

CROSSING OVER

Under the dry sun, the group approached the Northern border. They had made immense progress for approximately a month and the exhausting journey would soon end. They had found the nights did not prove any more nourishing than the days.

Miguel came to a clearing; the white in his blue eyes had tints of red. His long black hair was pulled back to keep out of his eyes. For now, the sand stayed out as well. The group had not encountered smooth terrain for what felt like a week. “Brother,” Miguel said, waving his arm forward to the slight dip towards the smooth sand in front of him. “We have an easier path here in the final stretch, eh?” Juan approached his brother, eyeing the clearing as he came up beside him. Juan’s clothes were tattered – he wore tan clothes to blend in with the desert. However, the sand coating him did most of the heavy lifting for his makeshift camouflage. His weary gaze swept the fading horizon as the sun fell below the top of distant mountains. “Nothing about this has been *easy*, brother,” Juan said with some distaste.

Full of sorrow, Miguel looked at Juan. “Look, Juan, I’m sorry... you’ve had to make the toughest choices out of all of us this trip. I’m not trying to take anything away from that, let alone bring it up.” Juan released some air as if he were going to speak again, then hesitated a moment. “You’ll never know what it’s like to pick one of your kids over another, Miguel. I just want to wrap this up so we can send for my little girl.”

Miguel broke eye contact with Juan and peered down at his sandy feet. “Let’s get the rest of the group.” The two of them walked over to the rest of their group, consisting of Juan’s son, Antonio, and their friends Paulo and Jose. Coming from different parts of Latin America, the extended family and friends still were not well adapted for what awaited them at the border. *No one* would be prepared.

Only a mile from the border, the night was noticeably active. This was an area that Miguel and the group received intel on as being noticeably thinner than the ten-mile radius surrounding it. The wall here was unfinished and would likely remain that way. The guards were reluctant to scrutinize this weak spot with any additional authority. They had heard the morbid stories about “La Tormenta”.

Officer Daniel Rodriguez was on patrol this night. His dirty blonde hair and tanned skin stuck out in the early dusk. His fully decked patrol uniform was largely clean of the sandy aura typical of attire near the border. He'd been on the job for three years and had more experiences with illegal crossings than he'd like to admit. Enough to put a person on constant alarm, while being most at peace. Contradictory, yet it was the truth.

Daniel learned that sometimes contradictions are necessary to function in his line of work. His job was to keep out those who would come against the laws of the United States even though these people looked like him and sounded like him. He had an intrinsic kinship with them, yet his duty was to keep them out or remove them if necessary. He believed in the law, but at the same time could not squash his personal feelings about the situation. Another contradiction to live by at the border.

As a retired soldier, Daniel knew what it was like to respect orders that could be interpreted as morally ambiguous.

"Paulo, it's your turn to stand watch." Miguel passed his revolver to his former coworker, a man he was trusting with his life. "Just like the old days at the mall, amigo. Never thought I would miss that shitty pay," Paulo said. Miguel patted him on the back and went to sit down near his brother and nephew. It was now dark, and they knew the dark was the opportune time to make their attempt. However, they'd been moving for nearly fourteen hours and needed a quick rest before trying the finishing few miles of the trip.

Juan and Miguel sat across from each other, their eyes locking as they both tried to find the words to express their complicated feelings. After a moment of silence, Juan reached out and clasped Miguel's hand tightly. Miguel understood the message in his brother's grip.

"We're almost there," Miguel said, breaking the silence. "We've come a long way."

Juan nodded, and the two sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. But their body language spoke volumes - their clasped hands, the way they leaned towards each other, the small, barely perceptible nods that passed between them.

Finally, Juan spoke, "I wouldn't have made it without you." Miguel smiled softly, "That's what brothers are for."

The group was laying under the stars. Their snoring remained out of rhythm with the crickets chirping in the night. On watch duty, Paulo held his gun close as he kept watch in the open desert. Not much for the eye to see, but Paulo was not at ease. Despite his time as a guard, he never gained the composure of Miguel, let alone that of a border patrolman. Not an ideal candidate for night patrol, but everyone must take their turn.

