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Dry Border

Courtney Craggett

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DRY BORDER

IN ODESSA, THE protestors line the streets, sun rising hot and bright behind them. They are oil field workers and businessmen, landmen and lawyers, babies in diapers, holding signs they are too small to lift, words they are too young to read.

Danny and his father fight their way through the traffic to join the other day laborers under the pavilions. They gather there every morning, thermoses filled with coffee, to wait for work, swap stories of their children, the families they've left behind, the new ones they've made.

"It can't be true," says one.

"Of course not," says another.

"But who knows," says a third.

There is a rumor, all anyone can talk about, not twenty-four hours old, as sudden and surprising as the West Texas wind that stirs up dust storms and rolls tumbleweeds across the desert. When the Río Grande is dry, the rumor says, the international border will be dissolved. There will be no more separation.

"It is almost gone," Danny says to his father, Juan Ramón. The Río Bravo. Danny is just a boy, not yet sixteen. He speaks to his father in Spanish, although his English is strong enough that he could make it through high school, even go on to college if the risk weren't too great. He hasn't been to the river since he and his father crossed it three years ago, but

it's never left his thoughts, that line that determines there and here.

He was twelve when they crossed, still a child but old enough to work. He left behind his mother, Carolina, his brother, Benigno, and his baby sister, Mary Fernanda. His father promised he would send for them once he and Danny worked for a few years and earned money and legal visas. Since then, they've scraped up just enough money to send down to Mexico, just enough to keep Beni and Marifer in school, to offer them a better childhood than the one Danny had, but not enough to bring them up here.

"It's only a rumor, son," says Juan Ramón. "Neither side would sign such a treaty."

"Why not?" asks Danny.

Juan Ramón reminds Danny of all the people who want to keep them out, all the fear that would accompany an open border, that accompanies even a closed one.

"I know," says Danny, "But the world is changing. It already has."

Juan Ramón laughs at this, at his son's ability to hope, but then again, once the Rio Bravo roared through northern Mexico and kept his forefathers alive. Now it's only a weak trickle that snakes through the desert.

"Just don't get your hopes up," he says.

Beyond their pavilion, the town is a madhouse of hope and fear and noise. A church marquee on the corner reads OUR GOD IS A GOD OF ORDER. PRAY FOR RAIN. Environmentalists pass out flyers asking for donations, listing steps to save the river. They have been talking for years

and no one listened until now.

At the intersection downtown, a congregation from one of the town's churches has gathered to pass out tracts. "God causes it to rain on the just and on the unjust," the pastor shouts, "but this treaty is unjust." The crowd claps and the pastor continues. "Join us here every Saturday morning to pray publically for rain, just like the prophet Elijah. God will show his power."

The day Danny and his father left Mexico, they went to the bus station together, where Juan Ramon counted out bills and coins and asked for two tickets to Nuevo Leon. He and Danny rode the bus and walked from there. In the bus station a mother and her three children sat on the floor sleeping in dusty clothes, their backs against the tiled wall. When the woman saw Danny looking at her children she nudged her daughter over to Danny. The little girl put a sticker on Danny's hand, and he shook it off so that he didn't have to pay for it. "I'm sorry," he told her, and hoped she understood he had no money either.

Benigno kicked a rock around the station, and Danny kicked it back to him a couple times. Beni was nine then, and Danny's best friend. He wore Danny's hand-me-down sweatshirt and combed his hair like Danny's. Marifer was just learning to walk, and she stumbled around the bus terminal grabbing onto chairs and smiling at other passengers. Danny and Beni tossed her back and forth between one another, and their mother yelled to them to be careful. When the bus driver called for the tickets, Juan Ramón put his hand on Danny's shoulder and pointed him toward the bus.

His mother kissed his head. “Help your papá and remember to pray,” she said.

Now Beni attends the preparatoria, the first in Danny’s family to make it past eighth grade. Marifer is in preschool. On that day before he boarded the bus Danny hugged her and Beni and said he would see them soon. “Will you still remember Spanish?” Beni asked him, and Danny said of course he would.

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“I DON’T WANT to wait,” Danny says to his father now under the pavilion.

“What for what?”

“For the river to disappear,” he says. “For the border to be gone. I want to do something.”

