

Are We There Yet?

Moises Garcia Gonzales' eyes filled with tears as he watched his pregnant wife step from the shower and gently pat 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 leave to make money to support my lover and new baby.

Maria walked over to him and kissed his cheek. "You are sweet."

He rested his head on her shoulder for a moment and then moved down into the mysterious cavern between her full breasts until he could kiss the bone hardness at the top of her protruding stomach. And there, unmistakably, the baby shifted its legs under his lips.

God forgive me for what I must do, he prayed. To cover both bases, he added a prayer to Santa Muerta, that he never incite her deadly wrath.

Moises sat alone on the second seat of the dark blue 'Policia Federal' four-door pick-up as it sped down the dirt road toward Our Lady of Guadalupe Elementary School. His small-boned 22-year-old frame was swung to the far right side door as the truck swerved off the narrow dirt road and stopped short at the end of the school's playing field.

Moises' distant cousin, Captain Carlos Fernando Felix Fuentes, stepped out of the truck's front passenger door, waving away a cloud of dust with the muzzle of his assault rifle. "Fuck the hot cunt of Tijuana in July," he said, breathing hard, sweat dripping down his temples and fleshy jowls. He reached into his pant's pocket and pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead and neck, and then wadded the cloth in his fist and shined the three gold stars on the epaulets on each shoulder.

When Carlos had been appointed The La Coahuila District Precinct Chief, everyone in their family had been delighted when he brought Moises in as his personal auxiliary sergeant. Everyone, that is, except Moises. Carlos was fifteen years older, and Moises' first memories were filled with his older cousin's pranks which were never as fun as they were mean.

"Don't take a nap, Jorge," Carlos said, turning to the driver. "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, a muscular officer, with sharp cheekbones and expressionless eyes, nodded, "You can count on me, Captain."

"What about you, Moises?" Carlos asked, as Moises jumped out of the pick-up's raised backseat, almost losing his balance.

"Sure," said Moises, steadying himself as he reached back into the truck to get his gun.

"Not exactly the posse I dreamed of," Carlos mumbled, as he slammed his car door. Placing the butt of his AK47 snugly under his arm pit, he fingered the trigger as he walked toward the 7-foot cyclone fence that surrounded the school's large playground and field.

Moises followed him and they stopped at the fence and stared out silently at the empty field. He was not in the mood to talk to Carlos about anything, even the weather.

Carlos took a deep breath, and sighed. "They should be letting the students out for afternoon recess in about fifteen minutes, right? It's a beautiful day for the children to play outside, don't you think?"

"Si," Moises said, his gaze never wavering from the school building.

"Listen," Carlos said, putting his hand on Moises' shoulder. "I don't want to kidnap kids anymore than you do. But it has become the heart of El Capo's operation. The Tijuana Cartel finally has a chance to prove they can score. This American doctor has a big business with these ten-year-old boys, and we are going to get almost as rich as he is. These are the facts: El Capo wants it. The gringo wants it. And there are hundreds of other rich gringos who want it. The Americanos are already in line with their cash... hundreds of thousands, even millions of dollars, Moises....to get their hands on these boys on one of those special week-long 'pleasure cruises' to the Bahamas Islands. This business is making the Tijuana Cartel more money than the all of 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 turned to him. "Carlos..."

"It's Captain, to you, as it is to every other officer."

"Anyway, *CAP-TAIN*..." Moises continued, as Carlos glared. "What about those of us who don't want to do the dirty work for the Tijuana family, let alone be a part of the family? What about those of us who wonder what will happen to these kids when they grow out of their beautiful little-boy bodies? What about those who feel they will go to hell for killing off the boys' families, just to convince them that they have nowhere else to go but with the gringo and the ship?" Moises took-in a deep shaky breath. Never before had he spoken so directly to Carlos.

Carlos tightened his grip on Moises' shoulder, and stared into him. "Get with it, oh holy one. For one thing, you don't have to do any of the killing. I made sure of that. You are just there to watch and make sure it doesn't get too violent, and take photos. And remember, 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

up their own life to give their sons such a chance?" He shook his head. Beads of perspiration ran down his face. "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 cyclone fence. "These boys come with us because they trust us. And then we just turn on them."

"For fuck's sake!" said Carlos. "The kids don't know it is us, who are doing the killing! Getting rid of the families is just a fuckin' necessary evil in a fuckin' successful business! It's not like you are a virgin to the success of the operation. Both El Gringo and El Capo nearly gloat when they talk about how good you are getting the kids to trust you. There is something about your sweet soft baby face that works every time." He reached into his pocket for 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 three boys." He kicked the fence. "Damn it! I'll bet you get your car, before I do!"

