

## Leave Him for the Pigs

He first saw her on the bleeding line during the safety orientation. Even with her mouth covered by a respiratory mask, her hair in a net, and her body obscured with a butcher's apron, she looked distinctly compelling, even beautiful. Julian walked with a small group of new hires and watched as first the chickens were strung up by their hind legs onto a conveyor line. They moved down the line with their heads still intact and their wings still fluttering. Then they were 'water-shocked,' the tour guide said, or knocked out cold by a tunnel of high pressure jets. As they came through the tunnel, Julian watched the woman stand ready with a knife. He was struck with how she failed to grimace as she worked. Her job was to cut their throats.

He was assigned to the freezer, where he worked loading and unloading poultry boxes. It was another week before he saw her again, leaving her shift. Her hair was jet black and long, and she had it pulled to one side over her shoulder. Julian sat in his Civic and watched her sitting on the curb, still wearing her respiratory mask. Then a car pulled up, and she was gone.

The next day he spoke with the foreman about moving to the slaughter line.

He was placed on decortication. From his new position he could see the woman, but there was no time to look: the recently scalded, near naked birds came at him too quick. As they came, he removed the feathers that hadn't been scalded off.

He learned from another worker the woman's name: Monica. She was single and worked two other jobs, twice a week as an overnight hotel receptionist, and Saturday and Sunday with a commercial cleaning company. In line to punch out, he took a chance to speak to her.

-I hear you don't take a day off?

She turned back toward him, partially, then seemed to assume he wasn't talking to her.

-Monica, right?

It was her time to punch out. She had to stand on her tip toes to stick her punch card in the machine.

-Yes?

-Julian. I started a few weeks ago.

-Nice to meet you.

She began to walk away. Julian paused.

-I have a car if you'd like a ride home.

She stopped, turned to him again.

-I have a ride already.

-Understood. I noticed you waiting the other day so I thought I'd--

-Okay. If you wouldn't mind. But I'm on the southside by the high school, the traffic is bad this time of morning--

-I wouldn't offer if I minded.

It took him much too long to unlock his car door. The traffic turned out just as she warned. Bad. They weren't two miles from the plant before fifteen minutes passed. Once they'd made it through the gridlock, it was Monica who broke the silence.

-You live alone?

Julian looked over at her.

-No.

-Family?

-No, two guys, my age. A cook and furniture worker.

-And they're good guys? You trust them?

-The bills get paid.

-I see.

They pulled into a driveway and he parked. Without thinking he shut his car off, which drew an odd look from her.

-This is your place? He asked as she unbuckled and exited the car. She walked around to his window and gave him a polite kiss on the cheek.

-Yes, it's mine.

In truth his roommates were flaky at best. The cook had once come home high on uppers and with no money for bills. Without remembering the moments before it, he tackled the cook and had his hands on his throat. But there had been something so animal in the cook's face, so deer caught in the headlights or dog caught knocking over a trash can that Julian couldn't bring himself to hurt him.

He began to give her rides home every morning. He looked forward to the conversation. They took turns speaking in Spanish and English. Julian joked with Monica that her English was better than her Spanish. She was a few years younger than Julian, but she'd been in the States longer. The car ride took thirty minutes and sometimes they wouldn't have anything to say. Julian thought the silences were just as pleasant. On his off days he would pick her up and drop her off. He was restless and didn't sleep well; he hadn't since he'd taken the job. The excitement Julian felt around Monica was not the kind he imagined would wear off, and he felt good about it, until one day she invited him inside.

When they got to her driveway, she paused a long moment before she touched the door to exit the car. Julian watched her patiently. He was glad to be near her. He hadn't been with a woman in six years, not since he came to the States. He grew up in a fishing district of Oaxaca, working with his father. When he was seventeen he got a girl pregnant. Her name was Marlenny and she was lazy, Julian thought, but she was beautiful and kind to him, and he planned to marry her. Instead, he found himself two weeks later on his way to the States. His job was to find work and earn enough money to send for Marlenny. She wanted to give birth in the U.S. He was still young then, and after working two months of fourteen hour days laying concrete in the summer heat, he quit his job. It took him months to recover steady work, and then he got the phone call. He recalled the numbers exactly: seven months and thirteen days after he'd left, the baby was born weighing just two and a quarter kilograms. Marlenny named her Teresa. She sent him a picture from that day in the hospital. The baby was red and her face was scrunched up and very, very small. Julian sent moneygrams each month to support her and the baby. He had now for six years. His throat dried thinking of Marlenny attempting to cross with Teresa--it was too dangerous--and so he waited impatiently for Teresa to grow older.

