

Silence

Erasmus crept through the countryside next to the highway, dropping to the ground whenever he heard a car. Trees were the best for hiding, but rare. After that came cornfields, the withered stalks providing cover, but if they weren't present, he hid behind anything, bundled crops, a slight rise in the ground or a dry irrigation ditch. He had always been short and wiry but never saw the advantage of his stature so much as at that moment. He was also still quite agile at 53 years, something he attributed to all the times he'd fled from *la migra*. He'd just never had to flee in his own country.

Erasmus tried not to think of what he had just left behind. Instead, he forced himself to think of where he was going, toward a town large enough that he could slip into a bus station and buy a ticket for another one as far away as possible, where he could move around without fear of recognition.

There were no busses in his town anyway. There was once a bus company, owned by his wife's brother, father of the nephew who'd sung in Erasmus's band. Now the last of the local busses rested on its rims to the side of what had been the main street, the glass blasted out of windows edged by soot.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw a car coming from behind, and dropped flat against the ground, hoping it wasn't anyone who knew him, or if it was, the driver would be too focused on the road to glance at its side, that any passengers would be too distracted to peer at an old man hugging the earth as if prostrating himself. Once the car passed, he saw another and, still hugging the ground, he inched forward until he thought it too dangerous to move and lay still once more.

Erasmus knew this road very well, although never, he joked to himself, at this level of detail. He had traveled it in cars and busses and on the beds of trucks carrying his trumpet to a

dance or celebration or fiesta in another town and then back again. Those had been nights he cherished, playing music with other members of his band, watching the people get up to or sway, and then riding home again to Alicia and the boys. The other members of the band had come and gone, but the mainstays were Simón, who played a flourishing guitar and Erasmo's nephew Daniel, who had the sweetest of tenors.

But the time had come when no one wanted to hear the old songs, or even the not-so-old ones. They wanted younger, better-built men in shiny shirts and pants and hats, yes with brass instruments but more than one and no one really playing them much while they made swingy moves on stage to a bouncy melody sung by a wobbly voice. And if they got famous, a couple of underdressed women cavorting in front, sometimes pretending to sing.

So Simón returned to the family store and Erasmo and Daniel went north to buss tables in restaurants and paint houses and swing waxing machines across the tile floors of office buildings. One day the *migra* caught them and sent them home. Daniel was unmarried and edgy and turned right around to go north again but Erasmo had missed Alicia and stayed.

At the side of the road, Erasmo took a can of tuna from his backpack and opened it. He wasn't hungry but knew he should eat, yet all he could do was lean back against a fencepost and look up at the stars and all the soothing enormity of the dark sky. Night was when there was no keeping away the memories. The house where he had grown up was on fire, and the one he built with Alicia and where they raised the boys was burning by now too. The houses of his relatives had been put to the flame, he knew. Erasmo didn't want to think of the people who once lived in them, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews, all of them, he assumed, gone. The church was still there, he was sure, with the expensive silver chalices and all the other priestly things and the

shiny, new altar and refurbished pews and confessionals. And the cemetery, where he used to go lay flowers for Alicia and talk to her a little, and if no one else was around, sing to her, after which he'd slide over, past where he'd eventually expected to lie himself, to the grave of the little girl they'd lost and lay a flower there, too. And then one for his mother, lying next to his father.

Everything happened so fast, he hadn't been able to go there to say goodbye to Alicia, to lay down one more small bouquet for her. He'd wanted to say goodbye and ask forgiveness for leaving her, this last time, never to return. But Simón was in the door, saying, "Now, *compadre*," glancing nervously out to the street, "they're coming." When Erasmo picked up his trumpet, Simón couldn't restrain himself. "Ay, *compa*, leave it, time's up." Erasmo was too slow to stuff things into his backpack, so Simón took charge, throwing in the essentials—socks, tuna cans, an opener, water bottles—then slung it over his own shoulder, grabbed his *compa*'s wrists and dragged him out the door.

"But I don't have any photos—" Erasmo protested.

"They're no good if you're dead." Simón looked both ways down the street, then pointed to the south. "Don't run north. They expect that, it's where they'll be. Go through the fields. You know the way."

Erasmo nodded, seeing the plumes of smoke rising in the west and north, from where the houses of his relatives stood, or used to. And then machine guns firing. "Aren't you coming?" he asked Simón.

