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### La Matanza: The Slaughter of Innocence

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Prologue

*La Tierra Nunca Olvida*<sup>1</sup>

And so—  
Sonny gathered the generations of his family close.  
His children, his grandchildren,  
and his great-grandchildren—  
all the generations of his familia  
to tell them one last story.  
Night had settled heavy on the valley.  
The fire was now low.  
Coals pulsed red in the ash,  
breathing slow, like something still alive.  
Smoke drifted thin and stubborn,  
the same way it had the morning of the *matanza*—  
when the lamb cried out,  
its voice tangled with the rising smoke,  
curling past the smell of *morcilla* in the pan,  
clinging to shirts, to skin—  
to memory.  
*La matanza*—the slaughter of innocence.  
The day smoke became memory.  
They leaned in close, listening.  
The night held still.  
Even the stars seemed to wait...

† † †

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<sup>1</sup> The Land Never Forgets

The story begins before the words—  
before any man dared to speak them.  
Before the blood and the knife.  
Before the lie that would outlive us.  
It begins in the hush—  
that breath between thunder and rain,  
when even the wind holds its tongue.  
The stillness of dawn,  
when the land tilts her ear and listens.  
Sonny was an old man now.  
Not dead yet  
but close enough to hear it coming,  
rolling low over the *Sangre de Cristos*.  
He leaned in the garden's corner,  
where something he could never quite bury still lingered—  
sacred, stubborn as the roots beneath his feet.  
A hummingbird slipped out of the light,  
hovering in the air,  
its wings whispering a secret only he could hear.  
For a moment—  
she lingered, almost winking.  
Then she was gone.  
The air stayed warm where she had been,  
stubborn as memory.

† † †

It begins with a boy  
and a car.  
A name he no longer wanted to hear  
a name he wished to forget,  
a name that felt borrowed from someone else's life.  
It begins the way all old stories do—  
with something broken,  
and something sacred.  
A *rosario* cracked at the seam.  
A lamb tied to a *piñón*—  
its hooves scraping the dirt,  
its cry sharp enough to cut the morning in two.  
A father with smoke in his eyes  
that burns more in the heart than in the lungs.  
These are the things we carry, *mijos*.  
Not in our pockets  
but in our blood.  
Where they wait for us,  
generation after generation,  
like seeds waiting for the rain.

And the land—  
*la tierra*—  
she remembers it all.  
She remembers the weight of footsteps  
the sins no one confessed  
the voices we tried to forget—  
drunken, tender, cruel, holy—  
all of them drifting through the bones of the valley  
like a forgotten *alabado*,  
a psalm whispered to no one.

† † †

Sometimes, if the morning is still enough,  
you might catch a flash of wings—  
a hummingbird darting through the garden,  
hovering just long enough to make you wonder  
if she came back to check on him.  
And sometimes, darker wings cross too—  
a black crow against the light,  
reminding us that not all watchers bring comfort.  
Farther off, in the faint curl of smoke over the *llano*,  
a small figure seems to stand watch.  
*La Virgen Conquistadora*,  
quiet in the distance,  
as if she had never left.  
And if you listen closely—  
in the wind between the ridges,  
in the crackle of cedar at night,  
in the faint metallic ghost that lingers in the air,  
in the cry of an animal that knows its time has come—  
you can still hear it.  
You can still feel it.  
Because the road you take forward  
always begins here—  
in the place where the earth keeps  
everything you've ever tried to bury...  
and where the stain of sacrifice  
never truly fades.

*La sangre se seca... pero nunca se olvida.*<sup>2</sup>

And from that forgetting—  
*Donde Comienza el Camino.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Blood dries... but it is never forgotten.

<sup>3</sup> Where the Road Begins.

I.

*Donde Comienza el Camino*

*La Villa Real de Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asís, Nuevo México*  
(Santa Fe, New Mexico – 1975)

He was nine years old the morning he broke  
his mother's only rule.  
It didn't feel like rebellion.  
It just felt... quiet.  
Like the air before a storm which never announced itself  
or a step you take without thinking—  
the kind you remember for the rest of your life.  
That was the day everything shifted.  
The day he hated his name and prayed for change behind closed doors.  
The day the Chevy Impala yawned wide and swallowed him whole.  
It was a fall morning, sharp and blue—  
the kind that makes the mountains look closer than they really are.  
Sunflowers flamed yellow along the driveways of the *barrio*,  
and brilliant-colored hollyhocks nodded in the sunbeams,  
saying *buenos días* and goodbye all at once.  
In the backyard, *Abuelito* was burning *piñón* and sweet cedar.  
The smoke curled into the sky  
like prayers rising from a guilty throat.  
The pearl-white 1961 Chevy Impala SS hummed low at the curb.  
It gleamed white, like a ghost that hadn't yet made up its mind.  
The engine ticked like a nervous pulse.  
That old Chevy had a sound to it—soft, almost tender—  
like it knew what it was about to do.  
Folks just called him Sonny, but the boy was named after his father.  
He stood barefoot at the portal,  
the cold catching at his toes like tiny hands trying to hold him back.  
The car door was already open,  
waiting.  
Inside, his little brother—his *hermanito*, just five years old,  
all wide eyes and innocence,  
mirroring the boyhood they both still carried—  
*Hermanito* who still smelled of sleep and warm tortillas—  
sat on their father's lap like he belonged there.  
Laughing,  
tugging at the man's shirt,  
feet swinging above the dirty floor mats  
as if the world below couldn't touch him.  
No seatbelts.  
No fear.  
There were no rules back then.  
No mandatory insurance.

Just ignorance and luck.  
Blind faith in God.  
And the prayer *Jesucristo* would ride shotgun.

† † †

The man—more shadow than father—didn't say much.  
He tapped the cracked vinyl beside him with two fingers, casual.  
An invitation,  
a dare.  
There was no smile.  
Only that long, slow drag of the Pall Mall,  
a half-inch of ash trembling like it had something left to say.  
It never did.  
Neither did the man.  
The car reeked of bad choices and broken promises—  
the smell of stale smoke, beer, sweat, old vinyl.  
It stayed in your hair,  
in your skin,  
in your *huesos*—  
in your soul.  
That smell follows Sonny for years,  
ambushing him  
in waiting rooms, in coffee shops, in the breath of nervous strangers—  
and his stomach clenches before his mind can catch up.  
Back then, though, it was just another part of growing up.  
The kind of smell that seeps into the walls of a boy's memory,  
long after the house itself is gone.

† † †

The screen door creaked open from behind him,  
and her voice slipped through—  
soft as flour, firm as stone:  
“*Ándale, mijo.*  
Just a quick ride.  
Don't worry.  
You'll be right back.  
Take your books if you want.”  
    *Abuelito* always said:  
        words can bless.  
    *Abuelita* always said:  
        blessings can wound too, *mijito*.  
He didn't turn around.  
He could hear his mother still—  
not in the air,  
somewhere deeper,

like the hum of a warning beaten into his soul:  
 “Sonny... you’re the man of the house now.  
 You take care of your *hermanito*.  
 And you do not—*no importa qué*—  
 get in a car if your daddy is driving.”  
 But the keys weren’t in his hands.  
 Not today.  
 The twelve-pack of Coors buried at the bottom of the cooler said so.  
 Maybe that made it different.  
 Maybe that made it okay.  
 The boy stepped down from the porch.  
 One foot, then the other.  
 That was the first step onto *el camino*.  
     *Abuelito* always said:  
         a man keeps the house steady.  
     *Abuelita* always said:  
         you are that man now, *mijito*.  
 He closed the door behind him without looking back.  
 And that was it—  
 a soft click,  
 like the lid on a casket.  
     *Abuelito* always said:  
         every journey begins with a step.  
     *Abuelita* always said:  
         some steps carry you farther than you ever return, *mijito*.  
 On the telephone wire,  
 a crow shifted its weight,  
 its shadow stretched long across the gravel,  
 as if it wanted to follow.

