

Tomato Juice
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Jorge's alarm clock pierces the gray silence between night and dawn, as though shattering a crystal vase into a million pieces.

I blink open one eye, then the other, taking in my dingy, half-lit surroundings, hearing, rather than seeing; my brothers-in-arms on the floor next to me do the same. One rises, and with a fumbling action floods the room with the incandescence of a single, uncovered bulb, thrusting the wood-paneled ceiling and cinderblock walls into bas-relief.

"Rise and shine, *amigos*." Esteban's voice, from the doorway, has a cynical edge yet to be dampened by two cups of instant coffee. "Another day at the office."

One by one, we pull ourselves out of sleeping bags, stumble towards the door, and even though I've lived here for the better part of the last year, I still crack my forehead on the low doorframe as I pass through.

In the kitchen, Tía Ruiz is making huevos rancheros, and the smell meanders through the kitchen, settling the early morning into a lull of familiarity.

Ramón, however, is not as placated. "*¿Huevos rancheros?*" he asks, preparing the way for a rapid-fire stream of Spanish. "*¿No puedes encontrar algo diferente para cocinar?*" You couldn't find anything else to cook?

Tía Ruiz scowls. "*Romparé tu cráneo con esta sartén.*" This threat of manslaughter, from the wizened lady standing at the kitchen sink, draws a laugh from the table of now-seated men. Ramón quickly adopts a defensive posture, palms raised to face level as ineffective shields against the diminutive woman's wrath, which only makes the assemblage laugh harder.

“*Solo bromiando, Tía.*” I was only joking.

She returns the skillet, still full to the brim with eggs, to the stovetop, but doesn't move her gaze from the curly head of her antagonist, until he fills a mug of instant coffee and obediently takes his seat at the table.

She follows him, takes her customary place at the head of the table, and as the long rectangle of still-waking men silently fumble for the hands of those beside them, she begins to pray.

“Bendícenos, Señor, y estos, tus dones, los cuales estamos al punto de recibir de tu generosidad, Por Cristo, nuestro Señor, Amén.”

“Coman!” she gestures—Eat!—and we pick up our plates, serve ourselves, and do so.

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The kid's been with us for the last couple months. It was Jorge who picked him up, driving the beaten, rusted red pickup back from *la tienda*, and it was Jorge who took him under his wing, gave up the dingy air mattress he had slept on to him. At first, he didn't talk much, and it took three days until, mixing Spanish and broken English, he revealed how he had come to be on the side of that road; how his mother snuck him across the border as a toddler, how they had lived together until the bank foreclosed the shack they shared and sent her back across the border.

He's gone through a lot, but he's still a kid, and as twelve-odd men clamber into the worn bed of the truck, he's prattling on about the day's coming futbol matches, speculating about Guadalajara's odds against América.

Jorge tells him to shut up, informs him that Guadalajara has about as much chance of winning as the kid has of out picking him today. The kid seems to consider a response but decides to let it go, instead, staring off into the fields along the highway.

Jorge pulls out the transistor radio from his coat pocket, and the bouncing of the shock-deprived pickup falls into line with the rhythm of the music.

Within minutes, we're at the greenhouses where the fifteen or so of us spend our days, making whatever pittance they pay us for a day's worth of hydroponic tomatoes. Still, as jobs go, this one's better than most; it's inside, which means less brutal sun, less sweat, less fighting over showers and water, less musk corroding the house at night when you're staring up at the ceiling, trying to sleep.

The work is soothing, actually, if monotonous; after a few trays you fall into a rhythm, move to a tomato, palm it, judge its size, its ripeness, then twist it against the vine, let it fall off into your hand, move on. But you can't let yourself get too relaxed—you have to keep picking, you have to get as many as you can before the California sun sets over the rolling fields.

I've worked for maybe forty minutes when a noise sets my nerves on edge—the gravel scrape of a car pulling up to the first greenhouse. At other places, I wouldn't be concerned—just a tourist stopping by to ask where they can buy some food, or how to get back to the place they were supposed to be half an hour ago—but I've been here a month, and haven't heard a single car come and go in that time.

I start looking around, scoping out the hiding places every one of us picked out on our first days here. There—the tray stack. I know in case it's a super I should keep working, but my instincts are telling me it's ICE.

Quickly I move aside a row of trays, then another, create a cocoon at the back barely taller than my head. I try as best I can to position them where they should have been, then do my best to secure a tray over my head. Green plastic on four sides, concrete on two. Now all that's left is to pray.

I hope against hope that it's not ICE, that it's just my paranoia, that my instincts are wrong—it wouldn't be the first time—but then I hear the door to the greenhouse slam, and the dull, guttural sound of deep, bass, English voices: "Hands up!"

Silently, fervently, I run Hail Marys through my head, every muscle and joint and sinew of my body dedicated to prayer, and standing huddled behind the green plastic tomato trays, I feel as though I am on my knees before God, prostrating myself on the marble steps before His gilded throne.

Footsteps pass directly past my chosen place of concealment, but my fragile peace lies undisturbed.

In the distance, I hear gunshots, rat-tat-tat-tat, and in the newly still silence after, the engine of a red Ford pickup revves, gravel roars, and silently I cheer my comrades on, though I know their odds of victory to be slimmer than Guadalajara's.

In the next moments, faraway curses, sharp instructions, boots on concrete, slam of door, and the ICE vehicle roars after the red pickup.

Shaking, I clear away the trays, not caring at this point whether they maintain the clean lines I was so concerned about minutes ago.

I roam the facility in silence, scared to make any noise that could give up my whereabouts to any men they might have left behind.

Suddenly, I round a corner, and beside a hydroponic tower see Jorge. Relief floods me at the sight of just one of my compatriots, but soon it dissolves into anxiety as I see the tears on his face.

“¿Qué es, Jorge? ¿Qué pasó?” What is it? What happened?

He doesn't answer, just puts his arm around my shoulder and leads me around a corner of shelved trays.

Instantly I see, but it takes a few seconds for the image before my eyes to leak into my brain, for comprehension to rouse its ugly head, and then reality hits me like a tsunami of grief, the reality of the kid, his body lying on the concrete floor of the greenhouse, the red-brown colored hole in his México jersey, his blood mingling with the tomato juices on the floor.

There are so many questions, so many issues to be resolved, but right now the intensity and sadness of the moment overwhelms us, and I silently cross myself, moved beyond grief for a world that can inflict this kind of suffering and go on as though nothing ever happened.