Paulo took a big gulp from their canteen while looking around, full of paranoia. Water dripped down his cheeks as he closed the lid. He was careful to put the water away, not wanting to waste any more than he had by overfilling his cheeks. *Then again, he thought, this will hopefully be our last night.*

To the North of their huddle, the chirping of the crickets ceased. Paulo turned his attention to the newfound silence. The winds began to whistle, and Paulo thought he could see whisks of sand moving twenty yards from his position. It was still hard to see, however. He went to investigate, gun pointed but not yet cocked. As he approached, the wind became a bit louder, the sand movement he suspected made him increasingly suspicious. He then made the outline of a figure less than ten yards in front of him. It stood nearly at his five-foot-seven eyeline, a bit below so he could still see over the figure. *Can't be harder than stopping a guy stabbing patrons with a knife hidden in a pizza box, can it?* He asked himself as he came to the final approach at the foot of the figure's moon shadow.

Daniel kept his sight on the land towards La Tormenta. His co-patrol, Harry, was off screwing around, but Daniel wasn't worried. Not only could he handle himself, but he was also entirely confident no one would attempt to cross during his shift. He had seen more bodies buried in this area of the border than anywhere else he had been stationed. Most of them were too disemboweled to show in the media. Who would try to cross that spot in the middle of the night? There's no way to be sure what is going on out there, even with a moon as bright as it was tonight. Then, he noticed the quieting of the Mexican cricket, and the arrival of the winds. His trained finger pointed out towards the spot he so dearly feared. Confidence can take him this far, but now it is up to Daniel.

Paulo was now less than a person's length away from the figure. He could see now; it was a bit taller than him. As odd as it was, it was no stranger than the features he was able to make out under the shining moon. Skin that appeared as coarse as the earth, arms that came down to nearly the figure's knees, no discernable neck to pick out. He could not see any eyes in the moonlight, either. "Hey," Paulo said, trying to identify a spot on where he thought the figure's face would be to look at. "What are you doing out here? Are you lost? Are you... are you here for us?" Paulo looked down and did not see any weapon being held by this person. He was sure it was a person now – what else could it be? Despite its distinct lack of human presence, Paulo was unable to imagine anything that would allow him to continue this conversation.

The winds continued to pick up, and the figure's appendage that passed its knee began to swing towards Paulo. He pointed his gun but could tell that this motion meant him no harm. He went to step toward the figure and felt a tug at his feet; they were stuck. Paulo tried pulling them out of the increasingly deep sand, to no avail. He began to panic and asked the figure for help, "Sir, can you... please, pull me out of this?" In his struggle he dropped the gun. Bending forward as he continued to sink into the sand, he felt for it. The winds were nearly screaming around him now – the figure began to sway back and forth. Paulo's hand found the gun, but he could not pull it from the ground, either. His hands were now stuck. All four of his limbs were being engulfed by the earth – as his torso connected with the sand, he looked up at the figure; it was now nearly twice as tall as before. No, even more. The appendages drifting in the now-vicious wind were not arms – they were indiscernible. Paulo now felt that the pull wasn't like quicksand. It felt as if there were *people* pulling him under. He felt rough bony sticks that felt like skinned fingers grasp at him. He began to bleed as nearly his entire body was under the sand. Only his head above the chin poked out. He was screaming but could not hear it over the roar of the winds. In his final breaths above the sand, he saw how immense the figure was now, how... unknowable the thing was in front of him. The immensity drove him mad in an instant.

Paulo, in his final breath, mustered, "Mother..."

Daniel's hair rustled in the wind; it grew so strong he almost fell back into his chair. Suddenly, it died down and how was once again able to look down on the ground. Despite the gusts, it did not appear that anything had changed out in the night.

“Harry, you feel that one?” Daniel asked, looking below his spot on the watch. Harry looked up at Daniel and shook his head. *Not much of a talker tonight*, Daniel thought; he looked back out at the desert and saw some of the wind pick up. *Is there something out there?* he thought to himself.

The group woke up to the prodding of a figure. They opened their eyes and saw that it was Paulo, eager to be relieved of duty. Jose asked, “How is it out there tonight, amigo?” He was still groggy from the short rest. Paulo looked right at him and replied, “Uneventful.” He then went to sit down.