† † †

The pearl-white Impala rolled out of the driveway,  
 gravel crunching under its tires like ribs.  
 The morning sun glared off the hood,  
 too bright to be trusted,  
 too quiet to be kind.  
 From the front seat, the radio played faint,  
 soft and slow—  
 an old familiar doo-wop song,  
 Fred Parris and the Five Satins, drifting through the static.  
     *Promise I’ll never let you go—*  
     *in the still of the night.*  
     *(in the still of the night...)*<sup>4</sup>  
 The melody floated in like a ghost already seated among them.

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<sup>4</sup> The Five Satins. (1956). In the still of the night [Song]. On *In the still of the night/ The Jones girl*. Stanford; Ember.

The words curled into the warm air between them—  
part lullaby, part warning—  
the kind of song he didn't so much remember as feel,  
like it had played low enough not to notice all his life.  
The song leaned close,  
whispering the vow for him,  
sealing it before he knew the cost.  
Sonny sat in the back, *Hermanito* pressed close against him,  
the hum of the engine filling the silence.  
The father glanced into the rearview,  
Sonny's eyes met his—just for a second.  
Not a smile. Not a frown.  
Something caught between warning and recognition.  
In that brief flash, Sonny felt the weight of men.  
The sense that some roads only go one way  
even if he didn't yet know where this one would end.

† † †

He moved closer toward the man sitting beside him in the back seat...  
and away from the woman who clenched her teeth in church,  
pinched the soft skin of his arm,  
warned him not to cry—or else—  
and taught him how to sit still,  
how to stay quiet.  
Remember—God sees everything.  
It didn't feel like much at the time.  
Just a ride.  
Just a Saturday.  
Just a boy in a car.  
But years later  
when his father's booze and cigarettes finally won,  
when *Hermanito* stopped calling,  
when his own soul looked back at him like a stranger  
he'd feel it.  
The bend in the road.  
The first one.  
And once you drive it, *mijos*, you can't turn back.  
Not in the body.  
Not in the soul.  
    *Promise I'll never let you go—  
    in the still of the night.  
    (in the still of the night...)*  
Some roads once driven never let you go.  
They leave their dust in your lungs,  
their tracks in your dreams.  
And no matter how many turns you take,

they're always just ahead,  
waiting for you to follow.

*Abuelito* always said:  
memory is a scar you live with.

*Abuelita* always said:  
forgetting is just another lie, *mijito*.

*Más vale un mal recuerdo que un buen olvido.*<sup>5</sup>  
Because forgetting  
is a lie.

## II. *Rancho Nada*<sup>6</sup>

The day rode quiet in the Impala's shadow.  
No one spoke.  
The car floated east over cracked blacktop.  
Its suspension was shot,  
and every bump made it groan—  
a tired body too long on the road.  
Inside, the air thickened.  
Hot breath and old vinyl.  
Beer and whiskey clung—spilled dreams on a cantina floor,  
memories no one bothered to sweep away.  
The windows were cracked just enough  
to bleed out the smoke of chain-smoked cigarros,  
and to let the nervous spirits of forgotten dreams  
escape into the pale morning light.  
In the back seat, Sonny sat behind the driver,  
pressed to the glass,  
the desert rolling by.  
*Hermanito* was in the middle—  
small shoulders tight, knees pulled close.  
Their father leaned against the opposite window, behind *Indio*.  
His cigarette burned low, ash trailing long, refusing to fall.  
His hand rested on *Hermanito*'s knee—  
heavy and far away,  
like a prayer mumbled without faith.  
Up front, two men passed a paper bag.  
The driver wore mirrored sunglasses.  
A tattoo scrolled down his arm:  
¡*Viva la Raza!*—long live the people, the race,  
the pride of brown skin.  
He was *Señor Lentos*—

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<sup>5</sup> A bad memory is better than a good forgetting.

<sup>6</sup> Nothing Ranch

temptation personified—  
full of promises.

*Abuelito* called him  
*Puro Trouble.*

*Abuelita* called him  
*el Diablo Pachuco.*

The morning sun climbed higher,  
its light catching on his mirrored shades,  
flashing blind spots across the empty road.

Indio—the other—wore an army jacket  
and a tattoo on his forearm that read simply,  
proudly:

Airborne.

A mark that still stood straighter than he ever could.

Indio—a soldier.

A lost soul  
haunted by war.

*Abuelito* called him  
*Soldado.*

*Abuelita* called him  
*Pobrecito.*

And Daddy—always lost.

The bottle always won.

He couldn't keep a job,  
or a wife.

He was losing his family,  
his broken dreams chasing him down every mile.

*Abuelito* called him  
*Perdido.*

*Abuelita* called him  
*Mijo.*

Empty bottles clinked with every turn—  
a lullaby for men too broken to rise with the sun,  
too haunted to face its light.

In the back, the boys sipped red cream soda—  
their bottles bright against the men's brown glass.

They didn't have to share on this trip.

The sweetness fizzed against the silence,  
a small mercy in a car full of ghosts.

† † †

“Daddy, where are we going?” Sonny asked.

His father's voice came slow, thick with dust.

“To the *Rancho Grande.*

To the big ranch.

To the good one.

We'll be back soon.”  
Sonny didn't believe him but didn't ask again.  
“Be careful with your cigarette!” Sonny exclaimed.  
A warning born from duty more than fear,  
his voice cut sharper than he meant it to.  
The ashes were falling,  
one almost landing on his *hermanito*.  
For a moment, the car seemed to understand—  
the boy carried more sense than the man smoking.  
More responsibility too.  
Protecting the little one was his burden now.  
His father's jaw tightened, his eyes narrowed, as if the rebuke had stung.  
He pressed the glowing tip into his forearm  
until the ember winked out,  
right over the faded, shaky words  
inked there:  
Death Before Dishonor.  
A performance.  
A reminder.  
I'm the father.  
The man.  
But Sonny wasn't impressed,  
and he wasn't afraid.  
He turned his face to the window.  
Fence posts bowed like old men in prayer  
as three crows lifted from the wire—circled once, then dove.  
Brujas with wings.  
The road shimmered in the morning glare.  
It felt like it could vanish into light, for a moment.

† † †

“Momma's gonna be mad,” Sonny said.  
“You're not supposed to drink when we're with you.”  
His father smiled.  
“I'm not drinking. It's just a beer.”  
That got a laugh from the front seat.  
“Just a beer,” one echoed.  
“Tell that to your *pinche* ex-wife, *cabrón*.”  
From the radio wedged under the dash—  
tinny, half-drowned in static—  
Freddy Fender's new one drifted in,  
the 8-track spinning slow.  
*If he brings you happiness,  
then I wish you all the best...<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Freddy Fender. (1975). Before the next teardrop falls [Song]. On *Before the next teardrop falls*. ABC-Dot Records.

