Velociraptors at Midnight

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It was an especially hot day the summer before my friend Alex went away to college that his Mama came to us and told us we’d be taking a road trip. The two of us were sitting in a blue kiddie pool and drinking warm beer in his backyard.

“We gotta do something to remember,” I was just telling him. “I’ll be damned if we’re just gonna sit here in dusty old Wenatchee all summer and then you go off to Pullman to get smart and I’m stuck here with Niedermeyer all winter.”

Niedermeyer was our other friend. Well, sort of our friend. He was the only white kid in our graduating class. My papa and his dad were both orchard managers so he came around a lot with his family. Some friends you choose. Some are forced upon you. He was okay but he talked a lot about white kid stuff, like computer games and cable TV shows. Mostly he just talked a lot. Just as I was gonna suggest we take a bus to Ellensberg or something, Alex’s mom showed up. She didn’t care that we drank. Nobody really did.

She was young for a mother. She was beautiful. I think Alex hated that fact even more than Niedermeyer and I loved it. We always told him how hermosa she was, just to get a rise out of him. Boy, did he hate it.

The chain-link fence squealed shut behind her as she walked toward us and stopped at the foot of the pool, all hips and dark hair and hot summer day.

“Alex, mijo, your Papa got picked up in Coos Bay, Oregon.” Her accent was thicker than most of the Latinas around Wenatchee. I loved it. “I need you to go get him.” She reached into her purse and dug out a pack of cigarettes.

Alex chugged his beer down and threw it at the garbage can by the shed.
“Christ Mama! Can’t they just put him on a bus or something?”
“You know they won’t release him unless someone is there to bring him home.”
“Well, can’t you go get him?” Alex asked, reaching out to her for a cigarette. I don’t think Alex ever bought his own smokes. He just took his mama’s.
“Dios Mio, you know I can’t take any more time off from the Bag-n-Save, mijo.” She pulled off her shoes and stuck her feet in the pool next to my thighs. Her skin was darker than mine; it shimmered, like sweet dulce de leche, under the water. She looked at me and smiled over her cigarette.
“I called your papa, mi amor. He says you can go too. You can take the car. And I have two hundred dollars for you. That should get you down and back.”
Well that pretty much sealed it. Wenatchee to Coos Bay was ten or twelve hours. We could take a trip down the coast. Bringing back Alex’s pa would be awkward, but that’d be a small price. A road trip in a rusted out Mazda 626 was just what I was hoping would come our way before Alex left for school.
We took Alex’s ma back to the Bag-n-Save, and went to my house to grab some sleeping bags and a cooler. I threw some chips and salsa in a backpack for later. We’d have to camp out since we couldn’t afford a motel. We were just slamming the trunk on our stuff, when Niedermeyer came pedaling down the street with a huge hiking pack on his back.
“Oh Christ,” Alex said, making for the driver seat.
“Hey guys!” Niedermeyer waved as he approached the car. “Gabe! Your dad called mine. He said you guys are going to Oregon. Can I come too?”
“We’re travelling fast and light Niedermeyer,” Alex said, motioning for me to get in the car.
“It’s cool guys. I’m ready to go.” He stopped his bike right in front of the car and looked at us. Alex and I looked at each other. It’s not that we hated Niedermeyer. He just talked so damn much and it was a long drive.
“You got any cash?” I asked, still looking at Alex.
“Yeah, of course.” Niedermeyer reached into his back pocket.
“My mom gave me a check for eighty dollars. We just need to go cash it.”

I sighed, “I suppose we could use the extra money.”

“Alright, get in,” Alex yelled. Niedermeyer threw his bike in my backyard and jumped in the back seat with his big green backpack. It was one of those old ones with the big metal frame on the outside. He was struggling with it. I’m sure he had it full of weird white kid supplies, like water purifiers and a compass or whatever.

“Hey Alex,” Niedermeyer said as we pulled away, “it’s too bad your mom can’t come with us. I’d love to sleep under the stars next to her.”

I laughed. Alex just ignored us and started the car.

