CARCASS

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M.I.A.

Tom Sweeney had no business in Vietnam. He figured if he went there, he'd end up killed or he'd kill someone. He could even come back in pieces, like Kozlowsky. He had his legs sent home to be given a proper burial two months before the rest of him could return. He'd developed an infection after the double amputation and wasn't released from the hospital in time to attend his legs' service. The horrors of war. Whatever the situation, it wasn't like the odds were in Tom's favor. So, he packed up whatever clothes could stuff into one duffel bag, his guitar, sleeping bag, a towel, and his Vinyl album collection and drove across the country in his VW bus from Wilmington down to the border. When he reached San Diego a week later, he called his mother to say goodbye. "Tell the draft people I was abducted by aliens."

She understood this to mean, "We might never see each other again," but had no words to dissuade her son. As the orphaned daughter of a World War II officer, she had warned Tom countless times, ever since he was a toddler, "Over my dead body you're enlisting." She'd even gone so far as to say, "I'd rather see you blind than fighting in a war." Tom knew his mother would do anything to spare him from the experience, even pull his eyes out of their sockets.

As for his father, maybe his disappearance wouldn't be as hard on him. He wasn't really much of a family man. He wasn't really much of a father. It would take him a while before he noticed his son was gone, being as busy as he was, all the time in the shop. And that was the other thing. Tom wasn't meant to work with his father in the repair shop. The old man insisted. Tom gave him excuses.

"I'm allergic to small appliances, dad. See this welt here? I touched a blender."

Tom's destiny was elsewhere, in a distant place, an exotic land where he didn't have to work for his father, where there was no war to go to, where coffee machines and toaster ovens did not exist.

Crossing over to Tijuana had been easy. Coming back, he thought, would be the hard part, if he ever did come back. He would have to create a new identity for himself, become another person. Technically, Tom Sweeney was dead and gone. Was he dead, or gone, or both? It didn't really matter. His mother knew he was still around someplace and that was comforting. He couldn't tell even her that he was going to Mexico, although she would have been pleased. She had once told him that Mexicans were the ultimate example of pacifists. They had given up half of their territory to the United States without putting up much of a fight. So, from now on he'd be Carlos Santana. A real Mexican name for a new Mexican man. But then he changed his mind. As much as he'd liked to be named Carlos Santana, he understood that he'd draw attention to

himself and that was the last thing he needed. Instead, he would pick a generic name, he'd be a Mexican John Doe, maybe Pedro García. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw the reflection of a true Pedro García—long brown hair, brown eyes, moustache and beard. So what if he spoke no Spanish? He'd have time, much of it, to learn it down in Baja.

He stopped at a tiny convenience store and a couple of apples for the road, a few bags of Fritos, two bottles of Coke, and enough beer to drink before it got warm. His boyish look didn't seem to bother the man behind the counter. Back home he'd get carded every time, even with the moustache and the beard, so he tried his luck.

"Sorry, I lost my ID."

"Dollars OK."

"Oh, I get it, no English?"

"Dollars OK."

"Dollars OK."

Pedro paid and left it at that. He'd have to learn a whole new set of rules, absorb the culture, feel at home, adapt. On the way out, he was lucky to be approached by a dealer who sold him three joints. How the guy knew he was a potential customer, he couldn't figure out. He really thought he'd blend in with his new name.

Since Pedro wasn't much into planning ahead, getting those provisions at the store was about as much as he could handle for now. He vaguely suspected what he'd do and where he'd go, but mostly he'd leave his future to chance. He did know he'd have to make a living somehow. His savings were already running low and he'd just left home. He reviewed his abilities. Having been on the ice hockey team in high school would not be useful in Baja, unless he got in a fistfight at a bar. But that was unlikely. He was a pacifist. Wasn't that the very reason he was avoiding the war?

He hopped in his VW bus and for three hours tried to get out of Tijuana. In his attempt, he drove past the same corner twice. It was either that or the same dog had changed corners to continue his nap. When he finally was able to leave the maze of crooked, filthy streets and confusing boulevards behind, he headed toward Ensenada. Once on the open road, he rolled down the windows to let the fresh ocean air of early autumn cool off the bus, but it didn't help much. He took off his T-shirt. He tied his hair in a ponytail. That didn't help much either. So, he opened a beer and drank it in one big swig.

"I could sing at bars," he thought. He was good, very good. And he had his guitar with him. He did Dylan like no other. He remembered the standing ovation he got for "Like a Rolling Stone" at the Senior Talent Show. The gym was packed beyond the Fire Department limit. It was his night. After the show, Cindy had finally given in and had sex with him, in his bus.