“You ok, Paulo?” Miguel asked his friend. Paulo was staring off past his compadres towards the direction of the wall. It didn’t look like he had blinked since sitting down. Paulo did not respond verbally but nodded his head slightly. Juan looked at Paulo’s side and noticed something off. “Where’s the gun, man?” he asked as he stood up approaching the shadow of his friend. Antonio stood up next to his father. The faces of the two other members of the group suddenly filled with realization as the figure they thought was Paulo looked at them in the night. Nothing in its eyes; only darkness. The sands around them started to vibrate and a horrible wind knocked over Juan and Antonio. Then, “Paulo” began to rise. And then he transformed.

Daniel got down from his post – he was concerned with the suspicious weather activity. The last time he was on duty with a strong wind near La Tormenta, he had uncovered a body a mile into the desert. All its internal organs were missing, and half of its face was ripped off. It had almost been entirely embedded into the sand and four men had to dig for twenty minutes to get it out. Daniel had only seen one worse postmortem body recover; that was during his stint in Afghanistan.

Daniel and other men had been attacked in Jalalabad – the enemy was attempting traditional warfare in an unexpected change of tactics. His closest fellow soldier, Pvt. Jacobson, had been stabbed in the leg and Daniel was attempting to move him out of the line of fire so he and his men could progress. The enemy forces flanked him while he was attempting to move Jacobson.

“Daniel, there’s men...” Jacobson said right before being shot between the eyes, still in Daniel’s arms. Daniel yelled and returned fire. He hit one combatant as the others retreated. As

he led a few men in that direction, one of the enemy soldiers threw a grenade into their group. “Move, move, it’s live!” Daniel screamed at his men as they took as much evasive action as possible. Not all of them made it out of the blast radius.

Daniel turned to see one of his fellow soldiers, Pvt. Lawrence, yelling as loud as he still could. Daniel couldn’t hear him yelling – he could only see due to the ringing in his ears. He didn’t want to look, but he could not stop himself. Lawrence was screaming with half of his face torn off. His eyeball dangled out of his socket, almost reaching the crest of what remained of his nose. His arm was partially gone, hand torn off with only two fingers remaining. There was so much blood it looked as if Lawrence was wearing a burgundy red uniform. He must have tried to cover his face from the blow as he was the closest soldier to it.

Daniel thought of Pvt. Lawrence and of the immigrant seeking the American border. His eyes watered for a moment. “Harry, I think we need to check something out here.” He looked out into the desert and prepared as best he could for the sight of another member of the fallen.

Months ago, the group had no plans to cross over to America. South America, specifically Brazil, was destabilizing, but it posed no immediate threat. Juan had no intention of abandoning his children. However, that all changed for them once Jose told Juan and Miguel about what happened to his cousin in Brazil, Jair.

“Open up, Jair, we know you’re in there!” Men dressed darkly banged on Jair’s door to his apartment in Maturin. Jair had been hiding in his bathroom, crouched in the tub. He had been too cavalier in his political beliefs out in public. He was shaking in the tub, nothing to protect himself with but a glass bottle of soda. The men counted down, and upon hitting one, broke through his door. Jair prepared himself for the men, but he knew he ultimately stood no chance against them. After a quick scuffle, Jair was gone. Miguel and Jose quickly began working on a plan for the two of them to cross into America.

That was until Juan decided that this most recent event was the tipping point. He told Miguel he would come on the condition that his children would come with him. “Juan, that is much too dangerous. They are safer here than the long journey to America,” Miguel said. Juan looked at his brother with fury in his eyes. “If that were true, then why are we going at all?” Juan asked. Miguel scoffed and returned his brother’s angry glare, albeit more mellow than Juan.

“Because they’re children, Juan. Carmen isn’t even old enough for makeup yet. Please do not bring them through thousands of miles through foreign countries when we might not even make it to our destination. At least don’t bring her,” Miguel said.

They came to an agreement – Antonio would come, and Carmen would stay with Paulo’s abuelita. She was the closest thing to family any of them had. After many weeks of travel through areas friendly and not so much, they were in Mexico. It was an improvement over their homeland yet not safe for them still. The land with the highest risk of entry also had the highest reward of safety if they could make it. Then they could smell the border. The group was confident they had made the right decision.

Miguel reflected on the decisions they made, the choices and events out of their hands that had shaped their path. He did this as he watched the earth devour his brother and nephew in an incomprehensible manner. He now wished that none of them had stepped one foot out of Venezuela.