Alex’s tío, Juan Carlos, worked at the Kwik-Trip on the edge of town. He’d sell us beer and cigarettes, so we always went there. He cashed Niedermeyer’s check too, so we had enough to buy a carton of Marlboros, two racks of Miller Lite, and a large bag of Hi-Country Jerky. Normally we had to get the generic stuff, so things were already shaping up nicely.

I thought for sure Juan Carlos would say something about Alex’s papa being gone since the Fourth of July, but he didn’t bring it up. He knew, though, that we were going somewhere.

“Mijo,” he told Alex at the counter, “you remember to check the oil every time you stop and don’t go faster than fifty, neither. I don’t want to hear about you breakin’ down your mama’s car.”

“Yes, Tío,” Alex said. We went back to the car and threw the beer in the cooler. We forgot to buy ice, so I ran and took a bag from the cooler in front of the station. I’d be damned if we were gonna drink warm Miller Lite the whole way.

We were leaving with enough time to make it to the coast before we had to stop for the night, once we got through central Washington we could follow the Columbia to the ocean, then drive south.

The drive was hot. The air conditioner was busted, so we just ran the vent. The air that blasted from it was warm and smelled like engine but it was better than nothing. Niedermeyer kept asking to
roll the windows down but it was hard to smoke with all that wind. We did most of the drive with the windows up.

And we didn’t talk much. It just felt good to be on the road. Central Washington is high desert. There’s a lot of scrub and exposed rock. Alex knobbed through the radio frequencies uselessly. There are only two kinds of music out there. Christian radio or mariachi radio. I hated mariachi music but it was better than the lame stuff on the Christian station. We blared the mariachi music through most of Washington. Mostly because it kept Niedermeyer from going on about all the Boy Scout shit he had in his backpack.

The flat country flew by as I sucked on Marlboros. I imagined that Mexico probably looked similar to this part of the United States. I’d never been to Mexico, of course, but my parents had lived there as kids. They said it was mostly the same, except safer. In Mexico, you moved cocaine. In Washington, you moved apples. As we drove along through the heat, I imagined we were down there with the scrub grass screaming by at a furious fifty miles an hour and mariachi music blaring in our ears. Alex’s mama would always say that mariachi music is like white people’s polka, except with better brass and more tequila.

It went that way until we got into Oregon and near Portland. Alex stopped at a Chevron for gas. I was gonna take over driving for a stretch so Alex could have some beers and relax. When I went to fill up the gas tank, this old guy in blue coveralls came running out, yelling for me to stop.

“What?” I asked, “what’s the matter?”

“You can’t pump your own gas in Oregon, kid,” the old man said. He came up to me and grabbed the nozzle out of my hands. “I’ll do it for ya.”

“Are you serious about this?” I asked.

“Serious as a kick to the gut, kid,” he said, “five hundred dollar fine for pumping your own gas in Oregon. So what’ll it be? Regular?”

“Yeah, regular’s good,” I said. I didn’t know what else to do so I just sat down behind the wheel and let him pump our gas for us.

Niedermeyer poked his head up between the seats. “Don’t forget to have him check the oil, too.”
“Oh, yeah.” I rolled down the window. “Señor, can you please check the oil too?”

“You betcha, just pop the hood,” he said.

After he checked the oil, he washed the windows too. Alex and I just stared at him the whole time. We’d never seen anything like it. It was like we were rich white people or something.

Finally, Alex turned back to Niedermeyer and asked, “Do we have to tip him?”

“Nope,” Niedermeyer said, “it’s just his job.”

The oil was fine. I paid the old man for the gas and we pulled away. After a mile or so Alex started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“That guy had me so surprised I forgot I have to piss like a racehorse.”

We both laughed. Alex cracked a Miller Lite and took a sip. Then Niedermeyer spoke up from the back, “You know where that comes from?”

“What comes from?” I asked

“The phrase ‘piss like a racehorse?’” He didn’t wait for us to tell him that we didn’t care. “It’s cause they give racehorses this stuff that makes them piss and shit a lot right before the race. So they’re nice and light.”

“How do you know this stuff?” Alex asked.