Sunlight spilled across the dash,  
catching dust, smoke, mirrored glass.

*Señor Lentes* tapped in time,  
half-mocking, half-sincere.

*Indio* hummed in a low baritone.

*But if he ever breaks your heart,  
if the teardrops ever start,  
I'll be there before the next teardrop falls...*

The father's mouth curled.

Sonny couldn't tell whether it was the song or the memory.

Fender's voice slipped into Spanish,  
soft as a cigarette drag, as the light itself:

*Si te quiere de verdad,  
y te da felicidad,  
te deseo lo más bueno pa' los dos...*

The sun climbed higher.

Shadows shifted across the boys' faces.

*Hermanito* turned toward the sound,  
as if the song were meant for him.

*Pero si te hace llorar,  
a mí me puedes hablar,  
y estaré contigo cuando triste estás...*

It sounded like Fender was singing to the boy for a moment.

Then the song faded into the hum of the road,  
leaving only the clink of the bottles  
and the whisper of wind through the cracked window—  
carrying smoke, spirits, and sunlight out into the desert.

† † †

The car slowed.

Coyote fence posts lined the path—  
crooked, sun-bleached, standing like rib bones in the dirt.

Gravel popped beneath the tires like bones beneath boots.

The road ended where the map gave up.

Scorched earth surrounded by rust.

Old oil drums.

The gate sagged open just enough to let bad things through.

A fence that couldn't keep anything in... or out.

Tumbleweed.

A collapsed barn slumped like a drunk in the dirt.

No pasture.

No rows of alfalfa.

No green.

Just silence.

And dust.

And the smell of something old—

metal and dried blood and diesel spilled long ago.  
Dust swirled up and over the trunk.  
The heat hit like an open oven door—  
dry, bitter, heavy with the tang of rust.  
They passed through a graveyard of trucks—  
of rusted frames and sunflowers sprouting from tailpipes.  
Life blooming where death refused to leave.  
The earth didn't forgive.  
It remembered.  
"This it?" the driver asked.  
A nod.  
"Yeah. Pull over, *ese*."  
The pearl-white Impala jerked to a stop.  
Sonny couldn't see much,  
but he felt  
*Hermanito's* nails bite into his skin.  
He didn't cry.  
Not anymore.  
They weren't supposed to be here.  
This wasn't the *rancho* their father spoke of,  
where lambs played under cottonwoods.  
This was somewhere else.  
Somewhere worse.  
Doors opened.  
The men got out first.  
Bottles clinked.  
Boots hit dirt.  
One stretched,  
cracking his back.  
Another lit a smoke.  
The father walked silent to the rear  
and popped the trunk.

† † †

An old sink tilted in the weeds.  
A dead fridge sat outside.  
A torn screen flapped—  
like a tired tongue with nothing left to say.  
The trailer sagged. Its door hung crooked.  
Windows boarded up, but still a home.  
No orchard,  
no garden,  
only wind scraping over stone.  
"This don't look like no ranch," Sonny said.  
"Smells more like a dying land."  
His father lit another cigarette and coughed.

“Leave the kids in the car,” someone said.  
But their father was already walking.  
“C’mon, stretch your legs.  
I’ll show you boys a real New Mexico *rancho*.”  
They followed.  
Not because they wanted to.  
Because when a father calls your name, you go.  
That’s how *los hijos* learn—how sons are raised.  
From dust.  
From silence.  
From whatever the day decides to teach.

† † †

The old man stood beside a Ford pickup with no tires.  
His body bowed like the fenceposts they’d passed along the *camino*.  
His hat sagged low, his eyes hidden under the brim,  
measuring them without moving—  
still as prayer,  
still in the way animals understand.  
He carried the war in his bones—  
Korea’s cold still tucked in the lines of his face—  
but deeper still, the land itself.  
No prayers left.  
His family had never left this village.  
Generations of shepherders  
who counted years by lambing and drought,  
by prayers that rose with smoke  
and hopes that fell with silence.  
The old shepherd raised his eyes and squinted.  
Across the dust, Indio met his gaze.  
Nothing was spoken,  
only the slow dip of the chin,  
a nod that held the weight of two wars,  
two lives pressed into the same soil.  
A silent salute  
from one soldier to another.  
His face had stood the test of time—  
weathered like the arroyos,  
lined with scars carved by sun, wind, and rain.  
At least one war had marked him.  
So had drought.  
So had crops that never came.  
The endless cycle  
of strong black coffee, whiskey, cigarettes, and regrets stained his soul.  
His skin was a story—

burns, scars, and blisters that healed in crooked, stubborn ways.  
He held a cigarette to the bone and took the last drag slow.  
Then, without looking, pulled a square of paper from his shirt pocket.  
A red tin from his jeans—Prince Albert.  
The lid creaked.  
He tapped it once, twice.  
Tobacco spilled like brown dust.  
No measuring—his hands already knew.  
One flick of the tongue.  
One twist of his fingers.  
Match to boot.  
Flame to breath.  
He never missed a beat.  
“*Buenos días*. You the men that called?”  
A nod.  
“The animals are back here.”  
No small talk.  
No hurry.

† † †

His land was long and narrow, scarred.  
Fragments of leftover dreams.  
Split by inheritance and regret—  
strips of forgotten Spanish land grants and skeletal *encomiendas*  
reaching for road, for water, for anything whole.  
Generations stripped to the bone.  
Splinters of land divided—brother to brother to brother.  
Lost birthrights never made whole again.  
The adobe house was gone—  
some part of it held up a barn wall—  
but nothing whole remained.  
They followed him to a gate of barbed wire chained shut with a license plate—  
bent, faded, a sunset in steel.  
The Zia symbol blistered but visible.  
And beneath it, the stubborn words still held on:  
New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment.  
Even here—where the land forgot to bless—those words refused to fade.  
The boy read them,  
felt something stir.  
A wordless ache.  
Something only old villages understand.  
Beyond the gate:  
pens of splintered wood and twisted wire,  
held up by rocks, twine, and the will of relentless men.  
“This side’s the *borregos viejos*,” the old man said.  
The old sheep.

The tough ones.  
Thick-shouldered and yellow woolled.  
Eyes like old saints—blank, watching.  
“And over here...”—he pushed open a creaking partition—  
“the *corderitos*.”  
The little lambs.  
Small. Trembling.  
Soft as the yarn his *abuelita* spun—  
only this wool still breathed.  
One bleated—too young to know fear, but close.  
The pen stank  
of hay,  
of wool,  
of something older.  
A sweetness turned.  
A rot waiting its hour.  
Sonny reached through the slats.  
His fingers brushed wool.  
Alive,  
afraid,  
already pulling away.  
The lamb disappeared into the fold.  
No one spoke.  
Not the men.  
Not the boys.  
Not the wind.  
It was grief without a mourner.  
They walked the pens in sorrow—  
slow, careful, unsure whether to look  
or to forget.  
The boy turned.  
Looked back at the Impala.  
Still running.  
Still ticking.  
Still full of smoke.  
The stench clung—  
to his shirt,  
his hair,  
his breath,  
his dreams.  
Again, no one spoke.  
The silence wasn't peace.  
It was pressure.  
Heavy.  
Waiting.  
Like the promise of rain that never came.  
This was no Land of Enchantment.

