an incoming call from *Ale*. Emi tapped accept. "Your ears must've been burning," he said, walking inside.

Adrian pulled a bag of weed from his pocket and started rolling a joint. "What's his problem?" he asked. "He seems even pissier than normal."

Victor opened the bulging Ziplock and inspected one of the small buds. "I guess *Ale* mentioned the d-word again," said Victor. "She's gonna stay at her mom's house for a while with the boys."

"No mames," said Adrian, licking the paper. "So we're getting blasted? It's Easter. I wanted to go to church tomorrow."

"I'm sure the big guy will understand," said Victor. "Poor bastard. It's the last thing he needs right now."

"I dunno," said Adrian. He lit the joint. "You kinda get what you're looking for, sables?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Emi, closing the screen door. He sat beside Adrian and took the joint.

"It means you've spent a long time searching out the devil, hermanito," said Adrian. "Writing stories about man and all his sins. You could always choose to focus on the way God shows his love instead." Adrian pointed to the sink of clouds to the west, flaring pink and orange as sunlight drained over the horizon. "Maybe it's a matter of perspective."

“That’s what’s so confusing about you,” said Emi. “A couple pretty lights, and you’re satisfied. You don’t think we’ve been gaslit? Tricked into thinking all of this is our fault?” Emi blew smoke through his nose. “Tell me, who’s the real sinner: the disobedient children, or the deadbeat who abandons them?”

Adrian chuckled. “That’s a good line. You’ve been preparing.”

“Always,” said Emi. He grinned. “What about you, Vic? You think the man upstairs is good, or evil?”

“I reject the premise,” said Victor, clapping a hand on each brother’s shoulder. “I think we’re home alone. And just like any kids left unsupervised, I see only one option.” He opened the bottle of tequila sitting on the table and poured three shots. “Now, since we’re tackling life’s thorniest questions tonight, next topic: who’s winning la Liga this year?”

After dinner, they decided to go downtown. Adrian called Fernando, but got no answer, so they took a bus to the city center and found a bar alongside a small plaza overlooking the sea. A band played beneath the quiosco in the middle of the plaza. Three women sat at the next table over, their words elastic with Yucatecan accents. One of the women, wearing a sash that read *Cumpleañera*, was telling the other two how Puerto Vallarta was overdue for a massive tsunami. How the obsolete tide gauges in place would offer just seven minutes of advance notice before the first wave hit shore, destroying every city within twenty kilometers of the Jalisco coast.

“Another example of God’s benevolence?” Emi asked Adrian. The woman wearing the sash looked toward their table.

“Please excuse my brother,” said Adrian. “He has daddy issues.” The woman smiled. She had a swooping flourish of a nose and bobbed hair.

“Don’t we all?” she replied.

Adrian held up his beer. “Happy birthday. How old are you?”

“Gracias,” she said, lifting her margarita. Her voice dragged over a slight rasp. She pushed her bottom lip into a pout. “I’m 32.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Adrian. He looked her up and down. “Well. Maybe.”

“Que grosero,” said the woman. She ran a fingertip around the rim of her glass, then licked the gathered salt.

“Sorry,” said Adrian. The band started playing *La Piragua*. “Could I make it up to you?” he asked. “Do you know how to dance cumbia?” The woman rolled her eyes. Adrian stood and took her outstretched hand. “What’s your name?” he asked, leading her onto the plaza.

“Eva,” said the woman, her hand warm in Adrian’s as he caught the drumbeat and drew a tight circle. Adrian was an excellent dancer, and always relished the first moments with a new partner. He marked a turn, touched Eva’s hip, and sent her back beneath his arm. She frowned as he whirled her through a series of spins. “Where did you learn to dance?” asked Eva. One of her friends clapped.

“The internet,” said Adrian. He led her through an enchufla, then cocked his head toward Emi. “My brother and I used to watch videos online and trade off being the girl.”

“Funny,” said Eva. Her bare back pressed into his stomach. She looked up and shifted her hips, then pointed to the woman who’d clapped. “That’s how my sister and I learned to kiss.”

Adrian missed a step. “Really?” he asked.

“No, pervert,” said Eva. Her aquamarine eyes flashed. “Are you always so gullible?”

The song’s momentum carried Eva an arm-length away. Then she was back, her chest against his. “I’m pretty sure I’d believe anything you told me,” said Adrian. A pale delta fanned out from the moon and across the black ocean.

Eva's face broke into a mischievous grin. "Well," she said, and stepped further into his arms. "That could be fun." The song ended, and the band struck up another. Victor offered his hand to Eva's sister. After a minute, her other friend dragged Emi from his seat. Soon, more couples joined them on the plaza, clapping and laughing. Two toddlers held hands and bounced to the sob of the trombone.

Eva was a hydrologist and worked for a nonprofit bringing clean water to rural communities throughout Jalisco, Adrian learned over a shared cigarette. Her contract was about to expire, and when it did, she would begin her new job as vice-president of planning at Energía Paradiso. Adrian asked if she needed a trophy husband. He said his goal in life was to be a kept man. Eva squeezed his thick arms and said, "Maybe."