“I’ve seen them do it. My dad takes me to the racetrack sometimes. He says you should always bet on the horse that pisses and shits the most right before, because you know they’ll be running lightest.”

We didn’t say anything back to him. Alex took a drink of his beer, then turned to me, “I can wait ‘til after Portland for a piss. Don’t worry about stopping now.” He turned the music back up and looked out at the Columbia River as I drove.

Oregon has all these turnouts and signs along the road that tell you about Lewis and Clark and prehistoric sites and whatnot. We passed one that said “Mammoth Beds Fossil Cache.” The Columbia River area has tons of stuff like that.

When we were in grade school, we took a field trip out to Lake
Roosevelt and they showed us fossils of mammoths and ferns and stuff. There weren’t any dinosaurs in the area but after that, we got really excited about fossils and all that. I mean, what boy doesn’t love dinosaurs at some point? Jurassic Park was in the Cineplex around the same time. The three of us—Niedermeyer was always around, even then—begged our parents to see it. Finally, it was Alex’s papa that took us to the late showing. After that we were convinced we’d be the youngest paleontologists in history. Mostly though, we just ran around the house for weeks like velociraptors.

I turned the blaring mariachi trumpets on the radio down.

“Remember when we were little, how we’d tear around the house like dinosaurs?” I said.

Alex laughed, “Yeah, remember how we’d stalk your mama’s old *perro*? We almost gave that poor dog a heart attack.”

“Yeah,” Niedermeyer chimed in from the back, “or the time we tipped over that curio cabinet and broke all my mom’s angel figurines.”

We laughed. Only white people have things called curios and figurines.

“That was the end of velociraptors in the house,” I said, “it wasn’t quite the same outside, with no hallways to hunt down.”

That got us all talking about old times. It’s weird how you grow up with people all your life. Especially in a small town. You know everything about a guy. About his family. And even though you pretty much know about all the crazy stuff in their life you don’t ever really talk about any of it. You just talk about the times you ran around like dinosaurs and got into trouble. Kind of like Alex’s *tío*, Juan Carlos. You don’t talk about the crazy stuff. You just fill up the gas tank, check the oil, and make the drive. What else can you say about the other stuff?

We drove through Portland without stopping. Alex pissed on the side of the road. After that we were in the forest and it was much more hilly. Night was falling and we were getting pretty excited to find a place to stop for the night. We did pretty good about saving most of the beer, but once we got a glimpse of the Pacific, that stopped. Alex finally changed the radio to some Portland station
and *Wild Horses* by the Rolling Stones came on. Niedermeyer passed out beers to everyone just as we turned to drive down the coast. Alex grabbed his beer and toasted the dashboard.

“Niedermeyer, that’s the most Latino thing you’ve done all day,” he said, “good timing, *amigo*.”

“Well actually,” Niedermeyer piped up, “the Rolling Stones are British and we did just tune away from Mexican music, so really it’s you who…”

“Niedermeyer, shut the fuck up,” Alex said laughing. “Just *cállate*, would you, and watch the *Pacífico*."

We drove for another hour or so, drinking beers and listening to rock ‘n’ roll, until it was dark. We found this campsite that didn’t have a fee, so we pulled in. We were the only ones there. Not many campers in the middle of the week I suppose.

The site we chose was really something. We were still in the forest. I mean, there were pine trees all around us but the huge dunes came right up to the edge of the site. Some of the tree trunks were actually buried a bit by sand. It was like nothing I’d ever seen. Like a different planet or something.

We didn’t have any firewood but we had some flashlights. Niedermeyer had a headlamp that actually seemed pretty handy. We ate beef jerky and tortilla chips with salsa. Mostly though we drank beers and talked about all the pretty girls from school we wanted to get with.

“Hey, you know what we should do,” I said finally, after we’d been sitting for a couple hours, “we should take this beer out onto the dunes and hike to the ocean. It can’t be far.”

“Sounds good to me,” Alex said.

