

Are We There Yet?

Moises Garcia Gonzales' eyes filled with tears as he watched his pregnant wife step from the shower and gently dab dry her impossibly large belly.

Catching his gaze, Maria smiled. "Officer Gonzales, could it be that you are more emotional about your first baby than the mama?"

"*Si*," he sighed, buttoning the cuffs of his police uniform. "And now I must go to the Tijuana precinct, and scrape together one or two *pesos* to support a wife and new baby.

Maria walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Being an officer might not pay a lot, Moises, but it is noble work and I am really proud of you." She stepped back, looking him up and down.

"What?" he said, feeling self-conscious as he stood bare below the waist in front of his wife. Although she was naked, he felt that he should be dressed at this moment, and he regretted his life-long habit of putting his pants on last.

"Hmm..." she said, clasping her hands together and resting her forearms on her stomach like it was a judge's bench. "I think it is time to tell you, Moises," she said, looking at him. She took in a long breath. "I have gold. As much gold as I ever dreamed of."

He smiled. "Yeah, right. Just where is this gold, Maria?"

She raised her forefinger in the air and shook it at him. And then, to his surprise, his wife, heavy with child, did a full pirouette. It was as breathtaking as watching an elephant in a circus turn on one leg, lumbering, precarious, and heartrending. After completing a wobbly circle, she stopped and faced him. Smiling, she pointed to his heart.

He grinned and pulled her close. Her mid-section lodged between them like a beach ball. "If you say so," he said, resting his forehead on her shoulder before moving down into the mysterious cavern between her full breasts until he was able to kiss the bone hardness at the top of her protruding stomach. Then, unmistakably, the baby shifted its whole weight under his lips.

Moises sat alone on the backseat of the dark blue 'Policia Federal' four-door pick-up as it sped down the narrow dirt road toward Our Lady of Guadalupe Elementary School. As the truck swerved sharply off the road and stopped short at the end of the school's pock-marked playground, his small-boned 22-year-old frame was flung hard into the side door.

His distant cousin, Captain Carlos Fernando Felix Fuentes, stepped out of the police truck's front passenger side, waving away a cloud of dust with the muzzle of his assault rifle. "I curse the whore of Tijuana in July," he said, breathing hard. Sweat dripped down his temples and heavy jowls. He reached into his pant's pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. After wiping off his forehead and neck, he wadded the material in his fist and shined the three gold stars on the epaulets on each shoulder.

Months earlier, Carlos had been appointed La Coahuila District Precinct Chief, to the pride of everyone in the family, and they were further delighted when Carlos brought in Moises as his personal auxiliary sergeant. Everyone was happy, especially Moises. He had always looked up to Carlos, and for the first time in his life, he had a real job. Carlos was fifteen years older, and Moises' first memories of his cousin were of pranks involving strangleholds and punches that always hurt a little, but still made him glad for the special attention.

Before he shut his door, Carlos leaned down to talk to the driver. "Don't take a nap, Jorge. The gringos gave you that new AK-47 to shoot bad guys. Keep it cocked, and in your hands. Be alert. Protect me like you would your own dick. No more. No less."

Jorge Salazar, a muscular officer, with sharp cheekbones and expressionless eyes, nodded, "You can count on me, Captain."

Moises jumped out of the pick-up's raised backseat and hit the ground hard, losing his balance. He jumped to his feet, hoping Carlos didn't see.

But no luck. Carlos was looking straight at him, chuckling and shaking his head. "What about you, Moises?" he asked. "Are you with me, or against me."

"Sure. With you," said Moises, steadying himself against the side of the truck.

"Not exactly the posse I dreamed of," Carlos mumbled, slamming his car door. He placed the butt of his AK47 snugly under his arm pit, and fingering the trigger, he walked toward

the 7-foot cyclone fence that surrounded the school's dilapidated playground and field.

Moises followed, and stopped next to him at the fence. Neither spoke as they stared at the empty field. Carlos took in a deep breath, and sighed. "I feel that I've got to tell you something, *primo*. You've been doing such good work here, bringing in these groups of boys, I just feel you should know something."