Daniel walked out into the desert, bringing Harry with him. Harry did not have much interest in figuring out the situation. He was an action-first man who did not like to listen to others unless he saw them as an equal to his intellect, strategy or otherwise. Most of the men he respected did not, however, share in his philosophy. His philosophy was always, *we patrol the border, not the land in front of the border, not the land behind the border. There are other jobs for that. All we should care about is bodies crossing.*

Frankly, that attitude wouldn’t fly if Harry wasn’t damn good at his philosophy. He was one of the most successful at stopping illegal crossings in the past year or so. To be clear, that’s *stopping* crossings, not *preventing* them. But, like Harry thought, that’s someone else’s job. Tonight, it looked like the job would be Daniel’s.

Miguel ran as fast as he could. He wasn’t proud. Tears ran down his face as he ran away from the sinking earth and the damaging winds. He saw Antonio and Juan go under but didn’t see what happened to Jose. He didn’t need to know what happened to all of them because as far as immediate matters went, he had to get out of there.

When they first made it to Mexico, Paulo had said, “This trip is not about us, amigos. It is for our family’s legacy and the hope of a better tomorrow.” Looking back now, Miguel could not imagine how tomorrow would be worse than today.

He didn’t know what happened to Paulo. Whatever that thing was that looked briefly like his old friend was not him. It was as if it was wearing a Paulo costume. His memory seemed off, as he retrospectively noticed oddities about Paulo’s physique; skin that was as course as the sand, eyes that did not shine in the night sky, his clothing seemed even more tattered than before. Then, when the transformation occurred—if you could call it that. Miguel did not know what to call it. All he knew was that the thing that took his friend’s form had more teeth in its mouth than a great white shark. He continued to run, even after his breath was near uncatchable.

Daniel and Harry wandered deeper into the moonlit Mexican side of the border. Daniel had made sure to inform the other patrol of their departure. The last thing they needed was a strike for abandoning their post.

“Aren’t you a good little soldier?” Harry said as they continued into the sand. “Always telling everyone that can hold us up exactly what we are doing.” Daniel looked at his partner and said, “I thought you loved strictly following the rules, Harry. Or does that not apply to you?” Harry scoffed at Daniel’s remarks.

“What exactly is so wrong with the weather that got you this worked up, Rodriguez?” Harry said as they made it over fifty yards into the desert. Daniel looked over to where Harry was standing, a few paces behind him. He was carrying a flashlight with one hand and using the other to hold his cigarette. Daniel’s body language was nearly opposite, with two hands on the flashlight with his firearm pointed out in front of him. Safety on, of course.

“I’ve told you before, La Tormenta is not something to mess with on a night like this. Poor fools who try to cross on a night like tonight don’t make it to the border and it’s not because of us.” “Who’re you giving the credit to then, huh? My understanding is that we are some of the best this America-defending business has to offer,” Harry said in response. Daniel shook his head and looked out towards the desert in front of them, dustier with every step.

It's not *who* I'm giving credit to, but *what*. They made it a bit farther before hearing a terrible scream not too far from them. Daniel and Harry moved swiftly towards the terror-filled noise.

As he was running, Miguel heard Jose scream. He thought that he had gotten far enough away from the attack and the others that the noise would be far away, but it wasn't. The volume of Jose's screams indicated he was but several paces away. Had he followed Miguel? Miguel didn't think it was possible, as he did not see Jose come with him after Antonio and Juan went under. To be fair, he did not really notice much of anything else after they were gone – he simply turned and ran.

Miguel was unsure of what to do. He knew that whatever creature had impersonated Paulo and had done a darn good job of it. The risk of encountering that creature again under the guise of helping his friend was a difficult choice, but one in which he knew what to do. *Jose would want me to run and make it*, he thought to himself. A deeper inner voice was saying something different. *You're a selfish bastard, Miguel, and worst of all – you're a fucking coward.*

He continued running away from the screams, and eventually they did quiet.

Daniel heard the screams get louder. He figured they were close and took his safety off as the winds picked up around him and Harry. Harry's body language changed, and Daniel could tell that he was now taking the threat seriously. This scream was not one you would typically hear. Humans must stop eventually to catch their breath. This scream, however - it was loud, but more importantly, it was *constant*.