Still staring straight ahead, Moises couldn't help but smile a little when he imagined Maria's sheer joy if he surprised her with their own house. That was something so far away it had never been a dream, even. Ecstasy. He never thought he would ever be able to use that word in his life. He would build a swing for his daughter. If the baby were a girl, he might not have to think about what he had done, every single minute of every single day.

Carlos studied him. "*Wait* a second... is that a little smile that I see on your mamby-pamby face? Was it the new little house that got you smiling, Moises? Or...was 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' smile widened, and he 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 wore complementary light blue dress shirts, dark blue pants, and plaid ties.

"Wait a minute, let me get myself presentable for the children." Carlos patted down the

wrinkles on the front of his uniform shirt and tucked it in more tightly over his flabby waist. Taking off his hard-billed precinct chief's cap, he ran his fingers through each side of his thinning hair, and then put the cap back on at a slightly cocky angle. "O.k., I'm ready. We have come at a good time," he said, smiling. It seems that all of the ten-year-old boys are at recess. Who do you see, Moises?"

"No one, really," Moises replied, 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 stare at Moises, "but, it is not what I am looking for." He put his hand on Moises' shoulder, and squeezed. "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 four cowards from Las Familias who were kidnapped from the Zocalo, and killed 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. "It was never proven that those four were members of Las Familias."

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

Moises nodded toward one end of the playground where a group of boys were playing soccer. "Pablo," 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, who makes 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. "The son of Jorge Gomez Soros, the prick who slashed El Capos 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. "These three will make thirty-four boys, El Capo's, age, and his magic number.

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, Pablo!" Carlos called out. "Pablo!"

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!” Pablo screamed to the two boys who were running with the ball. "Aqui!" he motioned for them to follow, as he ran toward the officers.

The high pitch of Pablo's voice was like a bolt of lightning piercing Moises' heart.

Pablo arrived at the fence, panting.

“Fast and good footwork,” 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." Pablo said, nodding. Jesus and Juan ran up and stood on each side of Pablo at the fence. All three looked up smiling happily.

“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 at Our Lady of Guadalupe, and he was impressed by you three, the most. In fact, he wants to bring you to America to be 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 Pablo, 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?’”

“Yes! Yes!” 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 probably 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. Which would you like to do?”

"Meet the Americano!" screamed Pablo.

Jesus and Juan nodded. "Yes, The Americano!" they said.

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

Pablo started up the fence, first, and when he got to the top, both Carlos and Moises reached for him and lowered him to the ground.

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

Jesus climbed to the top quickly, and was helped over. But Juan stayed on the other side, looking hesitant.

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

"Come on, Juan!" Pablo said. "Come with us!"

Juan smiled, and started climbing the fence, and as Carlos and Moises reached up to help him down, Carlos whispered, "Pablo is handsome *and* smart. There might be an extra bonus for that."

Once the three were on the other side of the fence, Carlos said, “Now, boys, let’s walk very quickly, run, even.” He looked in the direction of the school. There was a flash of black. "Now, would you get a load of *that!*" he hissed under his breath as they all started running. "We have The Fuckin' Flying Nun on our tail." He took Pablos' hand and started running faster. "Let's Run, Everyone! Fast!"

Moises was soon passing him with the other two boys.

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

Before they turned the corner, Moises looked over his shoulder. An elderly nun in a long black habit, was running across the field, waving her arms, and shouting.

"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, panting, pulling Juan and Jesus along after him.

Carlos, sweat dripping down his face as he jogged, 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 Fuentes, 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!" said Pablo.

"O.K." Carlos said, breathing hard as he opened the second door of the pick-up for the three boys. "Officer Gonzales will be sitting in the back with you three boys, and I'll sit up front with Officer Salizar, our driver."

As Moises lifted the boys into the backseat, Carlos ran to the front passenger side, jumped-

in and slammed the door. He took a quick look back at the four in the back and turned to Jorge. "Vamos!"

The truck screeched and picked up speed so fast, it alarmed Moises.

"Seat-belts! And engage the doors' child-safety locks, Officer Gonzales," Carlos said, as they sped down the dirt road. "Watch the speed, Officer Salizar. There's precious cargo here. Future soccer stars!" He looked over his shoulder, and winked at Moises and the smiling 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. "The Americano bought these gifts for you." He handed each of them a shiny iPod. "I've already downloaded the top 100 American pop songs 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," replied 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."

Pablo, 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 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've done 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 two years ago. 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, 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 fuckin' 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 in the back seat. 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. 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 I need you to supervise the brutes, Moises, because you are a good kid and you will make them 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."

Moises nodded.

"Oh, and don't forget to take explicit photos to show the boys."

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," said Moises, "Thank you."

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

Moises knew what he had to do. The seeds of that certainty were planted that morning, when his 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, Moises had hope that when his child looked up during his darkest hours, he would see his father's light.