Moises looked at him. "What?"

"These kids aren't going to a soccer boarding school. I thought you would have caught on by now. Do you *really* think the Tijuana Cartel would be sponsoring a soccer team of nine-year-olds?"

"What do you mean?" Moises' voice caught in his throat. "Where are they going?"

"Oh it's still nice. They're going on luxury cruises to the Bahamas with rich gringos."

Moises was confused.

"Hundreds of gringos can't wait to spend thousands of dollars on one of these week-long luxury cruises to the Bahamas to enjoy basking in the sun with these soft-skinned boys. They can't wait to get their hands on them." He shook his head and laughed. "The gringos even have a nice name for it: man/boy *love*."

Moises started to feel sick, and rested his head on his fists as he gripped the cyclone fence.

Carlos seemed to be getting more excited. "This is El Capo's most successful operation. The Tijuana Cartel is making millions, and the American doctor behind it all is swimming in greenbacks, too." Grinning, he looked at Carlos. "And, hey, we're not going to be looking too shabby at the ATM, either."

Moises studied the crumbling brick facade of the school.

Carlos shaded his eyes. "They should be letting the students out for afternoon recess in about fifteen minutes, right Moises? It's a beautiful day for the children to play outside, don't you think?"

Moises' heart was pounding. He didn't want to hear this. Although he had helped lure dozens of boys from schoolyards, he had not asked questions, and always told himself that he was doing it so that the boys would be going to wealthy soccer schools established by wealthy Americans, including some who probably owned soccer teams around the world. Now, he knew he had been fooling himself.

"Listen, Moises," Carlos said, more soberly, "I don't like kidnapping kids, anymore than you do, but it is a job that needs to be done. And, I should add: it is a *lucrative* job that needs to be done.

"Carlos..."

"It's Captain to you, as to every other officer," Carlos said, staring at him coldly.

"Anyway, *CAP-TAIN*..." Moises continued.

Carlos glared.

"What if I don't want to do the dirty work for the Tijuana family? What if I wonder what will happen to these kids when they grow out of their beautiful little-boy bodies? What if I don't want to be part of this. And what happens with the families when they find out their little son or grandson is missing....?"

Carlos interrupted him. "Oh, yeah, that. Well...we can't have angry parents protesting across Mexico...." He looked down at his boots. "So, anyway, we have to take care of that."

Moises thought he knew what Carlos meant, and stared at him. He took in a deep shaky breath. "Are you trying to tell me that you kill off the boys' families...??"

"Not the whole families, for god's sake," Carlos said gruffly. "Just the parents. These are just little kids. We can't have them crying to go home to their mama's. These kids are not slaves

on those ships. The gringos want the boys to be enjoying themselves on the cruises, too. Anyway, no boy will be begging to go home to mama, if he knows there is no mama to go home to." Carlos put his hand on Moises' shoulder and squeezed. "'Get with it, oh holy one. These are the facts: El Capo wants it. The gringo wants it. And there are hundreds of other rich gringos who want it. This business is making the Tijuana Cartel more money than all of the drugs that have been smuggled into the States since the Incas. And through our work here, we are earning positions in the the Tijuana family, just like *that*, Moises. Every other cartel will lie under us like prostitutes. Some day we will fry the Zeta's livers with onions and feed them to our children for the iron."

Moises felt a dark curtain coming down over him. It felt as though he was suffocating.

Carlos' grip tightened on Moises' shoulder, and he looked at him hard. "For one thing, you're lucky you don't have to do any of the killing. I made sure of that. And I've assigned one police officer there just to make sure it doesn't get too violent. He's going to take the photos to show the boys their parents are dead. And remember, Moises, these boys will have lives that they wouldn't even dream of in the armpits of Tijuana. *They* will be enjoying those luxury trips to the Bahamas, *too*. What mom or dad wouldn't give their own lives to give their sons such a chance?" He shook his head. Beads of perspiration ran down his face.

Moises looked at him, trying to keep his lips from quivering. "Carlos..." he said. "Carlos...I just..."