His father waits, and Danny explains. “It’s so small. What if we helped to make it smaller? Dried it out or something?”

“You’re crazy,” says Juan Ramón. Even if the rumor were true, he tells his son, the river can’t be dried so easily. It’s weak out in West Texas, but stronger in other places. Besides, he reminds Danny, it’s too big a risk, with their forged documents.

“You will see your brother again,” Juan Ramón says. “If we work hard enough.”

“That’s not enough,” says Danny. “We need to do more.” Juan Ramón asks what he has in mind, and Danny knows his father is only humoring him, but he mentions the many things that are already drying the

river, things he's heard the environmentalists talk about for years – the dams and tributaries, the droughts and plants, the overuse from both Mexico and the United States. “Maybe we plant some weeds that will dry the river, or we build a dam here, where the river is already so small.”

“I'm sorry, son,” says Juan Ramón. “We've risked too much already. We can't throw that away.”

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THE DESERT STARS are smeared bright against the sky that night when Danny sneaks out of his house, grabs the keys to his father's truck, a map of Texas that will take him back to the Rio Grande. He feels the river calling to him, begging him to come home. He has friends here, loves cheeseburgers and football more than his father ever will. But he remembers waking up in the mornings with his brother sleeping next to him, Beni's breath fast and hot. He remembers the way the highland mountain air smelled, like baking bread and car exhaust and frying tortillas, how the church bells chimed, and the buses sputtered down the streets, and shopkeepers splashed soapy water across the sidewalks and swept it away with a broom. He cannot live like this any more, torn between this place and that.

He slips his father's key into the ignition, and the motor coughs awake.

“Wait,” he hears. His father is pounding the window, opening the passenger door, climbing inside. He yells at Danny inside the cab. “Where do you think you're going?” he asks.

“I’m sorry, Papá,” Danny says. “You are too afraid, but I’m not, and I believe the rumor is true.”

Juan Ramón puts his hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re not afraid,” he says, and he tells Danny of his own fear, the way when they were crossing the river with other refugees he held his breath against any sound – every cry or cough or gasp for air – that could alert border patrol, the way he believed, back when they lived in the mountains of Mexico, that El Norte was the promised land, that everything would be easy once they crossed the river.

Danny waits, doesn’t answer right at once. Then he says, “The rumor is true, Papá. I know it, even if you do not.” He shifts the truck into drive. “You cannot stop me from going. You can come if you want to.”

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DANNY AND JUAN Ramón drive hours through the desert, under the cover of night. They dodge rabbits that grow daring and run across the road. A white owl swoops low in front of their truck. They carry their forged documents and hope, as they always hope, that if they are pulled over the officers will not look too closely. When the river is dry these documents will not matter, Danny thinks, and without the added cost of paperwork and lawyers and bribes, they will be able to afford to bring their family to Texas safely. “I know what we are risking,” he says. “I know what we risked back then too.”

They stopped at a hardware store on the way out of town, bought bag after bag of sand, tarps, plants. Danny had everything planned out,

and his father shook his head at the money he was spending but did not stop him. Danny sees in his father's eyes sometimes the guilt, that of all his children, Danny was the one who had to sacrifice, that now Marifer and Beni go to school and live normal childhoods while Danny does not. He knows that this is the reason his father is indulging him now, an act of love, of remorse, and not of hope.

In his lap, Danny carries a rosary and a few prayer candles. "I think Mamá would want us to pray," he says. They listen to the local radio stations, normally quiet by this time, but tonight loud and full of speculations about the rumor of the dry border. Pro-border terrorists have been arrested trying to open the Elephant Butte Dam in New Mexico to refill the river, a newscaster reports. Radio preachers warn against the antichrist's arrival when all nations are one day united. Environmentalists list steps to ensure the river's survival. Economists and anthropologists debate what would happen financially and culturally if the two countries were to merge. It would be our destruction, say some. It would be our salvation, say others.



IT'S NEARLY DAWN by the time they reach the river, only a few hours of darkness left for their work. They pick a spot that seems secluded, sit in the truck for a moment and listen to the howl of a Western Screech-Owl. "Are you sure?" Juan Ramón whispers. Danny nods and opens the door. The moon is small tonight, but the Texas stars light the river and turn the desert brush around it yellow. Danny walks toward the river, the river he has not

seen in three years. He reaches down and touches the trickle of water, rolls his pants up and steps in. The water curls around his ankles, his toes sink in the sand. He stares into Mexico and wades deeper into the river until he stands in the middle. The water only reaches his shins, the river almost dry. He stretches out his hands, one to Texas, one to Mexico.