"Thanks, Bob," he muttered before he came.

"It's Cindy," she said.

He was grateful in many ways. It was, after all, Dylan who had—unknowingly—gotten him into music. And the Beatles and Donovan and James Brown and Motherlode

and Steppenwolf and the Stones, of course. But Dylan, Dylan definitely knew where the answer was blowing. Music. Performing. That would be his livelihood. He took a deep breath.

Now that the big question was out of the way, he pulled out a joint and smoked slowly, enjoying every drag as if it were the last one. He thought of all the guys his age over in Nam that very moment getting stoned and not knowing if they would be doing it again at all, and felt a sudden, inexplicable sadness. It was the painful kind and had a certain amount of guilt in it. Was he betraying someone? Should he have chosen to go to war and defend his friends? Defend what? Was his country really fighting for peace or were there all sorts of other factors involved that had nothing to do with justice and world harmony? Wasn't fighting for peace a contradiction in itself? He was sure of one thing: if he didn't get over that last bit of doubt, he would not be able to continue on. So, he tossed the feeling out the window and lit up another joint. "This one's for my buddies in Nam," he said aloud, and then got to humming "Suspicious Minds."

After a curving stretch of the road, the asphalt became a straight line running along the coast. He inhaled the last whiff of his joint and held it in for as long as he could stand. Then he rolled up the window, let the smoke out, and took deep breaths to recycle whatever smoke was still circulating inside the bus. The sky met the ocean far to the west, and other than that, there wasn't much going on outside. As a way to beat the boredom, Pedro turned on the wipers and watched them struggle against the windshield. They made a little squeaking sound as the rubber dragged back and forth on the dusty glass. The noise reminded him of a mouse's final squeal before being crushed by his dad's foot. It had happened in the storage room behind the shop years back. He'd seen it all. He still remembered. He was a pacifist. He meant no harm to any living creature. Not even mice, or spiders. After ruining the wipers and scratching the windshield (he'd failed to fill up his water spray receptacle), he tried to focus on the road, but the gadgets on the dashboard were so much more attractive. They appeared to be harmless, unlike his dad's appliances. The speedometer, the gas gauge, the idiot light (for oil pressure, as his friend Ronnie explained to him once). He suddenly wondered if it should be lit or not.

He reached Ensenada too quickly. It didn't seem large enough. He estimated that the place might have a couple of bars, but no more than three. There had to be a larger city down the road, for sure. He decided to keep driving. He stopped to get gas and headed further south, toward the Baja desert. "Happiness is having a full tank," he'd said to Cindy at the drive-in once and it had made her giggle. He knew that giggle from Jill and Janice and Joan. It was the same funny, goofy giggle. It clearly meant, "You can have me." They always giggled at the drive-in, so it made things easier. It didn't matter which girl it was, the VW bus rocked and shook in the same way until the movie was over and the lights came up. Then he'd take the girl home and that would be the end of it until the next time. But there was more to Cindy than the giggling. She was a pacifist, like him. They shared profound ideas; they agreed on political issues. They discussed their views of the future. He liked her company. He had even asked her to disappear

with him, but she had chosen to go to Berkeley instead. He wondered what she thought of him, escaping the draft. Was he a coward? Was he brave? Was he taking matters into his own hands? Was he an idealist being true to his beliefs? Was he all of the above? It was hard to say. He hadn't given her much of a chance to express herself. He notified her about his decision, gave her a little bundle of weed that he had in his pocket and one long kiss, and left. He had been afraid that saying good-bye to his girlfriend would hurt more, but in all honesty, he felt worse when he said good-bye to his mother.

He wondered what his life in Mexico would be like. He'd definitely like to meet a beautiful, dark-haired, big-breasted older woman by the name of María. Aren't they all Marías? Or Delores. He preferred Delores. She'd own a pad by the beach. He could move in with her. Maybe she'd have a roommate, Juanita, and the three of them could live together. Maybe Juanita would desire him, too. He would have to oblige, and Delores would agree to the idea. "Hey, it's a free world," she would say. The girls would teach him Spanish and cook homemade burritos. He'd play his guitar at bars until the war ended and then he could go back to the States as Pedro García and bring Delores with him. He'd bring Juanita, too. He could probably buy himself a counterfeit Mexican birth certificate. He'd heard anything could be bought in Mexico. Then he'd just have to become an American citizen. It shouldn't be too hard. Millions of immigrants were doing it every year and he had a major head start.