"I swear to God, Moises. If we didn't share a blood connection, I would be proud to cut off your mamby pamby head and carry it to El Capo myself." He lifted his grip on Moises' shoulder and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a streak of dirt. "You know what? Sometimes I curse the God who planted your seed in my mother's cousin's daughter."

Moises turned and stared at the school, his knuckles turning white as his fingers tightened around the links in the fence. "These boys come with us because they trust us. And then we just turn on them...."

"*Dios Mio!*" said Carlos, raising his hands in the air. "The kids don't know it's us, who are doing the killing! Getting rid of the families is just a necessary evil in a successful business.

It's not like you are a virgin to the success, either. Both El Capo and the gringo glow when they talk about how good you are with the kids. There is something about your sweet baby face that works every time." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. "They're too young to see the difference between innocence and stupidity, I guess," he said, wiping his face and neck. "Doesn't matter. El Capo is talking about giving you a little house and a white Grand Marquis after we bring in these last boys. These three will make thirty-four in all, El Capo's age, and his magic number." He kicked the fence. "Damn it! I'll bet you get your car, before I do!"

Moises stared straight ahead. He felt as though his face had been chiseled out of a piece of stone. Still, he felt a little thrill when he imagined if Maria and him and the baby had their own little house. That was something so far away it had never been a dream, even.

Carlos studied him. "*Wait* a second... is that a little smile that I see on your mamby-pamby face? Is it the new house that got you smiling, Moises? Or...is it the image of driving into San Diego in the sparkling white Marquis, with Maria leaning up against you, thinking you are the best looking rich man in Mexico, her lips and other parts wet with *love*?"

Moises' grinned sadly, and shook his head. "Fuck you, Carlos."

Carlos laughed, and patted Moises on the back. "Now that's the Moises I know and missed! So are we together again on this one, *primo*? You'll do your Piped Piper magic with these three nice boys and give them a better life with the Americans?"

"Okay, Carlos," Moises nodded, and half-raised his fists in the air, pantomiming a tired boxer.

The shrill recess bell rang, and dozens of laughing boys and girls poured out of the double-doors at the back of the the school. The girls wore navy-plaid pinafores, and sky-blue blouses, and the boys had complementary light blue dress shirts, dark blue pants, and plaid ties.

"Wait a minute, let me get myself presentable for the children," said Carlos. He patted down the wrinkles on the front of his uniform shirt and tucked it in more tightly over his flabby waist. Then, taking off his hard-billed precinct chief's cap, he ran his fingers through each side of his thinning hair, and put the cap back on at a slightly cocky angle. "O.k., I'm ready," he said smiling. "We have come at a good time, Moises. It seems that all of the fourth graders are at

recess, and the best-looking nine and ten-year-olds are coming right toward us to play soccer. Who do you see, Moises?"

"No one, really," said Moises, looking out over the playground. "There is a sea of children out there. The question is not 'Who do I see?', but, 'Who do I *not* see?'"

"That's very poetic," said Carlos, turning to look at Moises, "but, it is not what I am looking for." He put his hand on Moises' shoulder. "Now, Officer Gonzales," he said, slowly, as though speaking to a child, "I..will.. ask.. you.. again: "Who.. do.. you.. see?"

Moises shrugged off Carlos' hand, and continued to look through the fence at the children running and playing, their screams high and shrill. "I see the son of Juanita Ramos, who sells tacos every day at the Plaza de la Constitucion."

"Isn't she the widow of one of the cowards from *Las Familias* who was kidnapped from the Zocalo last year? I heard they cried like babies when they were questioned, and when they were beheaded, their blood was light, almost pink."

Moises gripped the links in the fence, and kicked the dry clods of dirt at his feet. He clenched his fists tighter around the metal, fighting the urge to slug Carlos in the temple exposed by the jaunty tilt of his cap. "It was never proven that those four were members of *Las Familias*."

"What was that, Moises?" Carlos asked. "The children were laughing so loud, I couldn't hear you. Which one is the Ramos boy, and what is his first name? That is *all* I want to hear from you right now, Moises, period."