The house was cluttered, as if children lived there. No one else in the house was awake, they had just finished a graveyard shift, so it was just past five A.M. Inside she asked him to take off his work boots. The floors were hardwood and newly polished. Then she brought him a change of clothes and told him she would wash his work attire.

-At the end of the hall there is a shower. You can take one there. Afterwards I would like to talk. Do you eat eggs?

Julian nodded and then walked quietly down the hall. The house was one story and laid out like

most ranch homes. On one side of the house there was the master bedroom, on the other, with the kitchen and living room in between, two smaller rooms.

For those who work graveyard shifts, there is a lull between getting off and actually being able to go to sleep. A shower helps the matter, but normally it isn't til it's almost nine or ten before Julian settles down mentally enough to sleep. Not that the body isn't exhausted. In the shower, Julian scrubbed at himself, paying close attention to his pores and cleaning beneath his cuticles. He was a hairy man. He thought of Teresa and tried very hard not to feel guilty. He hadn't done anything wrong. He was doing everything he was supposed to be doing.

When Julian had dressed, Monica had already bathed and was serving breakfast. Julian didn't eat after a shift. The smell of food made him nauseated. He politely forked at his eggs.

-So this is your house? He asked her, taking a bite.

-Yes, I closed on it last year. It was hard to find a lender that seemed trustworthy. It took forever really.

-It is a nice home.

-My sister's husband, he was deported last week. Her and her kids, they are still here.

-That is tough I am sure--

My sister, she gets benefits, she hasn't worked since she had the youngest. The husband made all the money. I swore I wouldn't let it happen but I depended on that income. It's gone now. No warning no time to adjust. Vanished.

-I've been there before. It isn't easy.

Monica reached her hand across the table towards Julian's, then she pulled it away. There was a darkness under her eyes Julian hadn't noticed before. Her hair was up in a wet bun, and she wore a

sweatshirt with the neck cut out of it. She laughed.

-I'm sorry Julian, this is insane.

-What's--

-I need someone to move in. Before I lose this place. I need the help. There's an extra room.

My sister shares the other room with her kids. You'd pay less than what you pay now, I'm sure of it. I

know this is crazy.

Julian did not respond, not right off.

-I have a woman. A kid.

-I thought you said you didn't?

-Not here with me.

-I see.

-I don't have anyone left back home. My parents passed when I was young, and my sister, she's here with me.

-Were you born here?

-No, but I married a Texan, right at eighteen.

-What happen with--

-He cheated.

Julian nodded. It had been a few months now since Marlenny had returned his letters. It was normal now that he wrote more frequently than she responded, but it had been a half year since he'd spoke with her by phone either. It was June now and he hadn't heard her voice since January.

-I am not asking for anything other than what I say. I don't know you. But my gut says I could trust you. There isn't another person here that I could say that about.

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Julian sits drunk at a picnic table. He carves into the table with his key to Monica's. He's been drinking since eight this morning. It's four now and people have only begun arriving. He sits at one of many tables beneath a giant tent. It is Ricardo 'Ricky' Jr's birthday today, and Julian suspects that like him a majority of the attendees owe it to Ricky that they made it to this town. Ricky's family is established as a cheap and abundant manual labor supplier, maintaining ties back home with smugglers. Julian resents the family for how they do business: they bring immigrants over on credit at ridiculously high prices, put them in a job, and then bully them into a payment plan that keeps them from being able to leave. The social life in the community seems to revolve around Ricky's family, which is another thing Julian resents.

In the past few months since he moved in with Monica, there had been three raids: one at the town furniture factory and two others at separate restaurants. Julian read in the paper that local law enforcement vowed to clean up the illegal labor in the town. Julian blamed the Ricky family for bringing too many folks over. The hispanic community had spread impossibly fast across the south side of town. The city library system started English literacy programs, and hospitals complained of an influx of uninsured, undocumented patients. It was all in the paper. Julian had picked up the habit of reading the paper from Monica.

The raids had the whole community on edge. What had happened to Monica's brother in law could happen to anyone. The fear changed something in Monica. Her sense of detachment from Julian fell away. When they were home together she glued to him. She talked often of getting Julian

documented. The idea scared Julian, he'd never known anyone to succeed at turning themselves in. The options are to hide or be deported.

-You can't stay lucky forever. You have to do something to protect yourself, she said to him over breakfast.

-I have papers!

-Yes, you have papers...you go around with an out-of-state and expired license and a dead man's social security number. It can't last. They aren't blowing smoke. They really want us gone.

-What could I do? Cross back over, apply for a visa? Then where would I work when I came back?