We emptied out my backpack and filled it with Miller Lite and Marlboros. Once we left the trees and started up the first dune, we realized how bright it really was out there. It was a full moon and clear sky. You could see easily. The first dune was huge and it probably didn’t help that we’d been smoking all day. Climbing up a sand dune the size of a mountain is much harder than climbing up a normal mountain.

We got to the top of the first dune, huffing and wheezing like
a bunch of *cabrones*. We hadn’t known how far we really were from the ocean. I mean, there must’ve been ten miles of massive, rolling dunes. It looked like the Sahara or something.

“Well shit,” Alex said, “I’m not gonna go all that way.”

“Me neither,” I panted.

Niedermeyer walked up to the edge of the dune. It looked pretty steep.

“I don’t know about you guys,” he said, “but I’m gonna run down this son of a bitch as fast as I can.”

“Are you crazy?” Alex said, sitting there out of breath, “Climbing through this sand once was hard enough. I don’t want to do it again.”

“Your loss,” Niedermeyer said.

He didn’t even look back at us; he just disappeared over the dune. We jumped up and ran to the edge. He was flying down the thing. Definitely faster than fifty miles an hour. Huge, bounding strides carried him down. He looked like he was going to tumble end-over-end at any moment. Then he let out the loudest, craziest, velociraptor screech and jumped into the air. He tucked into a cannonball and went barrel rolling the rest of the way down. It was spectacular.

“Fuck it,” Alex said and plunged down the hill. I didn’t wait to follow. The whole way down we squealed and squawked like velociraptors. Alex tried to do a slalom type move but fell and tumbled most of the way. Latinos don’t know shit about the slalom. I managed to stay mostly upright, until the end. When I fell the backpack of beer opened up and beer and cigarettes went spilling everywhere.

It took us a while to pick up our supplies down there in the narrow valley between the dunes. We laughed and roughhoused our way through most of the job. Alex had somehow gotten a bloody lip and I had skinned my elbow on something when I fell, but we were okay. Once we gathered up all the beer and smokes, we climbed back up to the top of the dune we’d come down.

We sat there, alternating between choruses of *Wild Horses* and perfect silence until finally, after a particularly long silence, Niedermeyer spoke up.
“I’m sorry about your dad, Alex.”

I looked at Alex. He didn’t like to talk about his papa. Usually he got kind of angry if we brought him up. Especially since Fourth of July, a week ago, when he’d left again. It was the second time this year.

“IT’s okay,” Alex said finally, “You didn’t do it.”

“Yeah, but I’m still sorry,” Niedermeyer said, “It must be hard, you know. Lookin’ after your dad like this all the time.”

“Well, I won’t have to soon. Once summer’s over I’ll be at Washington State and he’ll be left to Mama.” He chugged down the rest of his beer and threw the empty can down the dune. “I shouldn’t be leavin’ her. I should be stayin’ to help her.”

“You know that’s not what she wants, Alex,” Niedermeyer said. I was getting nervous. Alex was starting to look upset. Niedermeyer’s white boy was really showing now. He just didn’t know when to shut up about this sort of stuff.

“Yeah, I realize that, Niedermeyer,” Alex said, standing, “she’s the one who filled out all those stupid scholarships for me. She knew I wasn’t gonna do them. I told her someone needs to be home with her, but she refuses. She tells me if I don’t go to college she’ll kick me out anyway.”

“I think she’s right though,” Niedermeyer kept going. “If there’s one good thing that can come of all this it’s those scholarships. You can…”

“No!” Alex screamed, “Es no bueno. Someone should stay with her. If not me, then who? Tio Juan Carlos? He won’t do it. His stupid gringa wife doesn’t like him around my hot mama. I’m all she’s got!” He looked like he wanted to say something more and I was pretty sure he was going to take a swing at Niedermeyer any second. He didn’t. Instead, he just went stumbling down the dune towards the car. I thought about going after him but I knew better. He just needed to be alone.

“You really need to learn when to shut the fuck up, Niedermeyer,” I said.

Niedermeyer didn’t say anything back to me. I could tell he felt bad. It’s not like he did anything wrong, exactly. He just couldn’t understand that we don’t talk about stuff the way he does.
“Don’t worry too much about it,” I said finally, “He’ll sleep it off.”