No *Tierra Encantada*.

This was no *Rancho Grande*.

This was *Rancho Nada*.

The sun burned overhead,

merciless, unblinking,

spilling light on every lie the land refused to hide.

*En la memoria del niño—el tiempo no borra la herida.*<sup>8</sup>

### III.

#### *El Paseo Despacio*<sup>9</sup>

The road shimmered ahead, heat lifting off the blacktop in lazy waves.

The virgin-white Impala cruised heavier on its springs.

It drifted a little in its lane—

steady enough to stay out of trouble,

loose enough to make Sonny wonder if the wheel was steering itself.

Windows cracked and smoke slipped through the seams—

like *rezos*, old prayers, leaking from the walls of a crumbling chapel.

*Una vez más*—once again—

the men in the front passed a paper bag between them.

Sonny sat in the back seat,

knee bouncing in slow, restless rhythm.

*Hermanito* leaned against him—small, fidgeting.

Up front, Indio rode with his elbow crooked out the window,

passing the bottle back and forth with the man beside him.

*Señor Lentos* caught Sonny's eye in the rearview.

For a heartbeat, Sonny saw himself caught in their lenses

—small, fedora shadowing his brow.

Then his gaze dropped to the paperback in his hands—

*Bless Me, Ultima*—creased at the spine,

smelling faintly of dust and cedar.

He tried to sink back into the story,

into Antonio's voice, into the *llano* where magic and prayer tangled in the wind.

"There you go again," his father muttered.

"Back to the books. You're always daydreaming...

your mind lost in too many damn books.

There's nature all around you,

and you're sitting there reading.

That smelly hand-me-down book is missing most of the pages anyway."

Sonny didn't answer out loud.

*Abuelito* always said:

never argue with a drunk.

*Abuelita* always said:

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<sup>8</sup> In a boy's memory—the wound never heals.

<sup>9</sup> The Slow Ride

forgive him—he is your Daddy, *mijito*.

(Respect your elders, even when they'd forgotten to respect themselves.)

Besides, Sonny told himself,

he could rewrite the missing pages however he wanted.

He already was.

Maybe that was the secret—

maybe that was how stories began.

Indio stepped in before Sonny could answer.

“At least he can read,” he said.

“Better than being an eighth-grade dropout like you.

If I'd read more books, maybe I'd've gone to *el colegio*.

Avoided the draft.

Kept my ass from getting shot at in some jungle halfway across the world—”

His voice dropped.

“Air was heavy.

Wet.

Green.

Gunpowder in your teeth. Rot in your nose.

Not like the *llano*.

Here it's dry.

Thin.

Brown.

At least the wind cuts.

It don't choke you.”

He carried that weight still,

same as the old shepherd they'd nodded to back at the rancho.

One war passed to another—

different jungles, same scars.

† † †

*Señor Lentos* wrinkled his nose

at the faint, sour whiff of lamb

drifting on the breeze.

For the briefest moment—

maybe real, maybe only caught in the curve of his reflection—

Sonny thought he saw the man agree.

And the air shifted just like that—

carrying with it the dry, wool-and-diesel breath of the high mountain desert,

that same heavy stillness before the first cry,

when he knew deep down

that some places left a mark to never be washed off.

The road ahead split under the heat—

one long ribbon of asphalt unfurling toward the mountains,

the other toward nothing at all.

The mid-morning sun flared against the hood,

painting the white car in fire.

*Señor Lentes* held Sonny's eyes a beat longer—  
not by accident, but like a fisherman testing a line.  
He smiled, slow and knowing,  
his gold tooth flashing brighter than the mirrored lenses.  
The sunglasses tilted just enough to reveal eyes beneath—  
eyes that promised the world,  
but hid the price.  
He gave a little nod,  
a flick of his chin,  
beckoning Sonny forward without a word.  
Sonny felt something turn inside him—like a page flipping.  
He knew the old sayings from his books.  
Beware Greeks bearing gifts.  
All that glitters is not gold.

*Abuelito* always said:

temptation is a trickster with many faces.

*Abuelita* always said:

pray to the *Virgen Conquistadora*—she will shield you, *mijito*.

The mirror seemed to whisper:  
Behold the world before you—follow me.  
It felt like the apple from the Bible.  
And Sonny—even at nine—knew enough not to bite.  
The first temptation had passed.

† † †

But the second came quick—  
the bottle.  
It slithered out from the shadows of the floorboards,  
coiled and waiting for the next boy's hand,  
glass hissing against the light.  
*Hermanito* picked it up,  
put it to his lips,  
took a long, drawn-out  
pretend sip,  
just like he'd seen the men do.  
Only it wasn't pretend.  
A drop followed.  
A drop was all it ever took.

*Abuelito* always said:

don't touch what isn't yours.

*Abuelita* always said:

even a drop can stain, *mijito*.

In the back seat,  
their own bottles of orange cream soda sweated cold in the sun—  
bright glass glowing against the brown ones.  
Sweet fizz for boys.

Bitter fire for men.  
And still, temptation blurred the line.  
On the *llano*, there is always another temptation.  
And the road ahead was nothing but *llano*.  
The 8-track clunked,  
Freddy Fender's voice spilled into the cabin, rich and sad:

*Wasted days and wasted nights  
I have left for you behind...<sup>10</sup>*

—from the trunk came a bleat,  
sharp,  
broken,  
alive.

*For you don't belong to me  
Your heart belongs to someone else...*

The cry rose again,  
threading itself through the song.  
A lamb's voice bending the melody,  
as if Fender sang for it all along.  
The father tapped his beer bottle with two fingers,  
lips barely moving to sing along.  
Indio joined in—low, off-key.

*Why should I keep loving you  
When I know that you're not true?*

The bleat broke louder, higher pitched—  
not in tune,  
but tangled with the music,  
like two truths laid bare in the same breath.

*And why should I call your name  
When you're to blame  
For making me blue?*

The sounds blurred until song and cry became one,  
a chorus of sorrow and fear,  
folded into the heat of the car,  
cut through by the climbing sun.  
The cry pierced even the light itself—  
a sound too raw for any song.

† † †

Sonny had seen it that morning—tied and blinking,  
eyes too big for its small face,  
looking at him like it expected kindness.  
*Hermanito* had chased it through the dirt yard,  
giggling, trying to catch its tail.  
He even named it—

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<sup>10</sup> Freddy Fender. (1975). Wasted days and wasted nights [Song]. On *Before the next teardrop falls*. ABC-Dot Records.

something silly, something sweet, something quickly forgotten—  
before one of the men scooped it up by the legs  
and shut the trunk with a thud.  
The younger boy began to cry.  
He clutched Sonny's arm.  
"Make it stop," he whispered.  
"It's scared."

† † †

*Señor Lentos*—  
mirrored sunglasses, shaky hands—  
turned to smile.  
"Don't worry, *mijo*.  
You're a champ.  
Ride with me.  
Things are gonna be alright."  
The air grew tighter.  
The smell—  
not just smoke and beer,  
but something raw now.  
Real.  
The mess all animals make in panic.  
The kind of smell that seeps into upholstery and memory.  
The kind that clings longer than the lamb's breath.  
No one said a word.  
Not even the father.  
He didn't turn around.  
Just let the ash fall this time—  
silent, final, like a surrender no one spoke.