After the cigarette, Adrian walked into the restaurant, to find an *Out of Order* sign pasted on the bathroom door. A busboy crouched in front of the toilet with a toolbox. "Damn," muttered Adrian, turning around. A pair of police stood outside, near the restaurant's entrance. "Excuse me," said Adrian. "The bathroom here is broken. You know where I could take a piss?" The rest of the shops surrounding the plaza had closed hours ago.

One of them glanced over while the other watched Eva dance with Emi. "Yeah," said the cop, thumbing the hammer of his pistol. "Just go up the promenade a bit, to the rocks."

"Thanks," said Adrian. The cop nodded. Adrian's head swam pleasantly. He wandered up the malecón, until slime-bearded rocks abutted the cement. A few meters below, waves dragged small stones over big stones with a hollow, toe-breaking percussion. "This can't be right," said Adrian. Then he chuckled. A cop telling him to piss on the sidewalk did seem to fit the mood of the night. He unbuttoned his pants and settled into a wide stance, facing the sea.

After a moment, a voice behind him said, "What are you doing, idiot?"

Adrian zipped up and turned around. A new pair of cops walked toward him, one shining a flashlight in his face. “Sorry,” said Adrian. “But I just asked one of your compadres and he told me I could piss here. Our restaurant’s bathroom was broken. I swear, he’s just over there.”

Adrian gestured toward the plaza.

“Really?” asked the officer with the flashlight. “You’re sure he didn’t mean those?” He pointed his light across the promenade, illuminating a sign that read *Baños Públicos* hung above the entrance to a bathroom.

“Híjole,” said Adrian. He grimaced theatrically. “Honest mistake.”

“Hands on your head,” said the other officer. Adrian looked toward the sky, and felt palms work their way up each leg, then around his waist, before the cop pulled the Ziplock of weed from Adrian’s pocket. “Ah. What’s this?”

“I have glaucoma,” said Adrian. He blinked a few times, then squinted, as though suddenly half-blind.

“You have enough for intent to distribute, is what you have,” said the cop with the flashlight. “I hope you’re local. Our jail is *not* fun for out-of-towners. Unless you really like acupuncture, I guess.” He unclipped his handcuffs.

“Acupuncture,” his partner repeated, chuckling. “Que culero.”

“Listen, guys,” said Adrian. “Is there any way to take care of this between us? Save everyone the trouble?” Adrian was certain he would be let go. Here they were, three people occupying the station’s life had swept them into. Law, and lawbreaker. But beneath their uniforms, these were men like him, who could distinguish a crime from harmless indulgence.

“How much do you have?” asked the cop holding the bag of weed.

“About a thousand, I think,” said Adrian.

The policemen glanced at each other. "I suppose we could look the other way, this once," said the cop with the flashlight.

"I appreciate it," said Adrian. He pulled a sheaf of pesos from his wallet, counted the bills, and handed them over. "1200, actually. For your trouble." After a pause, Adrian asked, "So...can I have my bag back?"

The policemen looked at each other again. "Don't be a moron," said the cop with the flashlight.

Adrian unclipped his watch from his wrist. It cost four times what the weed was worth. But convincing the cops to return his drugs seemed important. It would prove things were the way he thought, and not some other way. Adrian smiled. Held out the watch.

The cop handed Adrian the bag of weed, then clipped the watch to his wrist. "How does it look?" he asked his partner, turning his hand.

"Pretty cool, actually," said the cop with the flashlight. They all laughed. On the other side of the malecón, white braziers flickered atop the dark sea. Adrian bid goodbye to the officers and walked toward the brassy sound coming from the plaza. "Where were you?" asked Emi.

"Just enjoying the pretty lights," said Adrian. Emi shook his head and grinned as Adrian offered his hand. Everyone cheered while the two brothers pressed cheek-to-cheek and waltzed back and forth across the cobblestones.

After the band struck its final chord, Adrian asked Eva if he could see where she lived. She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth, then said, "How about I give you my number? And we can go on a proper date?"

Adrian thought about pushing, but didn't. Instead, he handed Eva his phone and wondered when he'd next be in Puerto Vallarta. He'd brave the seven-hour bus ride from Guadalajara to see her again, he decided. Who knows, maybe he'd move here for her. "Expect a call," said Adrian. Eva narrowed her bright eyes.

Adrian, Victor, and Emi walked toward the street, pawing at each other and laughing. They all staggered, playing up their drunkenness for old time's sake. Adrian told Victor that he was going to shave his beard the moment they got home. Emi said he thought it looked distinguished. Adrian scrolled through his phone and found Fernando's contact. But this time, when he called, the line went straight to voicemail.

At the other end of the street, a taxi driver was chatting with the same pair of police who'd frisked Adrian. The cops looked over, and the one wearing his watch pointed toward them. Adrian waved. The cops waved back as the driver walked over. "Where to?" the taxista asked, his eyes darting back and forth along the ground as though searching for something.

"Via Alvarado," said Emi, fluffing Victor's beard with his fingers.

"70 pesos," said the driver. A muscular flatulence, the smell of a punctured colon, wafted from an open sewer line running out to sea.

