

Truckers Welcome

Dante slammed the door of the El Dorado and leaned against the warm metal. A crow rose from behind some scrub, maybe in response to the distant wine of what could have been a chainsaw, or a brush cutter. The sky was nearly the same color as the two-lane blacktop bisected by the broken white line.

Gilma had laughed when he bought the El Dorado. Called him Grandpa. But at least the battery wasn't dead, which was more than he could say for the cell phone.

Gilma jumped when he slammed the door. He walked a few feet away, then turned and looked back at her in the driver's seat through the bug-spattered windshield. She stared ahead like she was still driving. He wanted to dive inside and yank her out. He wanted to yell, who forgot the charger? Who decided to take this trip, anyway?

He would have been happy spending the weekend like they always did in Austin, hopping from bar to bar late on a Friday, listening to bands, Ubering back to his apartment. They'd stumble in at three a.m. and forget to turn on the AC so when they woke at noon they'd be soaked in sweat. Make themselves a big omelette and gear up to do it again on Saturday.

Dante started walking. At least if he headed out maybe he could get a bead on the sound. Find the chainsaw or whatever the fuck it was and the person running it and get directions. Which way to Odessa? If he could get them back on track he'd be able to let go of blaming himself for starting the drive half drunk, blaming Gilma for leaving her cell on the kitchen counter next to the bowl of spotted bananas, himself for not checking his battery, the El Dorado being so old it couldn't charge a phone even if they'd had a charger.

He hadn't gotten more than twenty yards when he heard the car door shut. Good.

She was coming to her senses. He heard her flip-flops slapping the asphalt as she tried to catch up. Damned if he'd turn around. He pinned his eyes on the place where the road disappeared into some mesquite. It looked like something from a fairy tale, as if ogres could be waiting around the bend.

He felt Gilma next to him before he saw her. He kept walking. They didn't say anything. It seemed to Dante that the whine of the machinery was getting louder when suddenly it cut out altogether. A silence as wide and fragile as the gray dome of the sky engulfed them.

"Shit," he muttered.

He knew she had stopped walking because he didn't hear the scuff-scuff of her flip-flops anymore. He looked back. She stood in the middle of the road, stupid girl, right on one of the faded white stripes. From here, Dante could just see the manufactured splits in her jeans where the pale flesh of her thighs showed through. If a semi came along she'd be mowed down like a dandelion in a lawn.

But she seemed, as always, oblivious to her surroundings. The night they'd met, almost year ago, he'd had to fish her from the pool when his friend had kicked everyone out at midnight, her skin wrinkled and smelling of chemicals. She'd started swimming with everyone else and just forgot to get out. He'd wrapped her in a beach towel, walked her the five blocks to his apartment, and put her to bed on his couch.

Dante sighed loudly enough for Gilma to hear him even ten yards away. He clomped back to where she stood, grabbed her hand, and pulled her to the roadside. He wished a semi *would* come along so they could ask for directions, but that seemed unlikely. Back the way they'd come the El Dorado was a squat tan box, nearly the same color as the roadside scrub. Suddenly, walking away from it didn't seem like the smartest idea, especially now that there was no chainsaw noise guiding them.

Gilma started shivering, although the air was hot and dense. What if she suddenly

lost it, the way she'd done a few times since they'd met? Dante wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, pressed his lips against the top of her head. He whispered into her hair. She seemed to relax, just a little, so he did too.

The first part of the drive had been kind of fun. Four a.m. on 290 west was quiet, the highway nearly empty on a Saturday morning. He'd still been a little drunk when they left but soon he felt sober enough, driving with the El Dorado's windows open and KLBJ on the radio.

Gilma's hair whipped out the window. They didn't talk, but that was okay. They'd talked back at the apartment, stumbling around in the dark, laughing, bumping into the edges of furniture. Gilma's mother was the subject of the conversation, one they'd taken with them from the bar.

Gilma had talked about her mother only once before. Dante wanted to hear the rest of the story so he hadn't wanted to do anything to discourage the telling of it. If indulging her by driving across the state at four in the morning would keep the conversation going, then that's what he'd do.