The late afternoon sun came in through the passenger window, heating up the last beer rolling around on the floorboard. He drank it before it got any warmer and lit up the final joint. As the sun began to set into the ocean, it stained the desert floor a deep orange. "If only Delores was here, riding by my side," he thought. The road was now empty except for a couple of cars that passed him. He turned on the radio and heard a distant station playing *ranchera* music. The song was fragmented, upstaged by static, by sudden voices from other stations cutting in and out, saying words he could not understand and then vanishing. Finally, the radio made a zapping noise and went dead. "I'm too far from anywhere." The thought comforted him and scared him. Coming from the East Coast, he had always been surrounded by people. It was a cozy feeling. Everywhere he went there would be someone. He had never imagined that there was such a desolate place on the entire planet, except for, say, Alaska or Hawaii, where he assumed the population to be the lowest in the world.

There had to be a town somewhere down there, but no lights shimmered on the horizon. He rolled down the window and adjusted the rearview mirror. In the moonless night, he could barely make out the silhouettes of cacti, briefly lit by his headlights, gliding away by the side of the road, going as fast as they could in the opposite direction.

He felt lonely, as lonely as a runaway, as alienated as an outlaw, as isolated as a man of convictions in a self-imposed exile, a maverick in his own right. He was quickly becoming a pariah, a loner, a rolling stone. In a way, he liked the feeling, but how did it feel? He mumbled bits of lyrics, words here and there, "No direction at all. . . A complete unknown . . . Scrounging my next meal . . . Without a home . . . I'll have to get used to it . . . To be on my own . . . Never turn around . . . I have nothing, so I have nothing to lose." How did it really feel? For the time being it struck him that his new persona enveloped him in a certain mystique that attracted everything outlandish. He now possessed a fascinating allure. The effect of the joint seemed to dwindle and he felt a sudden pang of hunger. He rummaged through the junk on the floorboard for a bag of Fritos, tore it open with his teeth, and ate the whole thing in a couple of minutes.

Down the road, he imagined Delores sitting in the passenger seat next to him, her cleavage exposed just a bit under her tight blouse, her flared jeans hugging her hips, allowing a hint of her waist to show. He wanted to touch her dark skin. He had the urge to slide his hand under her blouse. He thought of stopping at the next rest area to jerk off, but then decided to do it as he drove. He undid the button of his jeans, unzipped them, pulled them down a bit, spit down on to his dick as a form of lubrication, especially important in that kind of hot and dry weather and gripped his fingers around it. He sped up. Now Delores had taken off her top, and her breasts, her big Mexican breasts, round and smooth to the touch, bounced with every little bump on the road. The road. He remembered that he had to keep his eyes on the road and looked up just in time to see the light. Bright and green and intermittent. Blinding, most of all. It came at him so fast he didn't have the chance to let go of his dick. The light came with a powerful tremor and a forceful wind, a twister of sorts that sucked him out the window, as he was, pants down and all. Without a driver, the VW tore off the road and crashed against a looming pile of rocks. Technically, Pedro García was dead and gone. Was he dead, or gone, or both? It didn't really matter anymore.

THE FAMILY IN QUESTION

Take this family, for instance, coming home from vacation in Baja, sunburnt, tired, eager to sleep in their own beds. Husband drives. Wife rides shotgun. Teen daughter fights teen son over the shady side of the station wagon so she can look out into the desert for the rest of the cloudless afternoon. He can have the ocean views to the west. She's had plenty of those at the resort. They finally agree to swap places and after a few contortions of arms and legs in the backseat, they are settled, and each adjust their headphones over their ears and start their brand-new Soundabout players at maximum volume. She listens to Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," and he hums to the rhythm of the BeeGees' "Too Much Heaven."

Nothing is remarkable, so far. The station wagon, even though it's a '72, has fairly new tires, the engine still runs well, everyone's had a chance to stock up on chips and pop at the gas station, and the two-lane asphalt is pretty smooth, very few potholes, really, considering they're traveling on a forsaken Mexican road. Husband and wife could take advantage of the privacy they've been afforded by the kids' headphones, the blaring music overpowering any serious talks, so much to say, but they don't. They remain silent for a good part of an hour. Even so, they are each full of thoughts:

It wasn't so bad. I can't believe I dreaded this trip so, the prospect of spending so many days with Richard. But now that we're going home, how funny—I realize I needed to get away from George, to create a little parenthesis in our situation. I'm that way. Always been. It's not about him; he's fine, so fine. It's the speed. Like I said to him last summer, "Let's go slowly. I need time to figure out how to tell my husband, how to leave without hurting anybody." Why did he decide to confess to Stella about us, about our thing, all of a sudden, without even warning me? Now his whole marriage is a mess. It's his fault that he got kicked out of the house. Now she's hired a lawyer. His kids are unbearable, all three of them flunking out at school, and I bet they're even smoking pot. Big disaster. You can't act on impulse in these kinds of situations. You must think it through, make plans and execute them. You've got innocent bystanders.