"They aren't after my family." He pushed Erasmo in the back. "Go now, low, through the fields."

And then Erasmo was off, to the sound of more bursts of machine guns that sounded like they lasted for minutes, although he knew it couldn't be that long. He didn't turn around to see until he was sure the town couldn't see back. By then it was dusk, and he saw the orange flames reaching skyward. He collapsed, his legs, his chest, everything hurting from the running while crouching. He stood up again, and moved forward, aching as though he carried the world on his shoulders. He hoped *compadre* Simón was right, that they would be patrolling the north and wouldn't look for him on the road south. Still, he dropped every time he heard a motor. They were cars, not SUVs with tinted windows. But nobody had any normal business on the road to or from a town that was burning. He would go as far south as he could.

And, from a safer place, go east to the border. They controlled it all, but if he made it far enough east, he was betting that they wouldn't still be looking for an old, washed-up trumpet player whose worst transgression was to be an uncle.

That night sitting against the fencepost and looking up at the stars, Erasmo again asked Alicia to forgive him, knowing he would not hear anything back except the wind or another goddamn car, but hoping he could feel something inside, that he would sense her. He imagined her in his mind, her hair up in a practical bun, her hands in balls at her hips and her brow a little tight, the way she looked when he came back late from some wedding or dance where they'd asked him to play. But he sensed nothing, so he kissed the ring she'd given him at the altar and then lay back and stared up at the wide dark sky out of eyes that would not stay closed.

Erasmo had always thought of himself as an essentially happy man. Some of that was the ability to see the good in people, some of it was joy in his family, and some of it was just making

music. And not just any music, but the kind he could play on his trumpet, those moments when he pressed the mouthpiece to his lips, parted them, blew into it, and heard the crystalline tone come out of the horn, a sound that, to him, always felt like church bells pealing. Getting that tone right, making it loud or subdued, the melody forming as he moved his fingers over the valves, pushing down and letting up as he blew wind into the trumpet, giving life to the metal, made him content. He didn't care whether the music was happy or sad, proud mariachi or melancholy ballad, a declaration of love or despair, as long as the other members of the band each played their part, as long as it all moved together toward the purity of the heart. He didn't care as long as people moved each other across the dance floor, as long as they clapped and came up afterwards to thank him and maybe press a small bill into his hand.

He would come home from playing, often late, and Alicia would rise from where she lay sleepless and bring him tea and some bread—he ate little but enjoyed having his fingers on something. And she would ask him about the audience, and he'd tell her they were wonderful, and she'd ask how the members of the band played, and he'd say not as good as your husband, and she'd laugh and ask what did you play tonight, and he'd tell her by singing, *Negrita of my sorrows, you of the fluttering eyelashes, to all of them say yes but never tell them when, that's what you told me and that's why I live in sorrow...* and she'd say, didn't you play any nice love songs, and he'd say, why yes, *Why shouldn't they know that I love you, vida mía, why shouldn't I say that you have joined your soul to mine...* and you know what, he would say, I dedicated that song to the woman I most wanted near me in that instant, and Alicia would sit back with a put-on look of dismay and ask, and was she there, and he would answer, no, she wasn't there and that made me sad but it also made me play better, like the trumpet itself felt the separation. I told them all about her. And did you say her name? she asked. And he said, yes, I told them, this is for

Alicia, the love of my life, and then she'd sit in his lap and they'd kiss and laugh until she said, Hush, don't wake up the boys, with that smile that had made him fall in love with her the first time and then again and again.

That first time he was deported, Erasmo had wanted to stay at home, play his music even if no one listened any more, chat with Simón in the store, be with Alicia and the boys, who were getting to be young men. Alicia worked at what she could, but she was never very strong and the boys were in school and the time came when even she thought it might be good for him to go back north and earn a little money.

Then Daniel returned with nicely polished boots and a big belt buckle and crucifix, and a truck that he drove around town so everybody could see it.

Erasmo told him "Come on, Daniel, let's make a band again and earn some money."

Daniel stared at him and then just started laughing. "A band? Bands don't earn shit." He pulled out a joint and offered it to Erasmo, a pro forma gesture, since he pulled it back toward his mouth before Erasmo had a chance to decline. He puffed and said, "*Tío*, I got a new way to make money. Wanna know how?"