It had taken only a few minutes to get ready. Dante made coffee and poured it into his work thermos. Gilma spent ten minutes in the bathroom with the water running. She didn't look any different when she came out and he couldn't figure out what she'd been doing in there. She seemed happy, though.

They'd still been having fun when the sun rose. Gilma poured coffee from the Thermos. They passed the tiny cup back and forth. At six-thirty they'd stopped at a diner in Junction across the street from an adobe church. Dante figured she'd start telling the story again when she was ready. She'd smiled a few times in the diner, looking down at the twin suns of her fried eggs. This gave Dante almost more satisfaction than stifling his belly's growl with food. It was so fucking hard to make her happy.

She hadn't finished the eggs. Just poked the yolks and dragged her fork through the yellow liquid. Maybe she ate a few of the home fries. Dante thought about reaching across the gold-flecked red Formica and spearing the uneaten fries from her plate but that didn't seem right.

Back out in the parking lot, fatigue had washed over him with such power he almost sat down in the gravel-strewn dust. If they'd turned back toward Austin now they'd be home in bed by nine a.m. And then what? He'd never hear the end of the story about the mother Gilma hadn't spoken to in two years, or find out what they were driving toward in Odessa.

He had looked over at her, nose up to the wind, a crinkle around her eyes. "Do you feel okay to drive?" he'd asked. "I could really use a nap."

Afterward, he could see the forking paths of their fate. Down one, still at home, they could have fallen into bed and slept off their drunk into a sweaty afternoon. Down the other path, the chosen one or maybe the one that chose them, they'd stumbled to the carport in the early morning darkness with the Thermos and the single dying cell phone. There in the diner parking lot was a subsidiary fork of the second path, in Junction of all places. He could have gotten behind the wheel again. Instead he'd tossed the keys to her, slipped into the passenger seat, pulled his baseball cap over his eyes, and let sleep drag him under.

He'd awoken to a changed world. The sun was gone behind clouds the color of cheap metal office furniture. The road unrolled with nothing on either side, or ahead, or behind. Gilma had turned the radio off and there was just the hum and rattle of the El Dorado.

"How long have I been out?"

Gilma shrugged. "I don't know."

He fumbled for his phone on the center console where he'd left it reading out

directions as they pulled away from the diner. The black screen reflected Dante's sleep-addled features.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" The words had flung spit onto the dead screen. Gilma cringed at the percussive curses but kept her eyes on the road. Her hands gripped the wheel, positioned as perfectly as if she were taking her driver's test, and there was no sign of a smile, or any emotion at all, on her pale, fractured face.

"Pull over," he'd said.

Now here they were on the empty road with his lips in her hair and her thin body shivering under his arm. It occurred to him that they weren't talking because they were both thinking the same thing and it wasn't good. They were both scared, not just of the unknown road and their lostness but of what awaited back in Austin and ahead in Odessa.

If they could drive forever they'd be fine. Not forever in a straight line but forever around in circles, going over the same territory of hidden grief. Grief infused everything between them: the way he'd woken her that first morning on his couch with tentative kisses. She'd opened her eyes, then closed them again and begun kissing him back. They'd both relaxed into the sex. They began going to hear music every weekend. They talked about bands and DJs, schedules and logistics. All their questions were pointed and practical. And still he felt the sorrow coming off her.

He didn't think there was any way to get to a place where they were fine but he herded her toward the car anyway. The familiar, squared-off box of the El Dorado comforted him. Dante opened the passenger door for her and then went around to the driver side. The phone still taunted him with its black screen but he didn't care anymore. The engine startled them both when it caught, ripping the dense air. He jammed the car into reverse and glanced down to see, thank God, a gas tank still more than half full. He

pulled a U-turn so fast the tires squealed.

She began to talk on the drive back over the road he hadn't seen, the road she'd driven while he slept, after the lost cell signal and the fading GPS and the dying of the phone.

"I'm still thinking about my mama."

"What about her?" Dante asked as carefully as if he were stacking teacups.