The mom turns her head to glance at the kids, the innocent bystanders in the backseat. The daughter has her eyes closed, listening to her cassette player, or perhaps she's sleeping, her head leaning against the window. God knows what she's dreaming about; it's hard to tell. The son looks out toward the ocean far away. She wonders what he might be so interested in out there. The son, he is always a mystery.

The husband has his mind in a distant place as well: his office, or what had once been his office.

So complicated. So tiring. How long can I keep up this charade? Get up, shower, get dressed, bye-bye honey, see you after work, and head over to Smitty's for a very leisurely breakfast, and a longer midmorning coffee, reading the paper, perusing the want ads with a red marker in my hand as if some opportunity worth my while might be advertised by way of a miracle. Then it's the walk around Washington Park, moms pushing strollers, toddlers playing on the jungle gym. How easy it was back then, when the kids were little. No expectations. Muriel was fine with what we had. But now she wants so much, so I head home at five thirty to the big lie. "Lots of good stuff going on at work," I say as generically as I can while I think about the headhunter's promises, his lame excuses. Yes, I'm overqualified, I understand, but I don't care; just get me an interview.

There's this thing, this dark smudge on my résumé. What happened here? Why did I quit such a great job? Could I provide references? If Goodman hadn't started it all, the audit, I'd still be sitting at my desk every morning at 9:00 a.m., coffee mug in hand, ready for a day of productive work. If Goodman hadn't noticed something was amiss: The Grand Miscalculation. "Do you know how much your fuck-up is going to cost the company?" I hear the question every night, in bed. Then I distract myself with other things, like how many maxed out credit cards I'll have to deal with, and if and when I'll get a paycheck again.

The husband steps on the gas. The suddenness of it startles the daughter. "What's going on?" she wonders, perking up to look at the road like a meerkat coming out of her burrow. The single yellow line dividing the strip of black pavement appears and disappears as the desert heat reverberates, distorts the landscape, as if seen through tearful eyes. Saguaros along the edge of the sand seem to salute the passing station wagon. She spots an old VW bus, torn, scavenged, totaled, abandoned by the side of the road, resting against some boulders, and wishes she owned it so she could get away. Her parents would yell at her, "Claire, come back!" but she'd just drive off towards the horizon, never to be heard from again.

I'll have to do this as soon as we get home. Nine weeks. I can't let another day go by. Last time I waited too long and I could almost feel it kicking in my belly. I'll see if Randy will help me pay for it. Dad's been a little stingy lately. I can't ask him for money, for whatever made-up reason, like last year. How could I tell my parents? Yes, mom, I'm pregnant. Again. Yes, dad, I'm taking care of it—again. If I didn't have the nerve to say anything last time, if I did it all by myself, now forget it, I'm on my own. They'd never understand how they ended up with me, with the kind of daughter I am. A murderer.

Brother has now listened to his entire cassette, but keeps his headphones on, in silence. Perhaps he won't be bothered by anyone. He has heard that sometimes whales jump out of the water off the coast of Baja and when they dive back in, they create a splash so gigantic and spectacular that it can be seen from a plane. He looks intently at the ocean, but it's calm, so much so that it could be dead, for all he knows. This is when he thinks:

It's so right, but it's got to be a mistake. I know Joey's with me on this. We can't be faking it, not after all these months of hiding everywhere, lying to our parents, making up excuses to our friends to be with each other, fuck, basically living in two dimensions at the same time. I've known how real our thing is since that time at Steve's when we all

slept over after the game. I can still hear his whisper in the middle of the night, "Kevin, move over," then feeling his body rub against mine on the living-room floor, behind the couch, each of us wrapped in our own sleeping bags. I came so fast. Man, we've been through some crazy shit. And then, the other day when he said, "I don't want to go to college next year. Let's just move to some enlightened country where we won't be called faggots." I know for sure my dad would call me that if he found out. He does it with every other person he thinks is a goddamn queer. I'm wondering if I should get back to the real world and rule this out as a mistake, forget about it. But I can't wait to get back home to see Joey; I can't deny it. God, I miss his strong hands on my ass.