“Man, what *is* that sound,” Harry asked, moving increasingly closer to Daniel. Sweat started to drip from Harry's brow. Daniel didn't respond, simply pointed with his light, and moved towards the louder winds and the voice echoing above it all. The sand around them was caked to their legs, the mounds increasing as to make it more difficult to walk. It felt like something was pulling their legs down.

Daniel approached the yelling voice in what he figured was just feet in front of him. Then, the screaming stopped. Harry had fallen slightly behind Daniel, and a mound of sand rose

behind him. As he turned, the wall of sand kept climbing until it was nearly three times Harry's height. He realized that it was not a person or a wall at all in front of him. It was something else, reminiscent of an H.G. Geiger monster. Not anything that has ever been or ever will be of this natural world. The thing grabbed him with a sharp, sandy appendage and Harry was lifted into the air. Now he was the one screaming.

Miguel saw the border approaching in front of him. He thought if there was someone there, maybe they could grab help for his family and possibly the entire area. What was stopping that thing from taking on a few border patrolmen? Miguel was not even sure what he saw back there, if it was a marauder waiting for a victim in the night, if it was several people, if they encountered some sort of sinkhole. He still could not believe all the arms that seemed to come from the same place. His mind was wandering – the running had helped him block those thoughts out but now that he was farther away from the event, it crept back into his conscious thought.

Miguel slowed down a bit to take a self-inventory. He was soaked in sweat and in sand. He had no possessions. There were cuts on his legs from the tremendous gusts of wind throwing the sand into him viciously. The winds had died down around him, which eliminated the distraction he had from his injuries. Determined to find someone else for aid, he continued his trek towards the border.

Less than a minute later, the screaming once again echoed from the opposite direction. Only this time, it was louder and sounded like more than one person's voice.

Daniel turned around to see a giant wall of moving earth grab Harry with what looked like a sharp claw on one of many arms. Before he totally lost his composure, he started firing his weapon above the head of his accomplice to free him without injury.

The thing holding Harry grabbed at where Daniel shot with a few of its many hands. Daniel fired some more shots into its center mass, not looking directly at it to remain sane. Harry screamed as loud as possible, which only added to exasperate the situation. The thing let out a roar that sounded almost human; the voices of dozens of people came together in an echo that rattled Daniel's composure. He thought he could hear his mother's cry in that scream, or maybe that of his sister.

He was back in Mexico celebrating his sister's quinceanera, watching them bring in the shaved ice and rich chocolate cake. As it came out, they heard tires screech out on the street, men getting out of their cars, yelling, and shots were fired. His sister began to wail along with the other party guests.

He heard them through what felt like a tube shaped like the shell of a snail - round and round until it bore itself into his ears - both a neighbor and a distant pen pal. He was home and far away, for the first time in his life there was no difference. All of senses were pain, and he relished the feeling. No longer did he have to hide how much disassociated back to thoughts of the Middle East; his current pain held its ground against the hurt borne into his soul.

As Daniel lost his mind, the thing grabbed him in one of its other arms and lifted him next to Harry. Harry had passed out from yelling and the continued sight of what was holding him. They were carried into the desert, two more casualties in a line of many.

Miguel was close enough to witness the end of the two men's encounter with the thing that took them, the thing that took his family. He had laid down to hide himself, despite not much of anything present to hide behind. However, he realized after that laying down made him closer to part of that thing than anything else. The sandy earth below pulled him under as quickly as he had run from his dying family. It was over and the thing was now whole. The sun would come up soon.

Megan Rojas looked through her binoculars as gusts of sand blew across the desert. She was looking for a group of migrants that were awaiting asylum. She had been informed out their coordinates but did not see anyone from 100 yards out. They might be low to the ground to avoid being whipped around by the sand, but the ground in front of her looked flat. Less than 75 yards away, still nothing.

As she moved closer and closer, the diagnosis did not change; they were not here. Megan went to call her backup, but a large gust unexpectedly blew the phone out of her hand. It carried a few feet to the South as she lunged after it.

Starting to feel desperate, she reached down into the sand for her phone. It had already been covered, but she thought she could still feel the tip of it a few inches down. As she dug deeper, she lost the touch. However, a different feeling crept into her hands. One of the forces

pulling her down. She then noticed the sands below her shifting, knocking her feet off balance. She had not found other people in the desert, but something had found *her*.

The End