*Abuelito* always said:  
silence can be the loudest answer.

*Abuelita* always said:  
trust what you smell, *mijito*—  
it will tell you the truth.

† † †

By then, *Hermanito* was off in his own little world—  
wearing *Señor Lentos*' sunglasses now,  
laughing softly to no one.  
A six-pack of empties rattled beneath the front seat,  
clinking like wind chimes in a dry arroyo—  
a riverbed long since abandoned by water.  
One orange cream soda rolled loose on the floorboards,  
its bright glass catching a beam of sun—  
fizz gone flat, its sweetness already fading.

Innocence trembling under the weight of the day.  
Ghost music—  
the kind that drifts away before you can catch it—  
something quickly forgotten...  
unlike the smell,  
the cry,  
or the way temptation drove them in the heat of that day.

† † †

But beneath that thin hollow music  
was another sound—  
the echo of the lamb in the trunk,  
its cry trapped inside the bottles,  
rattling with every bump in the road.  
And somewhere in that cry,  
Sonny heard the *Sierra*—  
not the mountains themselves,  
but the distance they promised and denied at the same time.  
It had a voice—  
pleading, hunted,  
thirsty for mercy where there was none.  
It was the sound of testing—  
and temptation was close.  
The mid-morning sun glared through the windshield,  
bright as judgment,  
burning the day into memory,  
refusing to let them forget.  
The sun climbed with them,  
poured its weight through the glass  
and reminded them there was no shade,  
no escape.  
The road stretched on—  
two lanes, no exits.  
And temptation—like the dust—already in their lungs.  
*Cada quien carga su cruz.*<sup>11</sup>

Even the innocent.  
Especially them.  
And some crosses were heaviest  
because they're not yours to carry.

---

<sup>11</sup> Everyone carries their own cross.

IV.  
*La Morcilla*<sup>12</sup>

The plan to kill the lamb came together  
like bad weather on a clear day—  
sudden, uneasy,  
and not quite right.  
There was no corral.  
No hooks.  
No altar.  
Just a sagging clothesline strung between two *piñones*.  
The lamb's cry came sharp,  
high in the throat—  
and for a heartbeat, Sonny was back home—  
at *Abuelito's* and *Abuelita's* casa,  
smelling dust and diesel,  
watching a small wool body pull away from his hand.  
It bleated—  
softer this time,  
unsure as they tied its legs and pulled the rope tight.  
Even the wind seemed to stop and listen.  
The wire groaned under the weight.  
“Go inside and bring me a knife,” his father said.  
“What kind of knife, Daddy?”  
*Señor Lentos*—always hiding behind his own reflection—  
Grinned,  
“A sharp knife.  
What do you think?” he laughed.  
Sonny opened the drawer and picked the best one he could find.  
He held it with both hands,  
just like his mother always scolded him:  
blade down, two hands, walk slow.  
*Hermanito* stood in the doorway—  
silent, watching.  
Too small to help.  
Too old to look away.  
The men laughed.  
Mocked him.  
His father sneered.  
“You couldn't cut butter with that thing.  
Always daydreaming—  
your head lost in too many damn books.”  
*Abuelito* always said:  
    a sharp tongue cuts deeper than any blade.  
*Abuelita* always said:

---

<sup>12</sup> Blood Sausage

words can wound, *mijito*, but they cannot scar the soul.  
Maybe it was the liquor—the *cerveza bravísima*.  
Or maybe it was just how he was.  
Mean, cruel—  
But that moment lodged deep  
like a splinter that never came out.

† † †

*Indio*—an old family friend, today just another drinker—  
in his faded Army jacket,  
cuffs frayed from being pulled too much.  
He moved fast.

His blade opened with a loud snap.  
Before Sonny could breathe,  
he dragged the edge across the lamb's throat.  
Quick.  
Clean.  
Never blinking.  
The sun caught the knife for an instant—  
a gleam before the blood.  
“*¡Atrápen la sangre!* Hurry—  
catch the blood!”

*Abuelito* always said:  
blood belongs to the earth.

*Abuelita* always said:  
blood belongs to God, *mijito*.

Cedar popped and *piñón* split in the fire—  
each sound like a warning—  
like the old spirits had stirred.  
But the ground got there first.  
The first spray hit the dirt with a hiss.  
Steam—thick, red, alive—curled up  
like incense.  
Some hit the flagstones,  
leaving dark spots that never came out.  
Then the pan slid under and caught the rest,  
filling like a chalice no one dared lift.  
The lamb jerked once.  
Then nothing.  
The silence after  
wasn't right.  
Dogs in the *barrio* raised their heads.  
Even the crows swallowed their cries.  
They heard what was missing.



*Abuelita* had to work quick  
before the blood thickened and dried.  
Off to the side,  
in the shadows,  
she set the pan down on a hot *plancha*,  
stirred in pork fat, chopped *chile*, a pinch of clove.  
The secrets only *abuelas* knew,  
whispered more than taught,  
prayers folded into spice,  
blood memory written in steam.  
The *morcilla* hissed.  
She pressed it flat—  
slow, steady, sacred.  
It crisped at the edges.  
Darkened.  
Thickened.  
It became more than blood,  
became *morcilla*,  
became memory,  
became offering.

*Abuelito* always said:  
    recipes are prayers with taste.

*Abuelita* always said:  
    prayers are recipes for the soul.

She scooped a bit onto a folded tortilla  
and handed it to *Abuelito*.

The first taste was his.

*Abuelito* took a bite.

Closed his eyes.

Chewed slow.

Smiled.

He remembered his own youth—

his first taste of lamb,

his first bite of sacrifice.

Not just of food,

but of life.

Then it was Sonny's turn.

He didn't want it.

Something in him curled away,

tight and uncertain.

But he knew—

it was a sin to waste what was given.

*Abuelito* always said:  
    a boy must eat what's served.

*Abuelita* always said:

give thanks for what's given, *mijito*.  
*Hermanito* watched from the edge of the firelight—  
wide-eyed, wordless—  
as Sonny lifted the tortilla to his mouth.  
He remembered the prayer.  
You bless the food.  
You offer thanks.  
And you eat—  
even the part you don't like—  
*todo*.  
He didn't have to ask for *segundos*.  
But he had to finish what was served.  
He took a bite.  
It was good.  
Rich.  
Nourishing.  
It fed his body,  
his soul.  
and left him hungry for something  
he could never name.  
And that's what tangled him—  
what fed him and haunted him.  
Because the memory was still there—  
the lamb's soft bleating,  
the innocence in its eyes.  
A gentle creature one moment—  
delicate, almost a pet—  
a sacrifice the next.  
Sustenance and sorrow, braided together.  
That was the irony—  
the sacred weight of eating something  
you once touched  
and thanked for its offering.  
Like the wafer at First Communion,  
that promised body,  
the chalice,  
that promised blood.  
Faith demanded he eat.  
Memory made it taste like guilt.

† † †

That scent—*ay, Dios mio*—that scent.  
Sweet, smoky, ancient.  
And something  
rotten,  
holy.