Moises neck felt stiff as he nodded toward one end of the playground where a group of boys were playing soccer. "Javier," he said. "He's the one kicking the ball."

"Ah, yes," Fuentes said, smiling. "The good-looking one leading the other good-looking boys. He is perfect. A gringo's dream. Who else do you see?"

"Jesus Diaz, the son of the bakers' downtown. He is running right behind Pablo."

"You mean the Diaz Bakery, makers of the driest bread in Tijuana, and tortillas that have the texture of an old woman's *you know what*?" Carlos smiled. "Suddenly I feel better about carrying-out El Capo's orders. Who else do you see?"

"Juan Soros."

“Perfect!” Carlos laughed. “None other than the son of Jorge Gomez Soros, the prick who slashed El Capo's nephew's neck last year over the whore they both loved. El Capo asked that we bring back the Soros boy in this last operation. This is going to be a very good day, Moises. A very good day, indeed.” He patted Moises on the back. “Don’t be so glum. Imagine it is a week from now, when it's all over.” He put his hand on his brow to shade his eyes, as he watched the boys play soccer. “We will be driving our bonuses soon, Moises, I promise you.”

Moises stared out at the children in the field, trying to imagine himself dead.

“Hola, Javier!” Carlos called out. “Javier Ramos!”

A handsome boy, with flawless skin, bright eyes, and an eager smile looked over at the officers standing behind the fence.

“Come here!” yelled Carlos, “and bring Jesus and Juan with you!”

“Jesus, Juan!” Javier screamed to the two boys who were running with the ball. “Aqui!” motioned, as he ran toward the officers.

The high pitch of Javier's voice was like a bolt of lightning piercing Moises' brain.

Pablo arrived at the fence, panting.

“Fast and good footwork, Señor Ramos,” Carlos said. “Let’s just wait a second for your friends to come. I have some very exciting news to share with the three of you.”

“O.k.” Javier said, smiling and nodding. Jesus and Juan ran up and stood on each side of Javier at the fence. All three looked at Carlos and Moises eagerly.

“Well, boys,” Carlos said. “I have very *very* good news. Yesterday, a soccer scout, an Americano, came into the police station. He said that he had been watching all of you boys playing soccer at recess here at Our Lady of Guadalupe, and he was most impressed by you three. In fact, he wants to bring you to America to become soccer stars, and he came to me at the police station to see if that would be all right. Of course, I said, 'Yes', because I want the best for our most talented boys in Tijuana, and I know that when you're making millions of dollars, you will want to send a lot of it back to Tijuana, to your mother, and to help the city. Right?”

“*Si, si,*” said Javier, nodding and smiling.

“And we just talked to your parents. You can imagine how *happy* they are. But the most important question, is this: ‘Do *you* really want it?’

“*Si! Si!*” the boys screamed, jumping up and down.

“Well, then,” said Carlos, chuckling. “Let’s just help you climb over this fence. It’s a waste of time to go back through the school yard. Besides, the last time I talked to your principal....Sister....Sister...”

“Sister Robertina!” the boys cried out.

“Ah, yes, Sister Robertina,” Carlos said. “The last time I checked in with Sister Robertina, soccer success was not at the top of her list of dreams for you three boys, and she would want you to return to school after recess, instead of going with us to meet the Americano. But you are ten now, and able to make your own decisions. What would you like to do?”

“Meet the Americano!” said Javier.

Jesus and Juan nodded. “Yes, The Americano!”

“O.k., then, let me and Officer Gonzales, here, help you over this fence, right now.

Javier started up the fence first, and when he got to the top, and Moises reached up and carried his small frame over the fence, easily.

“Great!” said Carlos. “Now, the next two soccer stars.”

Jesus climbed to the top quickly, and Moises reached up and lifted him over.

Juan stayed on the other side, looking hesitant.

Carlos put his arm lightly around Javier’s shoulders, and when the boy looked up at him, Carlos nodded toward Juan.