"The last time I saw her. Looking at me like she never wanted to see me again."

"That can't be true."

"I mean, what the fuck is so bad about getting pregnant?"

Was he supposed to know the answer?

"Okay. So I was seventeen," Gilma said. "But it happens all the time. It happened to *her*."

Dante squeezed the El Dorado's steering wheel. Now he regretted saying it couldn't be true Gilma's mother never wanted to see her again because of course it could be. He imagined Gilma standing in the doorway of a trailer with a baby bump just starting to show under her t-shirt, her mother across from her, a mirror image of her daughter with hands on her hips.

"She threw the letters at me," Gilma said.

"What letters?"

"From the colleges. She screamed at me, how did I think those professors would feel about a knocked-up east Texas *puta* at their fancy school." Gilma knocked her knuckles against the El Dorado's window like someone asking to be let out, or in. "I went to stay with my Aunt Tracy. Not my aunt, really. My mom's friend. She moved to Austin to go to nursing school."

She rolled the window down and dusty air blasted into the car. "I wrote to her." It took Dante a moment to realize Gilma was talking about her mother again, not the

friend. “I told her about the ultrasound, how she was going to be *abuela* to a little girl.”

Dante imagined the fuzzy gray picture, curling at the edges, pinned with a magnet to the stand-in aunt’s refrigerator.

“Did she write back?” He was asking simple questions because he wanted simple answers. He didn’t ask after the baby’s whereabouts, about the aunt, or, most forbidden, the father. If he asked those kinds of questions, she might ask him right back.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

That ended the conversation and they pulled back onto Highway 10.

Dante gave her the choice an hour after they’d descended into silence again. North to Odessa or south to the El Dorado in Terlingua Ghost Town.

“That’s why I bought this car, you know.” He glanced at her uncomprehending face. “I thought it would be funny to have an *El Dorado* at the *El Dorado* Hotel.”

She shook her head. “My uncle used to go down to Terlingua for the chili cook-off every November.”

“Is this a real uncle or a friend uncle?”

“My mother’s brother. He’d test recipes all year. He showed me the entry form once. You wouldn’t believe how many rules there are about cooking chili. He came in third one time.”

Dante knew about the cook-off. He’d worked at the El Dorado before he moved to Austin. After the favor he’d done the owner, he could get a room anytime, no questions asked. But he wasn’t going to get into that story, not yet.

Instead he said, “The thing is, Terlingua is 150 miles in the opposite direction from Odessa. Maybe that wouldn’t be a bad thing. Maybe you and your mama just need more time. Two years isn’t that long. On the other hand—”

What did he need? To turn away from the past, or toward it? Who knew what might happen if he went back to Terlingua. He gripped the steering wheel. He wouldn't look at Gilma. Seeing her face might make him say something to persuade her one way or the other and wanted this to be wholly her decision, the way the decision to leave Austin kind of hadn't been. At the bar last night she'd talked about her mother, about Odessa, about the two sisters Dante hadn't even known she'd had, then her mother again and more about Odessa. She'd said more about herself in an hour than she'd told him in the year they'd known each other. Though nothing about the baby. He still hadn't known about the baby. Funny how the absence of knowledge about a person's past makes any little thing they decide to share seem like such a big deal. Finally last night he'd said, "So why don't we just go? Leave right now and be there by lunchtime." Which was a bit of an exaggeration, though not much. And she'd agreed, still half drunk in the steamy middle of the night.

Dante eased his foot off the gas. The El Dorado slowed and a semi pulled past them. He knew he'd have to have to go through a lot more afternoons curled on the bed with her, a lot more weird and pointless drives, a lot more pushing that little fringe of hair out of her eyes with a tenderness he hadn't known he possessed. A lot more of all that until she got to a place where everything bad that happened wasn't her fault.

"You need to say one way or the other," Dante told her. The exit was coming up and ahead of them the road forked like their stories, one way north, the other south. The only certainty was that they couldn't keep going straight. She needed to make some kind of move. But she just sat looking through the passenger window.