It stayed under your fingernails,  
your clothes,  
your dreams,  
no matter how hard you scrubbed,  
It was the smell of the *matanzas*.  
The old ones,  
the sacred ones,  
the ones whispered about only  
after the rosaries were put away  
and the children were asleep.  
The lamb was gone by evening.  
Only meat now.  
Ribs, shoulders, haunches rubbed with spice.  
They laid it over hot coals.  
Flames licked the fat  
spat sparks into the air.  
They pulled off the burlap, lifted the tin lid.  
Smoke rose, wrapping itself in the branches,  
drifting toward the mountains—  
where *La Virgen Conquistadora* in silk robes kept her place,  
waiting in silence,  
as if her velvet gaze had already foreseen this day.  
The prayers were said.  
The meat was eaten.  
But the blood?  
The stain stayed.  
In the smoke.  
In the stone.  
In the boy.  
Memories in the backseat of the Impala,  
when the same smoke clung to his shirt,  
twisting with the liquor breath and *rezos* of men  
on *el paseo despacio*—  
and beneath it, always,  
the dust and diesel of *Rancho Nada*—  
a smell no boy could ever outrun.  
And years later—  
long after the taste had faded,  
long after the fire was cold—  
Sonny would still carry that scent.  
It came back in the oddest places:  
a church kitchen,  
a stranger's barbecue,  
in the steam rising from a winter pot of beans.  
Anyone watching him then would never have known  
that behind his smile,  
behind the ordinary rituals of life,

he was still that nine-year-old boy  
at the edge of the firelight,  
tortilla trembling in his hand,  
heavy with blood and memory.

*Abuelito* always said:

meat fills the belly, then it's gone.

*Abuelita* always said:

blood fills the memory, *mijito*, and it stays.

*La carne se olvida, pero la sangre se queda.*<sup>13</sup>

And like Judas's kiss at Gethsemane  
and Christ's chalice lifted at the Last Supper,  
Sonny knew this too was both betrayal and communion—  
the taste of sorrow and salvation,  
swallowed together.

V.

*La Botella*<sup>14</sup>

The smoke still hung in the air—  
thin, bitter threads braiding with the copper scent of blood.  
It clung to Sonny's shirt,  
his hair,  
the soft skin beneath his nose.  
Every breath tasted the same.

† † †

Later, he and *Hermanito* found an empty beer bottle in the dirt.  
They spun it between them.  
It turned slowly.  
It landed on *Hermanito*.  
But the bottle didn't just stop.  
It pointed.  
It chose.  
A spirit swirled inside that glass—  
not just fermented, but coiled, waiting.  
A serpent in the dirt, dressed like communion.  
The bottle was a chalice too—  
dark, bitter, waiting for its drinker.  
One day, it would sing.  
And he would answer.  
And it would stay by his side—  
a union where no one else mattered,

---

<sup>13</sup> The meat is forgotten, but the blood stays.

<sup>14</sup> The Bottle

'til death did them part.

† † †

*Abuelita* took baby brother inside,  
to wash the dust—  
and the lamb—off him,  
scrubbing as if water could erase  
what blood had already written.

*Abuelito* always said:  
dust washes off.

*Abuelita* always said:  
blood never does, *mijito*.

Sonny stayed outside.  
Sat in the dirt beside *Abuelito*, arms wrapped around his knees,  
trying not to spill.  
He didn't speak.  
Just watched—  
the fire,  
the pan,  
the smoke still rising, curling slow,  
like it knew there was nowhere else to go—  
like the dust and diesel that once hung heavy at *Rancho Nada*,  
refusing to leave.  
His father was already gone—in the Impala.  
Once, it had been pure—  
pearl white,  
bright,  
clean.  
Like First Communion shirts.  
Like the lamb before the blood.  
But now—  
it had taken on a sanguine color.  
Deep, glossy,  
*Sangre de Cristo* red.  
Roman Red.  
Like centurion tunics  
when they delivered Christ to the cross.  
Sonny couldn't say when it changed.  
Or how it changed.  
Or why it changed.  
Maybe it always had been that way.  
Or maybe it was the moment the blood hit the dirt.  
Maybe the car drank it too.

*Abuelito* always said:  
a car is just a machine.

*Abuelita* always said:

no, *mijito*—a car carries the soul of its driver.

† † †

He rode off in it—  
his father and the man in the sunglasses,  
with the gold tooth and devilishly handsome grin.  
They passed the bottle between them—  
not just drinking,  
but worshipping,  
as if it were holy enough to seal their bond in silence.  
No words. Just gravel.  
And ghosts.  
“¡*Que viva la Raza!*” they toasted—  
drunk on pride,  
and something older.  
“¡*Que viva!*”  
And fate answered back.  
And the 8-track played on.  
*Wasted days and wasted nights...<sup>15</sup>*

† † †

Across the yard,  
the man in the Army jacket stood alone,  
chewing that toothpick,  
not looking at anything.  
Not even the lamb.  
Flies buzzed around what was left,  
but no one shooed them away.  
Sonny stood—slow and stiff.  
Brushed the dirt from his hands,  
then walked toward *Indio*  
like a soldier reporting for duty.  
*Indio* saw the boy coming—already changed.  
Their eyes met—one soldier to another.  
He smiled, quiet,  
almost ashamed,  
then raised his hand—  
not a salute,  
but a blessing.  
A recognition.  
A passing of weight that only soldiers  
and young boys understand.  
“Carry on, soldier,” he said.

---

<sup>15</sup> Freddy Fender. (1975). Wasted days and wasted nights [Song]. On *Before the next teardrop falls*. ABC-Dot Records.

Then, softer—

“Carry on, *mi'jo*.”

*Abuelito* would've said:

stand tall, even when you're small.

*Abuelita* would've said:

bend, *mijito*, but don't break.

† † †

And something inside the boy shifted.

Something small

but permanent.

Something that waited, in silence, for over fifty years—

until the scent of blood returned,

until the taste of *morcilla* found him again,

until the memory dragged him back—

To that morning—

that moment in time—

when his father died inside,

and his brother began to slip away.

And still—

in the quiet corners of Sonny's soul,

the taste of *morcilla* lingered

like memory,

like mercy,

like something that begged forgiveness—

after it had already been swallowed.

Like a prayer said too late.

And when he tells it now—

old, tired, with more years behind him than ahead—

he says only this:

*Abuelito* always said:

no man can outrun his shadow.

*Abuelita* always said:

no soul can escape its bottle, *mijito*.

*A cada quien le llega su botella.*<sup>16</sup>

And when it does—

it doesn't ask.

It takes

---

<sup>16</sup> To each, their bottle comes.

VI.  
*Sombras*<sup>17</sup>

Bottles follow a man.  
But some spirits don't need glass to stay alive.  
They live in scent—  
in smoke,  
in blood,  
in the breath of fires long gone cold.  
Sonny would carry that breath with him,  
through miles,  
through years,  
until it found him again—  
in the flicker of candles at *El Santuario de Chimayó*.  
The scent stayed with him—  
faint but stubborn,  
clinging to his jacket like memory.  
And beneath it—  
sharper, almost metallic—  
the ghost of blood,  
as if the land itself still whispered what it had seen.  
It was the same ghost  
he'd first known on that day of the *matanza*—  
when the lamb's cry tore the air,  
and the smoke from the firepit  
braided with the copper scent of sacrifice.  
That smoke followed him ever since.