“Come on, Juan!” Javier said. “Come with us!”

Juan smiled at his friend, and started climbing the fence, and as Carlos and Moises reached up to help him down, Carlos whispered, “Javier is good-looking *and* smart. There might be an extra bonus for that.”

Once the three were on the other side of the fence, Carlos tucked his AK-47 under one arm and said, “Now, kids, let’s walk very quickly, run, even.” He grabbed Javier’s hand and started jogging.

Moises took Juan’s and Jesus’ hands and ran next to him. He looked back at the school and saw a flash of black. “Look back at the field, quick,” he said under his breath.

Panting hard, Carlos turned toward the playground. “Well, would you get a load of *that!*”

he hissed. "We have the Fuckin' Flying Nun on our tail." He started running faster, pulling Javier, wide-eyed, behind him. "Let's Run Faster, Everyone! Fast!"

"Thank God, she's not within hearing distance," muttered Carlos. "Her long frock is in our favor, too."

Before they turned the corner, Moises and Carlos looked back at the school. An elderly nun in a long black habit, was running across the field, waving her arms, her mouth open as though she was shouting, although Moises could not hear a thing.

"Damn, she's really clipping along for an old goat," said Carlos.

"Out of hearing distance, out of mind; out of mind, into peace." said Moises, breathing hard, pulling Juan and Jesus along after him.

Carlos, sweat dripping down his face as he lumbered along, looked at Moises. "Oh my, that was perfectly *lovely*, Officer Gonzales!" he said, in a high voice. "Might one call it *p-o-e-t-r-y*?"

Moises smiled.

Always the' *Poet*," said Carlos, shaking his head. "*Dios Mios*, what did I do to deserve the Officer Poet?"

The big-wheeled 4x4 police truck was waiting close to the road, the engine running.

"Wow!" Javier said.

"O.K." said Carlos, breathing hard as he opened the second door of the pick-up.

"Officer Gonzales will be sitting in the back with you three, and I'll sit up front with Officer Salazar, our driver."

Moises lifted the boys into the backseat, and Carlos ran to the front passenger side, jumped-in and slammed the door. He took a quick look at the four in the backseat and then turned to Jorge. "Vamos!"

The truck screeched and picked up speed so fast, it alarmed Moises, and he could feel the muscles in Juan's shoulders tense-up as he leaned into him.

"Seat-belts! And engage the doors' child-safety locks, Officer Gonzales," Carlos said, as they speeded down the dirt road. "Watch the speed, Officer Salazar. We have precious cargo here. Future soccer stars!" He looked over his shoulder, and winked and smiled at Moises and

the boys.

Moises did not smile back.

After they had gone a few miles, Carlos opened the glove compartment, and pulled-out three iPod Nanos in florescent green, blue, and orange, with matching florescent ear-buds dangling from each. "O.K., young winners" he said turning to the three boys in the backseat. "TheAmericano bought these gifts for you." He handed each of them a shiny iPod. "I've already downloaded the top 100 American top hits for you.

The boys grinned and stared down at the iPods in their hands.

"Go ahead, put in the earphones," Carlos said. "Officer Gonzales will help you." He looked at Moises.

"Of course," said Moises, turning to help Juan untangle the wires on his ear-buds.

"The little 'x' button on the iPod is the volume," said Carlos, still turned to the backseat. "Keep pushing it until it's *really* loud. The Americans always play their music *really* loud."

Javier, put in his earphones, first. Then, Jesus, and Juan. When all three of the boys were humming to the music, Carlos smiled, and turned to Jorge. "I've got to go to straight to the station, now," he said, under his breath. "There are a few goody-two-shoes officers who have been looking at me a little funny in the last couple of weeks. To have our cover blown now would not only cost us the deal, it would cost us our lives."

Jorge stared ahead at the road, looking grim. "Can't you arrest those officers, and torture some kind of 'confession' out of them, like you did in the past?"