We stayed up there for a while, getting more drunk under the full moon, staring way out across the dunes at the Pacific ocean. I swear if you listened long enough you could hear the waves. We went down to the car finally; Alex was asleep in the back, on Niedermeyer’s massive green backpack. We got the sleeping bags from the trunk and slept by the cold fire pit.

In the morning, there wasn’t much talking. We were all tired and about as hung-over as any eighteen-year-olds can really be. Mostly we were just uncomfortable because there was sand everywhere. In our ears. In our asses. There was no way to get rid of it all. We’d be shaking sand out of our hair for the rest of our lives.

It took another few hours to get to Coos Bay. During that time the weather began to turn. It was cloudy and grey, the way Oregon usually presents itself in all my memories. The air coming through the vent was thick now with the promise of a rainstorm.

We pulled up to the police station. It was all grey cement, the same color as the sky. I was going to stay in the car but Niedermeyer got out to go with Alex, so I figured I should go too.

Inside, Alex told the cop at the front desk we were here for his papa. They gave him a little paper bag of his pa’s personal stuff that he handed to me, then they took Alex through a door to the back while Niedermeyer and me waited up front. There was a window that looked across to the piers along the rocky shore. A bunch of fishing boats were docked, probably not going out fishing since a storm was coming. We stood, looking out at the water while we waited for Alex to come back with his papa. I knew I shouldn’t, but I looked in the paper bag at the stuff Alex’s papa had brought down here with him. Not much. Just a few things. But looking at those things, I had to finally say something.

“You know what’s weird about Alex’s papa?” I said. It felt strange to talk about it, but I figured if I was going to, then Niedermeyer was the one who’d listen. “What’s weird about his pa is that he’s not a drinker or anything. I mean, usually when somebody’s papa is runnin’ off all the time or gettin’ picked up by
the police it’s because he’s a drinker, you know? Or worse than a drinker sometimes. But he’s not. He’s a good pa. This is the man who took us to see movies when we were little. And, I mean, what are you supposed to say about it now? Sorry? Sorry doesn’t do anything. It’s just sad and there isn’t anything else to say.”

I reached into the brown paper bag and pulled out a pair of military dog tags, a wallet, and a folded up picture of Alex’s mama. She was in her bra and panties, holding a baby Alex. She was so beautiful. That’s when I really felt angry.

“Like this.” I showed Niedermeyer the photo. “A guy goes out and gets himself a wife as hot as Alex’s mama, and then he goes off and gets himself blown up and his brain all scrambled, or whatever happened over there, and now he can’t even enjoy her, or take care of her, or take care of his kid, and they gotta go search around for him when fireworks scare him off. I mean, you almost wish he was a drinker. So you could hate him. But this?” I shoved the photo at Niedermeyer’s face. “This is just somethin’ else that I don’t even know how to talk about.”

For the first time in all the years I knew Niedermeyer, he didn’t have anything to say. He took the photo and the wallet and the dog tags from me and put them back in the brown paper bag. It was good timing too, because just then Alex and his papa came out from the back with an officer. His pa was in pretty bad shape. His eyes were all red and puffy like he’d been crying and he looked like he probably hadn’t eaten or showered in a while. They signed a few papers and we walked out to the car.

I opened the passenger door for Alex’s pa. He looked at me and grabbed me behind the neck, “Thank you for coming, mijo,” he said and hugged me before climbing in the Mazda. We stuffed Niedermeyer’s huge green backpack in the trunk along with the cooler and the sleeping bags. Niedermeyer and I both climbed in the back seat. Alex got in the driver seat and started up the car. I had to piss but I knew we’d be stopping for gas and to check the oil before leaving town, so I waited.

As we pulled away from the police station, the radio began to play and the vent started to blast cool air. It was just starting to drizzle outside; the cool air would be nice for the drive back. I
leaned across the back seat to Niedermeyer.

“I don’t wanna make cracks to Alex about his mama anymore,” I whispered in his ear. He nodded silently as Alex drove us all home through the gathering storm.