† † †

Many years later, Sonny would see *Indio* one last time.  
He was fifty-seven then;  
*Indio* was almost eighty.  
Sonny's face showed the wrinkles of joy,  
laughter,  
pain,  
sorrow,  
buried scars.  
Time had carved lines deep into *Indio*'s face too—  
his war was over now.  
He found peace in the end.  
Sonny caught the crooked grin one last time.  
And then it was gone—  
swallowed by the crowd,  
by the flicker of candles,

---

<sup>17</sup> Shadows

by the silence of the funeral itself,  
a gathering more somber than sacred,  
where sorrow wore its Sunday best  
and silence sat heavy in the pews.  
It was *el rosario del Indio*—  
not the kind of *rosario* where you prayed for a miracle—  
this was the kind where the miracle never came.  
The smoke of *piñón* and cedar drifted with the incense—  
a mingling of mountain fire  
and sanctified spice.  
But no amount of perfume could hide the other ghost  
in the room:  
the copper-sweet scent of lamb,  
still clinging to Sonny's memories since boyhood,  
as if sacrifice followed him even here.

† † †

*Como siempre.*

As always, Sonny's *esposa* walked beside him—  
quiet as the candles,  
steady as the shadows.  
Her fingers, warm and familiar, brushed his arm,  
yet her touch lingered like wind stirring the red dirt of *Chimayó*.  
He whispered, "Thank you for coming with me, *Esposa*.  
I need your strength to guide me."  
She only smiled.  
A smile soft as the *chile* fields ripening in the sun,  
as certain as the earth that gives root to *milagros*.  
It flickered like a flame in the small mystical *Santuario de los Milagros*,  
where prayers rise from soil and stone.  
And in that silence he felt the burden lift—  
if only for a breath.  
Was she really beside him  
or just the shadow he needed her to be?  
He didn't ask.  
He only held the moment.

† † †

He leaned close in the quiet between prayers,  
his voice barely above the whisper of the flames,  
speaking in fragments:  
*Indio's* crooked grin,  
*Señor Lentes* behind those mirrored shades,  
his father's heavy silence,  
his *hermanito's* laughter,

and the day of the *matanza*.  
He didn't need to explain the rest—  
her fingers tightened around his.  
She knew.  
He said little to anyone else—  
just slipped inside like a shadow at dusk,  
nodded to a *comadre* in the back pew—  
one of those old family friends who knew everything  
without ever asking—  
and walked straight toward the rows of dancing flames.  
Before lighting the candle, he pressed two fingers to his lips  
and then to his heart—  
like *Abuelita* had taught him when he was a boy.

† † †

Sonny thought of his *abuelita* and *abuelito*  
who had passed almost thirty years before.  
It was a memory grief spared him from recalling in detail—  
merciful in its blurring.  
*Abuelita* went first, stubborn even in dying,  
insisting Sonny bring her great-grandchildren  
so she could see them one last time before letting go.  
His daughter always remembered  
the warm smell of fresh tortillas,  
and sitting at her kitchen table,  
cutting paper dolls with her.  
A year later *Abuelito* followed,  
as if he couldn't let her make the journey alone.  
Sonny had named his son after him.  
And it was that boy—  
wobbling around the living room then—  
*Abuelito* was playing with the day he took his first steps.  
Sonny was at his bedside when *Abuelito* passed.  
The room was crowded with family,  
all holding their breath as if silence might slow the inevitable.  
*Abuelito* smiled between labored breaths,  
his eyes finding Sonny's.  
And with a clarity that cut through the hush, he said:  
"Sonny, it's okay. I'm okay, *mi'jo*.  
Your *abuelita* is here with me now. To take me with her.  
To show me the way."

† † †

The same hand that reached for the match brushed his pocket,  
finding the old rosary *Abuelita* had given him.

Its beads were warm from being held too tight,  
and when he shifted his grip, it slipped—  
falling to the flagstone floor with a hollow crack.  
One bead split at the seam.  
Like a lamb's throat.  
Like a boy's memory.  
He bent quickly,  
cradled it in his palm,  
and held it there a long moment,  
as if an extra heartbeat might seal it whole again.  
But it stayed cracked.  
The scratch remained,  
etched like memory.  
He never fixed it.  
He couldn't.  
He only carried it—  
cracked,  
the way faith itself was carried.  
Never whole.  
Never abandoned.

† † †

And then the miracle of *El Santuario de Chimayó*—of *el pocito*.  
The small well of holy dirt,  
where pilgrims came to take a handful home in jars and pouches,  
believing in its power to heal.  
Sonny knelt there once long ago  
and dipped his fingers in.  
The earth clung warm and fine to his skin,  
as if the land itself remembered every prayer ever spoken into it.  
Some said it was a miracle.  
Sonny believed it was memory.  
This time, he pressed the cracked rosary into the soil,  
rubbing the broken bead against the holy dirt  
as if the land might seal what he could not mend.  
Then he let the same earth sift between his fingers,  
scrubbing at his palms like a penitent,  
as if its grit might wash away the stain of lamb's blood,  
and with it the sins—  
the guilt—  
that had clung to him since boyhood.

† † †

The prayers rose like smoke,  
curling slow,

steady,  
as if even heaven had to pause before taking them in.  
Names were spoken,  
tears swallowed,  
songs sung half in key,  
half in ache.  
And through it all, Sonny held the rosary tight,  
the crack in the bead pressing into his palm  
like a reminder that nothing sacred ever stays whole.  
Like so many things that could still be carried,  
even if they couldn't be mended.  
Now, here in the *Santuario*,  
it wasn't just the gesture—  
it was the whole rhythm of the ritual.  
First the slow and steady breath,  
so the heart would hear the prayer before the lips released it.  
Then the sign of the cross,  
not rushed but traced with care—  
forehead, chest, shoulder to shoulder—  
each point a place to leave a piece of the sorrow behind.  
Holy words in English, a final prayer in Spanish—  
so heaven and earth both understood.  
The candle he lit was small.  
Nothing fancy.  
Just wax and wick and a whisper  
of hope.  
But it flickered like a heartbeat—  
fragile, warm, alive.

† † †

He hadn't wept.  
Not in the way others did.  
But in his silence, there had been sorrow—  
a sorrow worn smooth from years of turning it over and over,  
like a river stone.  
Sonny thought of the old temptations—  
*el vino, el orgullo, el rencor*.<sup>18</sup>  
And how they still called to him in weak moments—  
soft as breath, sweet as sin.  
He thought of the man with the mirrored sunglasses.  
Of *Indio*.  
Of laughter now silenced.  
Of lives that burned out fast