"I can only get away with my 'torture to truth' technique with new officers. The three men I'm most worried about have been with the Coahuila Street Station long before I arrived as its Precinct Chief. The trouble is, not only have these three officers earned the respect and trust of the other non-compliant officers, they're smart. Long before the human rights groups started questioning my 'techniques' for rooting out corrupt officers, these three moral dick-heads had questions of their *own* about my 'methods', and, one by one, in their fucking noble manner, they set up one-on-one 'meetings' to share their concerns."

Carlos sighed. "So unfortunately, I can't torture them, or fire them. And I can't promote them, of course, and move them even closer to my operations. They are fucking thorns in my

side, until they are 'killed in the line of duty', which will be the first thing I bring up with El Capo after this operation is over, I can promise you that."

"*I'm Glad You Came! I'm Glad You Came!*" Juan sang out from the the back seat.

Carlos jumped a little in his seat, and then grinned at Jorge. "It's a new hit song in America, by the group "The Wanted". I like it a lot, myself. For the last two weeks, I've been listening to the music that the gringo downloaded on the kids' iPods. Very catchy. He has good taste. I even got an iPod on eBay for my son, and downloaded the same music. Pepino loves it, and listens to that thing, 24/7. And, on those *rare* occasions when I *can* get his attention, he doesn't give me that god-damned *attitude*. That, *alone* was worth the hours I spent trying to win a single auction on eBay."

"I'm talking too much, about nothing," Carlos said, yawning. "After you drop me off at the Precinct, drop Moises and the kids off at McDonalds."

He turned around and looked at Moises. "Get them anything they want, Moises. If they want two Happy Meals, get them two Happy Meals. If they want super-super sized fries, get them super-super sized fries. And as they eat, find out where they live, and let Jorge know."

Moises nodded.

Carlos turned to Jorge and lowered his voice. "The two newest members of the cartel, El Capo's teenage nephews, are chomping at the bit to do their first killings, so that's good. But they are like dogs, and I need you to supervise those brutes. Make sure they honor the boundaries that I have drawn: no grandmothers or grandfathers over the age of sixty-five, no siblings under the age of these three boys, and absolutely no torture. A good man has to draw his boundaries."

"You can count on me, Captain," said Jorge.

"Good. Oh, and don't forget to take photos to show the boys. The mamas' bodies have to be clearly recognizable, or this whole thing will be a bust. Moises will give you the camera."

He looked back at Moises.

Moises nodded and patted the camera case next to him.

Carlos kept looking at Moises, and a wave of sadness crossed his face. "You know, *primo*, I only give you a hard time sometimes because you are a good kid, and a smart kid, and this is your chance to move up and do well for Maria and your babies."

"I know, Carlos, thank you," said Moises.

Carlos smiled and turned around. "Very good, then." As they passed San Juan Battista, one of Tijuana's oldest churches, he made the sign of the cross. "My mother prays there every day," he said.

A few blocks later, Jorge swerved the truck in front of the La Coahuila District Precinct. Carlos opened his door, and slowly got out. Then he turned and opened the back door. He smiled, looking down at the boys, and extended his right hand. "Congratulations Señor," he said, shaking each of their small hands.

After he shook Juan's hand, Carlos' gaze rested on Moises. Moises lifted his hand off of the camera case, and squeezed his cousin's forearm.

Carlos smiled sadly. "Gracias, *primo*. Gracias."

Jorge waited outside in the police truck while Moises took Javier, Juan, and Jesus into MacDonald's. The three boys jumped up and down with excitement, as they ordered whatever they wanted from the menu. Javier's super-sized fries were so big, he had to hold them with both hands, and for the longest time he sat in his scooped-orange-plastic chair just staring down at them. Then, as though emerging from a trance, he looked up at Moises. "Would you like some fries, *Tio*?"

At that moment Moises knew what he had to do. The seeds of that certainty had been planted that morning when he kissed his wife's swollen belly, and their infant stirred under his lips. He would take the boys back to their families after McDonalds, and they would live. And he would not. What he had done on earth was sinful beyond a child's imagination. But now, during this final moment of truth, Moises clung to the hope that when his son looked up during his darkest hours, he would glimpse a flicker of light.