"Deal," said Emi, and slid into the back seat. Victor followed. As Adrian started to climb in after them, a hand caught his arm. He looked around to find Eva. She glanced toward the policemen, who were watching a commotion in front of a bar down the street. Men tumbled out, yelling and shoving each other. One of the cops tapped a baton against his thigh.

"I changed my mind," said Eva. "It is my birthday, after all."

Adrian turned back to the cab. "See you guys tomorrow," he said, and slammed the door on their catcalls. The child-lock clicked, and the cab pulled away. "Where to?" asked Adrian.

Emi shouted something, his arm flailing through the window. The cop with Adrian's watch turned to his partner and laughed.

"I'm just a few blocks away," said Eva. He pulled her to him. She tasted like fruit, and her body fit neatly against his. They walked arm-in-arm along the malecón, listening to the waves lift toward the moon, then fall. The sea still determined, after all this time, to one day touch that shining light far, far above.

In her room, they undressed quickly and tumbled into bed. Eva wrapped her smooth legs around his hips. She kissed his neck, gripped his back. "Que quieres?" whispered Adrian, looking down.

"Tú," said Eva, and breathed.

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Adrian awoke to Eva tracing the tattoo on his arm. "Good morning," she said, examining the stylized letters. Sun shafted through the window above the bed. Adrian pushed the comforter down. The sheets exhaled an artificial sweetness, sharpened slightly by the briny pheromones of their sweat. Eva's studio was small, with a balcony that overlooked the ocean.

"Hi," said Adrian. He braced for the familiar morning-after polarity reversal, when he would want to do nothing more than leave. When a list of invented obligations he could be late for would ticker through his head. Instead, Adrian wondered if Eva might want to join him, Emi, and Victor on the hike they had planned for that afternoon. He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her nude body. She had a tattoo of her own, a delicate serpent uncoiling along her ribs. "Damn," said Adrian, shaking his head. "He took His time with you."

Eva swallowed a grin and fixed Adrian with a stern look. "Just so you know," she said, walking her fingers across his chest. "I'm not usually this easy. Last night was an anomaly."

“I’ll propose right now, if it would make you feel better,” said Adrian. He was surprised to find that the idea didn’t seem crazy, floating between them in the daylight. “As long as you don’t make me sign a prenup,” said Adrian. “I want some of that Paradiso money if we don’t work out.”

“Hmm,” said Eva. She palmed Adrian’s stomach. “You *are* very pretty.” She slid her hand up his torso, then gently pushed his head toward her waist. “But what else can you offer? I need more than just a pretty face.”

Afterwards, Eva went to the bathroom. Adrian heard water running, and Eva singing *Di Mi Nombre*. He turned on the television, stood up, and began gathering his clothes. His shirt was draped over a chair, his pants in a bundle beneath the nightstand. Adrian fished his phone from the back pocket. Eva came out of the bathroom wearing a towel wrapped around her head and nothing more. She walked to the kitchen and began to slice an apple, quietly humming.

Adrian watched her and imagined a lifetime of mornings spent this way, naked and content. Then he looked at his phone. The screen was covered in an angry outbreak of small red numbers. 47 missed calls, 105 unread messages, 387 new WhatsApps. Like anyone born in this country, Adrian had long ago learned to fear unexpected notifications. He locked his phone again. Then he unlocked it.

There were messages from people Adrian hadn’t spoken to in years. 19 missed calls from his mom. 32 WhatsApps from Ale. Random words from the truncated previews in his inbox seemed to glow: *sorry, best, help*. Adrian sat down on the bed. A professional voice cut through the static building inside his head. *A renowned journalist, Emiliano Gomez was best known for his work exposing corporate corruption.* Adrian looked to the television. Two bodies hung beneath a bridge. One heavy, one thin. Both half-skinned, like fruit on display at some hellish

market. Channel 7 would only show this footage once before the RTC threatened to censure them, Adrian heard himself think. A sheet flapped beside the bodies. A warning painted in blocky letters.

Confusing them for rogue dealers, sicarios of La Nueva Generación once again demonstrated their trademark ruthlessness toward any perceived competition. Adrian tried to push away comprehension. *Already, other journalists are alleging law enforcement's involvement in the murders.* The television displayed side-by-side pictures of Emi and Victor, pulled from somewhere on the internet. Eva gasped.

Adrian turned at the sound of her voice. She looked at him. He looked past her, out across the ocean's surface. Beneath that sprawl of broken sunlight, toxic chemicals, known nowhere else in this or any other universe, seethed. Eva came and sat beside him. Touched his arm.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Adrian braced for the acid-wash of guilt, or rage, or grief, but felt instead a different poison spread across his mind. Knowledge, bright and anguished. The entire race's slow awakening, distilled into a single, searing second. "Should we get dressed?" asked Eva, putting a hand on his forearm.

Adrian stared a moment longer toward the horizon's golden haze, where sea transformed to sky in a seamless, blinding shift. From chaos to void. From struggle to apathy. Orphans, all of them. Finally, he met Eva's eyes. They appeared backlit, as though refracting some muted light inside. "Yeah," he said. Eva squeezed his arm. "Yeah, I guess we should."