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<sup>18</sup> wine, pride, resentment

and left only smoke curling toward heaven.  
A single crow perched on the weathered crucifix outside  
guarding the courtyard entrance.  
Its wings stirred as mourners approached—  
watching, silent, unbothered.  
And when the honor guard carried *Indio*'s flag-draped casket  
out into the light,  
their boots struck the blood-red soil of *Chimayó*  
in measured rhythm—  
brothers-in-arms keeping step with him  
one final time.  
The earth itself seemed to echo,  
its tierra *bendita* holding the memory of sacrifice  
and the hope of miracles.  
The rifles at their shoulders gleamed,  
the flag stretched tight across the silence of their grief.  
The crow lifted its head from the edge of the courtyard,  
black wings tight against the morning.  
It gave one last salute—  
a cry that split the silence like the crack of a rifle,  
yet low and raw as the earth itself,  
a bow of shadow dipping toward the blood-red soil of *Chimayó*,  
as if it knew the cost of sacrifice too.  
Sonny touched the brim of his fedora,  
a memory rising of the salute he once gave *Indio*  
as a boy at the *matanza*.  
Crow and child,  
shepherd and soldier—  
all saluting the same man.  
And in that cry, he heard it—  
“Carry on, *mi 'jo*,” *Indio*'s voice whispered,  
firm and unyielding.  
The crow screeched again,  
anchoring the past to this moment,  
before rising to the sky—  
his companion,  
his spiritual guide,  
a dark arc against the pale heavens,  
leading his war-torn spirit toward rest in the National Cemetery.  
*Que descanse en paz, carnal*, Sonny whispered.  
Rest in peace brother.  
It was barely audible—  
like the last line of a prayer you're afraid to say too loud,  
in case heaven is still listening.  
Then—almost by instinct—Sonny prayed to himself.  
“The Lord is my shepherd...”  
A pause.

"...I shall not want."  
 And that was enough.  
 The verse hung there—  
 unfinished—  
 like smoke from a candle just blown out.  
 He raised his right hand and traced the cross upon himself—  
 Each motion slow,  
 sacred—forehead, chest, shoulder to shoulder.  
 "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost... Amen."  
 Then again—so the land would hear:  
 "*En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo... Amén.*"  
 He left the candle burning—  
 a soft steady flame in the cradle of adobe walls,  
 offering no answers, just light.  
 And as Sonny stepped back into the cooling dusk,  
 the hills around *Chimayó* had already begun to fade into violet shadow,  
 and the wind carried the faint scent of sage and juniper.  
 Behind him the candle still burned—  
 small, maybe,  
 but enough to light the way back through years of shadow.  
 He didn't look back.  
 Sonny knew some stories end without an ending,  
 some wounds stay half-healed,  
 and some prayers go unanswered  
 but they are still worth saying.  
 He told himself one day he'd bring his *nietos* here.  
 Not to mourn.  
 But to teach them how to listen to the silence.  
 Because who knows what tales fate might one day remember—  
 or tell—  
 when the time is right,  
 and the soul is listening.  
 The faint *piñón* smoke curled above the candles,  
 mixing with the heavy scent of wax and stone.  
 Sonny let it follow him out of the *Santuario*,  
 down the worn steps,  
 into the cool mountain air.  
 Some scents don't burn away.  
 They travel with you—  
 quiet, patient—  
 until they find you again.  
*Donde hubo fuego, cenizas quedan.*<sup>19</sup>
 The smoke still follows.  
 The beads still carry.

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<sup>19</sup> Where there has been fire, the ashes remain.

The shadows still walk.

VII.  
*Coda*  
*Réquiem*

Some mornings the ache came before light.  
Sonny lay still—  
throat tight with a scream he couldn't release.  
He feared the earth might split beneath him—  
or worse, that someone might hear,  
and ask if he was okay.  
*Otras mañanas* he let the scream go—  
and it turned into a menacing shout.  
Loud.  
Raw.  
Unapologetic.  
He prayed for mercy.  
He pleaded for recognition.  
Was anyone listening?  
Did anyone care?  
She'd never liked the word wife.  
Said *esposa* carried more soul.  
He'd tease her, call her *vieja*.  
She'd shake her head and call him *Papá*—  
same as the grandchildren.  
And sometimes—  
just sometimes—  
she would ask in that soft, stubborn voice—  
a voice that found him in the dark:  
“¿Estás bien, Papá?”  
He could still hear her—  
soft, certain, close enough to touch.  
Sometimes he caught glimpses of her.  
She was always by his side.  
But now—there was only the garden.

† † †

Above the garden,  
Carlos Santana's guitar echoed—  
wordless, haunting,  
a prayer strummed in blue and gold.  
“*Samba Pa Ti*.”  
And so, Sonny remembered.  
Some songs don't need words

to set you free.

† † †

From far beyond the hills,  
a crow's cry lifted—farewell.  
Above the apricot branches,  
a white dove circled—leading.  
And in the old tree,  
two hummingbirds shimmered—  
one her spirit,  
one his spirit.  
She winked once  
and together they lifted,  
saying goodbye to the garden,  
continuing on the next branch of *el Camino*,  
not in shadow,  
but in light.  
Crow.  
Dove.  
Hummingbird.  
Memory, peace, and love—  
a trinity guiding him home.

† † †

The smoke drifted higher,  
curling into the dusk,  
carrying cries,  
laughter,  
betrayals,  
prayers.  
All of it rose together—  
like incense that never burned out.  
And in that rising,  
he understood:  
she had always been with him.  
Through hardships,  
through Indio's funeral,  
through every shadowed place.  
Not in flesh,  
but in spirit.  
She was gone.  
And yet  
had never left.

† † †

The fire was low now.  
Smoke thinned—  
the same smoke from the morning of the *matanza*,  
now carrying him home.  
So Sonny rose.  
His *esposa* led the way.  
Even now, his story rose with the smoke—  
not *puro mentiras* for coins,  
but truth carried in wings and song,  
so his familia would never forget.

† † †

*Donde hubo sangre, memoria queda.  
Donde hubo humo, recuerdos viven.  
Donde hubo amor, florece la eternidad.*<sup>20</sup>

† † †

And above it all,  
Santana's guitar lingered—  
one last note,  
fading not into silence,  
but into forever.

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<sup>20</sup>Where there was blood, memory remains.  
Where there was smoke, memories live.  
Where there was love, eternity blooms.

Author's Note:  
*Para los Que Recuerdan*<sup>21</sup>

This story is not mine.  
It belongs to the land that raised me—  
to the dry clay soil that cracked under my bare feet,  
to the smell of *piñón* and cedar smoke in our clothes  
after a winter burn,  
and to the blood we buried deep,  
believing the earth might keep our secret,  
though *la tierra* never forgets.  
It belongs to the ones who came before:  
the quiet men with hands like worn leather—  
who never spoke of pain,  
and the women who carried it in silence,  
until the rosary beads carved tiny valleys into their fingers.  
It belongs to the boys we once were,  
and to the men we became—  
shaped by what we saw too soon,  
and by the truths we've carried too long.  
I wrote this for the lambs—  
innocent, betrayed, silenced.  
For the ones who didn't have words—  
and the ones who still don't.  
And if something here feels like memory...  
perhaps it is.  
Or perhaps it is the land speaking—  
through me,  
through you,  
through the stories we pass along,  
so our grandchildren will not have to ask why.  
    *Abuelito* always said:  
        the land keeps what we cannot.  
    *Abuelita* always said:  
        memory is the root that never dies, *mijito*.  
*Donde hubo sangre, siempre queda memoria.*<sup>22</sup>

— Harold Moya Jr.  
Santa Fe, New Mexico  
*La Tierra Que Guarda Todo*  
Because the land keeps more than we confess—  
and remembers longer than we live.

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<sup>21</sup> For Those Who Remember

<sup>22</sup> Where there was blood, memory remains.