Erasmo shook his head. He already knew how Daniel made money, but he didn't want to *know*. By then men with bigger belt buckles and hats and trucks than Daniel had moved into town. And the town started to look better. Those men bought new silver chalices for the mass and paid to have the roof patched, they replaced the broken windows at the school, had a nice basketball court and soccer field built for the boys to play on.

The town was perfect for people with money to burn but who had to do so *discreetly*. The land was cheap but good. They could buy enough of it for their big houses, their horse tracks,

their *pachangas* and everything they wanted to hide. The town was near the intersection of highways going north but not too conspicuous. Not much in the way of police. Welcoming people but not prying.

No, the people who lived there were not the kind of people who would ask much about the purchase of a sizable piece of land in cash for more than they thought it was worth. Especially since the men with alligator boots and gem-studded crucifixes hanging from their necks built a youth park and made the church more beautiful than it had ever been, replacing the old with the shiny new, blanketing the church with flowers, the most beautiful flowers anyone in the town could ever recall seeing, fresh and lasting.

And then the construction of the biggest house they ever saw, with trucks from all over taking materials out to the ranch. And the fiestas, with musician tour buses rolling through town and helicopters overhead. The dour masons of the town were happy, working a lot and for the best money. Nobody else could find a worker to do anything, not to paint a house or patch a roof, but the potholes were gone and some of the streets had asphalt for the first time and no longer washed out in the hard rains.

No, the people of the town were not the kind to ask questions, so they didn't. And then, after a while, they understood that they couldn't.

“Come on, *tío*, let's go into business, you and me.”

Erasmus had run his hands through his hair, feeling more tired than if he'd played the trumpet deep into the night.

“Easiest money you'll ever make. All you got to do is help me drive.”

“No. But do me a favor?”

“Anything for my favorite *tío*.”

“Next time you go, take me to the border, Daniel.”

Daniel slapped him on the back. “Ah, great, you’ll help.”

“No, just take me to the border. I know how to do the rest.”

Daniel shrugged and said, “You know what you’re doing” in that tone that made clear Erasmo’s nephew thought he didn’t.

So Erasmo went back to bussing and polishing. Sometimes Daniel came by the restaurants and chatted, sticking some dollars in Erasmo’s hands as he left, or dropped by the house and offered his uncle joints the older man found faraway places to throw away later. “It’s a good life, *tío*. You sure you don’t want in?”

“Oh, Daniel, I’m too old for that kind of thing.”

“It’s simple. Nothing to it. Just coming and going. And you’ll see home again.”

“Many thanks, but I’m too old and clumsy.”

Daniel nodded. “Okay. But don’t say I didn’t offer.”

“No, I’d never say that.”

In the apartment up north that he shared with a half dozen other men, although it seemed like more, Erasmo would sneak out onto the street for privacy to call Alicia. Sometimes they’d just talk, and sometimes he’d sing to her. *Oh, land of the sun, how I sigh for you, now that I am so far, without light and without love...* Don’t be so sad, *mi amor*, she’d say. I’m always sad without you, he’d answer. And I without you, she’d say. When are you coming home? The boys miss you. Just a little more, I need to put aside just a little more money.

Lying in the fields looking at the sky, Erasmo regretted ever going to the United States, even as he was on his way back. At the time he went—at the times he went—he had seen no other way. But now he thought he should have stayed, found some means of supporting the family, done something, anything, to stay with Alicia. He'd have taken her up north in the beginning but she didn't want to go. "What am I going to do up there?" she'd ask.

And then later she was too sick. She'd look at him with rheumy eyes, so thin, so thin, this woman whose fullness had comforted him in the first ravenous years of marriage. She'd say, "you know, Erasmo, if you need a woman while you're up there it's okay."

"Alicia, what are you saying,?"

"I know a man has needs. Just think of me. Don't stay up there with some—"

He couldn't speak.

"Think of me. Keep the ring and think of me."

He pulled her into his arms and cradled her like a child, the thin bones, the trembling, like a bird trying to free itself. "There's no one else but you. Never has been." He kissed her. "Never will be."

"It's ok. Just come back to me."

"Yes. A thousand times yes."

He'd seen her a little more withered each time he came back, and then the last time he departed, he told himself he would make enough money for her medicine and turn right around. And, damn, the boys followed him, despite him asking that they stay home to take care of their mother. But they didn't listen. When they arrived, they sought him out at the restaurant where he bussed, taller than he remembered. So they all started working and sending as much money

home as they could, or so Erasmo thought at the beginning. But they started buying things—they worked hard, they said, they deserved something—their own apartment, a nice TV, they even started saving for a car.