-You know you could find work. And you have the money. If you are documented, we are protected. This house is protected.

-And I have a family. When I go back, it'll be for them.

-You don't have to say it like that, not with that venom.

Julian knew she trusted him, and that she'd claimed him, but he wasn't able to give himself to her. Several times he woke to find that she'd crawled into bed with him and had her arm across his chest. One night they tried to make love, but he couldn't perform. The guilt and resentment was only made worse by the constant sounds of children in the house. Monica's niece was six just like Teresa. The little girl could already write in English. As much as he resisted Monica, he couldn't deny he loved her. They were a good team, and her company kept him sane. It was when she was gone to work and Julian was left to the house alone with the children that he drank. He'd started out with a beer or two before he'd nod off. But the insomnia persisted. He would wake up thirsty with salty skin and drink another, and another. Monica didn't judge him for it. He couldn't be around the kids, not sober.



Marlenny wasn't returning his calls.

Julian turns towards the kegs and sees Ricky manning the keg pump. People are always eager for news, and Ricky is one of the few in the community with the luxury of legally going back and forth. Julian watches as older women, those with the strongest emotional ties back home, flock around Ricky. He is a flamboyant man, wearing tight black jeans and white snakeskin boots, a white belt, a clean black button down and a sparkling black, bejeweled blazer. His hair is oiled and slicked back, with long bangs he has pulled up and to the side with wax.

Julian wants a refill and stands up. Monica had screamed him out the door for leaving the house already drunk. She has work in several hours. He is in no hurry to leave to pick her up. His legs feel light. His skin is warm. As he approaches, Ricky calls out to him in Spanish.

-Julian! Look at you, you poor guy.

Ricky's face flashes from smiling to concerned.

-Julian, what of it? How are you? How have you been?

-What a party Ricky--

-Thank you. You know my family knew your father. He was good man. Worked hard.

Ricky reaches his arm out around Julian shoulder. Julian twitches in discomfort.

-He was a good man.--Julian tries to back away--Thanks again for having me here.

Ricky pulls Julian in closer.

-Hey, hey, where you off to?

Julian removes Ricky's arm from around him, slowly.

-You came for another beer, ay? Here, let me get you a refill.

Julian relaxes. He thinks of Monica.

-Your Marlenny, have you heard anything of her?

-No not recently, I wrote her this last--anyway, what of Marlenny?

-She married. This past March.

-Married? To who?

-A policeman of all people. Can you believe it? This is what they tell me.

-And what of Teresa?

-Teresa?

-My... our little girl. The man is a respectful man?

-Julian. Have you heard nothing from home?

-What of Teresa?

-No, no, I can't-- Are you sending her money? Why wouldn't she tell you? It has been months now. The dysentery epidemic? Six months ago, in January--

-Goddammit, what do you know?

-...

-Is she okay or not?

-Well from what I hear you've moved on anyway, haven't you?

-Why would you talk... don't talk to me like this.

Ricky tries very hard not to smile. Julian drops his head and charges into him. Immediately someone tries to push him away, but Julian somehow makes it back to Ricky, who lays curled up by the keg.

-Someone get him out of here! Ricky says.

Julian takes Ricky by the side of the head and brings it hard against the side of the keg with dull thud. He lets go, Ricky tries to stand but stumbles; Julian mounts him, going for his neck, while Ricky swats his arms widely in defense. His head is bleeding onto the gravel.

-What do you know? You think it's funny? You think it's funny playing with our lives?

-Get off me you fuck, get off! Somebody get him off me!

The first person to contact Julian brings an elbow to the back of his head. The next, dislocates his shoulder. Ricky rolls over onto his knees panting, coughing up blood. A man to each arm, they drag Julian off.

A woman from Ricky's family rushes toward the men, yelling, "Don't touch him, don't touch him, leave him for the pigs."

Julian lies on the gravel. He tries to raise himself with the shoulder that isn't dislodged. It isn't working. He manages to roll on his side, kicking his legs to back track away from the crowd of people. No one pays him attention anymore, everyone is attending to Ricky. Six years he's been here, and he's never messed it up. His little girl. He doesn't know whether to believe what's happened. He makes it to a tree and props himself onto his feet. It occurs to him that for the first time in six years, he isn't afraid. He pictures Monica waiting on him to come home, but it doesn't worry him. No more guilt, he thinks. Shooting pains course through his shoulder and arm. He isn't afraid. He's already lost, he thinks. He's going back. The thought doesn't trouble him. He feels lightheaded. He leans back against the tree; he hears the sirens. He thinks of Teresa and listens as they near.