“Come on, son,” his father calls, and he reminds Danny that the sun will rise soon.

Together they carry the sandbags from the truck and set them on the bank. The water is only a few feet wide here. Their task will be small. They work silently, laying the sandbags one on top of the each other in the river. Once a pair of headlights shine on the distant hills. They crouch low in the river, although there’s nothing they can do to hide their truck, and they pray the headlights will not come nearer. “If we are caught, I’m sorry,” Danny says. He slaps at insects. Overhead a pair of nighthawks circle as if watching. Their wings flash white as they swoop through the sky. Juan Ramón stands knee deep in the water and stacks the sand. The river hits the sand, slows, rises. They keep building. This dam is all that Danny can do right now to see his family. Build this dam and hope that God recognizes it.

“What would you do if they came here?” Danny asks his father.

“I would take Beni to the high school and show him the auditorium where he would graduate. Someday I know I will see him cross the stage there.” Juan Ramón pauses a moment. “I’m sorry you could not finish school.”

“I know,” says Danny. “Maybe someday.”

He listens to the desert night, quiet but for the whistling killdeer, so different from the place he was born. He remembers it well, the way nights in Mexico are almost as loud as the days, the way the neighbors watch TV on full volume and dogs bark and banda music plays until the gas trucks trumpet at dawn. When he first moved to Texas Danny could not sleep. His father held him tight and said everything would be fine, but Danny could not breathe in the silence of the West Texas nights.

There are parts of Texas he's come to love, though, the barbeque and the desert and the sprawling one-story houses that spill across the land. He thinks of his coworkers who have become like brothers, and he thinks of the friends he left behind in Mexico, the crowd of children who would gather in the evenings to kick a soccer ball around the street. He builds the dam and hopes that the dry river means he will no longer have to choose.

The last bag is in the river. Danny wades in and joins his father. They straighten the sandbags, make them even and tall. If God sees, he will know that they did their best, he will see what this means to them. Already the river's flow has stilled. Juan Ramón puts his hand on his son's shoulder. They do not speak, listen instead to the sound of the pool filling. In it Danny hears his mother's voice calling to him. He hears the noisy Mexican streets and the still Texas nights. He smells taco stands and barbeque joints, his old home and his new. He dips his hand in the water once more.

His father turns to leave. "Wait," Danny says. He says that he wants to pray. He says his mother would want them to pray. He takes the prayer candles from the truck and sets them in the sand. He fingers his

rosary. Juan Ramón joins him but looks reluctant.

“Hijo,” he says. “We need to go.” Danny says it will not be long. Danny lights the candles, takes out a photo of his brother and sister, old and faded. He fingers his rosary and recites the Ave María, just as his mother taught him when he was a boy. “Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia.” Juan Ramón shakes his head a little bit and smiles at his son, the way he still believes, at least for tonight. He joins in. “El Señor es contigo.” The light from the candles flickers in the darkness, sparks rising into the desert sky.

Three hours south, a group of refugees struggle through the desert, thirsty and tired, the water towers that would have saved their lives shot open by border patrol, spilled across the sand. Along the borders, children Beni and Marifer’s age are kept shivering in cages. In the Texas capital, speechwriters are already updating campaign speeches to address environmental concerns, add promises of river preservation to their candidates’ platforms. In the Odessa high schools, the students will take sides, and teachers will wonder, although they’re not allowed to ask, which ones are legal and which are undocumented, which ones could disappear any day, sent back to the lives they ran away from. And down in Mexico, Beni is waking up, combing his hair the way he remembers his brother combing his, putting on his school uniform, thinking of his brother and father. Some day he will see them again. He’s sure.

“Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros, pecadores,” Danny and his father recite together, the boy’s eyes closed, his father’s wide open to check for headlights on the horizon. “Ahora y en la hora de nuestra

muerte, Amén.” They make the sign of the cross and watch the candles burn. The Rio Grande laps at the sandbags behind them. The killdeer whistles again. From somewhere far away, the wind blows.