Erasmo thought he'd send home money for the best medicines, but that was just an illusion—payday in the U.S. never went very far. If it wasn't the rent, it was the food, or the time he sliced a finger and had to go to the ER, or his work shoes gave out, or a boss stiffed him, or one of the other guys had a worse emergency, or the time he was robbed walking home by some *pochos*, U.S. Mexicans. So the money that he wired home was never enough. And meantime her cough worsened, and their talk turned to doctors and medications.

He worked harder, sent more home, came back to the apartment exhausted. You're so tired, he'd hear her say from the phone as he paced the street. Did you get enough for the medication? Almost enough. Alicia, I'm sorry. I'll be fine. Cough. Just stay safe for me and come home when you can.

He'd hang up and know she was lying. He counted the coughs, more and more of them, thought to himself she sounded weaker. He worked non-stop, as much as he could, until the boss would send him home he was so tired.

Then Simón called. "*Compa*, you got to come home."

"As soon as I make—"

"No, Erasmo. You got to come home now."

So Erasmo hitched a ride home with Daniel.

He'd left in the middle of a shift, told his sons to collect and send what remained of his pay, and hurried home. Twenty-five years of marriage goes by in a flash, especially if you take a lot of time out to go work in the U.S. All that time spent apart from her, and letting the boys go with him to work in the north, now seemed like the worst possible thing.

His sister and Simón met him at the door with an embrace and eyes that told him everything he needed to know, more than he wanted to know. They spoke in low tones about how they had made arrangements with the priest and the funeral home, brought food, but he said nothing and understood nothing. Then they took him into the bedroom and left him there, sharing the bed with Alicia for the last time, her face made-up, her beautiful eyes closed.

After the funeral, the boys went back north. He argued with them, asked them to stay and keep him company. He asked them to stay home with their family—with what remained of their family, he didn't have the heart to say.

“We're going, *papá*. Don't try to stop us.”

“You should stay home with family.” What he meant but didn't have the heart to say was—with what's left of the family.

“You should've thought of that when we were growing up.”

So Erasmo found himself alone in that house, accompanied by nothing but his memories. He would sit in the front room and hear the sounds of baptismal and birthday parties, think of children racing around and crying when they fell. The bedroom was the worst, so he started sleeping, to the degree that he slept, on the old couch. The bed was too big for one body, he'd wake in it in at night thinking that he heard Alicia's breathing, only to stretch an arm across to

what had been her side, expecting somehow to find her there but instead to feel air as his arm fell onto the hard mattress, with the slight indentations she'd made in her sleep over all those years.

He picked up the trumpet but found his lips weak and loose, his fingers no longer obeyed him. Simón found some work for Erasmo as a mason and he liked that. He worked with his hands again, making something harmonious and smooth. The work was physical, and there was a lot of it, especially on new ranches outside of town. He enjoyed the company of the other workers, the bosses with the fancy boots and hats and buckles fed them very well, and at the end of the day he was tired, almost enough to sleep.

He was working on church repairs the day Simón came to see him.

“Ay, *compadre*, how good—”

“Put down the trowel, Erasmo.”

Erasmo did, wiped his arms on the apron.

“Come home with me.”

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I’ll tell you on the way.”

Erasmo took leave of the other workers.

“Walk faster, *compadre*.”

“I will, but tell me what this is about.”

“Your fucking nephew talked.”

“What do you mean?”

They’d reached Erasmo’s door.

“Get everything you need for the journey.”

“Why?”

“Because your nephew is singing to the Americans. He burned a lot of their money and some of their people. So they’re going to burn everything that’s his to the fucking ground.”

So Erasmo lay on the ground and looked up at the stars. He’d left the trumpet behind in the house he’d shared with Alicia for too little time and that was now all gone. The once-gleaming instrument he’d polished so carefully over the years lay somewhere in the ashes, with the photographs of his family, and everything he had of Alicia and the boys, except the wedding ring. The only thing that kept him breathing was to summon up music, to let it course through his mind and lungs and veins. So he raised his hands in the air above his mouth, his lips positioned as if to blow and his fingers moving as if he held the instrument in front of him again.