The sky's even gray had blown apart to expose a blue underbelly. He'd have to give her more time. He focused on a cluster of buildings ahead. A gas station, maybe, or a little taqueria. As they got closer he saw the sign: *Dusty's Roadhouse. Music on Weekends. Truckers Welcome.* He flipped the El Dorado's turn signal and pulled off the

road. They weren't truckers, but maybe they'd be welcome anyway.

Dante shoved the dead cell phone in his pocket and got out of the car. He thought he'd have to coax her inside, but she slipped out before he could come around to open her door. He took her elbow like a long-married husband and together they entered the roadhouse.

A band was setting up. Big Red and the Scorpions, the flyer said. Big Red was exactly that, six foot five at least with flame-colored hair in a ponytail, adjusting a mic stand in a corner of the barroom that didn't seem big enough to contain him, let alone the bass player, drummer, and keyboard player.

Dante and Gilma stood at the door for a minute, letting their eyes adjust. How perfect it was to find music again now, something that lifted them from whatever separate, unspeakable tragedies they were experiencing, if only for the duration of a song. Already, from what he could tell in the dim light, Gilma looked happier. They sat at a little round table a few feet from the band. Dante went to the bar and ordered two Coronas. Then he asked the bartender, a woman almost as tall as Big Red, if by any weird chance she might have a charging cable for a Samsung phone.

She disappeared into a room behind the bar and came back a moment later holding a plastic bin filled with phone chargers. "People leave them all the time," she said. "Charge up their phones and get too drunk to remember to take the cords when they leave." She narrowed her eyes. "But you won't do that, will you?"

"No ma'am," he said, not bothering to point out that it would be someone else's cord he'd be leaving behind.

Dante found a charger that fit and plugged it in to an outlet a few feet from their table. The screen lit up and he felt something ease in his chest.

"We'll stay while the phone charges." He lifted his Corona and clinked it against Gilma's. He prayed silently that when they were ready to go, she'd know which way.

Big Red and his band launched into an up-tempo country number. A minute into the song, Gilma leaned across the table and half-shouted something that sounded like “it died.”

“What?”

“The baby. A late-term miscarriage. Three weeks after the ultrasound.”

Dante let Big Red’s voice push him back in the scuffed wooden chair. His chest heaved as if the sound of the band had blasted the air from his lungs. The picture he’d conjured of a pixie-faced toddler with Gilma’s silky black hair and huge unblinking baby eyes, adopted by non-aunt Tracy, living somewhere unnamed but accessible in Austin, swirled down the drain of the possible.

The song ended. Gilma spoke into the relative silence as the guitar player tuned up before the next number.

“The doctor said it was unusual for someone my age. Probably meant something was wrong with it.” She twirled the Corona bottle, then began picking at the label with her quick-bitten fingernail. “I’m glad I didn’t send that ultrasound to my mother. I never sent another letter even though she kept on writing.”

Dante saw how Gilma would have let the letters pile up on the edge of the desk in the tiny back bedroom of the apartment. How Tracy would have found them one day and tossed them onto Gilma’s bed where they’d fan out over the comforter.

The band started the next song and Gilma had to shout again. “I thought telling my mom about the baby made it die. I burned all her letters on August 23. That would have been the baby’s first birthday.”

By the time the battery was full, people occupied all the tables. Who knew Big Red was so popular out here in the middle of nowhere? Dante and Gilma clapped as enthusiastically as everyone else when the first set ended. Dante even did his signature

whistle, forefinger and thumb inside his cheeks the way he'd learned from his dad. Then, without saying anything, they both stood up. He unplugged the charger and brought it back to the bartender.

They stepped out into the parking lot. The clouds were back, darkening the sky. The El Dorado was wedged so tightly between an F-150 and a Chevy minivan that Gilma had to shimmy sideways to reach the door. Inside the car, she took Dante's hand so he couldn't look up directions on the phone or start the car or do anything but sit feeling her small bones resting in his palm. The owner of the F-150 got in and gunned the engine so they both jumped.

After a long time, Gilma let go of his hand and told him which way she wanted to go.