The father glances at the rearview mirror. His son is quietly looking out the window. It seems to him he's daydreaming; he catches his forlorn gaze into the horizon and wonders if he's happy. His daughter, the baby of the family, is humming some song with her eyes closed. How would she take the news that he has been unemployed for seven months? He hasn't given her any signs. He has paid for her birthday party, the guitar lessons, the braces, the records, the new clothes, the dermatologist, the movie tickets and popcorn. He has promised her a car, a used one would do, like the one his son got the previous year. She wants either a Celica or a Corolla, but he wants to replace the station wagon first, most likely for a Plymouth model, an impossibility at this point. This vacation has been the latest family demand, a splurge he embraced without hesitation.

No one will fix this for him. His mother told him she won't help anymore. Why is a hard-working forty-two-year-old man asking his retired mother for money? His wife eats potato chips out of a bag in the passenger seat, oblivious to his predicament. And so, he thinks:

It's her fault. Nothing's wrong with being a homemaker, but if you're not going to get a paying job and contribute, don't push for the big house when a smaller one works just fine. Don't push the kids into going to Ivy League colleges when you haven't done the numbers. She always wants more, and I want something different. And what do I do? Negotiate, give in and resent it. That's my modus operandi. When I was excited about getting the Plymouth Fury Sport Suburban, we ended up with a Ford LTD Country Squire Wagon.

That's just one small example of our dysfunction. Maybe I should just drive the car over a cliff and end it all. She'd have no say in this. The kids would never know about the Grand Miscalculation.

Then, something remarkable happens. Like a vision fast approaching, a coyote appears out of nowhere and stands stock still in the middle of the road, staring straight ahead at the oncoming vehicle, challenging it to do something. If it weren't for its glowing yellow eyes, the father would not have noticed it. But there it was, daring him to instinctively swerve the steering wheel to avoid running over it.

The station wagon skips over the highway's shoulder and overturns several times, so violently that each member of the family is launched into the desert dust, landing like broken and forsaken rag dolls, awkward and askew. The coyote, still unmoving, calmly looks over her shoulder at the blazing wreck perhaps unaware that it has spared the father the guilt of killing his family and himself, at least purposely. And, in turn, each of the others of their own Grand Miscalculation.

SO THIS IS OBLIVION

In a car cemetery, unlike a junkyard, nothing is salvageable. Not even the faintest, last shred of dignity. I had been looking for a car, a particular one. I didn't know the make, the model, the year, or the color. It was a rental. Raúl, my late husband, didn't think our old VW Beetle would do well on the open road. It was a matter of trust. But who's to say? The newer rental car might have blown a tire right on the curve, or maybe Raúl got distracted with all those cute little lights on the dashboard and didn't see the signs. The fact is that he drove headlong down into a ravine on his way to Cabo San Lucas thirty-nine years ago. He intended to hurl our wedding bands into the ocean, on the beach where we got married.

It was a silly fight that started it all. I'd say it was a series of silly fights, four years' worth. He said we had been married for too long. He said we had overpromised God when we vowed to stay together until death did us part.

"Who are we, but puny human beings, to make a lifelong commitment if we don't know what will happen a moment from now?" he said. "We can expect that we'll be a couple forever, but we can't make it a promise. Especially to Him." He was right.

Every night, I'd remove my wedding band and put it into a small silver bowl that I had on my nightstand for that very purpose, along with my gold earrings and my medal of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the one my godmother gave me for my First Holy Communion. It was a routine that gave me comfort. Floss, wash teeth, wash face, apply night cream to delay wrinkles around the eyes, undress, then lie down to read for half an hour before turning off the light. Routine wise, the night Raúl left was like any other. It even included an argument. I had bought a terra-cotta pot with a hydrangea to put on our front step, and as usual he thought the expense was unnecessary. But this time, he had had enough. He took my wedding ring from the bowl, used soapy water to get off his and put both in the jewelry box they had come in.

"I'm dumping these wedding bands into the ocean, in Cabo San Lucas," he said. "This marriage is going to oblivion."

I should have gone looking for the rings right after Raúl was killed. Now, much has been lost, tracks have faded. Rent-a-car places don't keep records that long. I wished I still had the accident report, but in a fit of rage, when I went home alone after the funeral, I burned it. I recently tried getting a copy at the police station, but was told that years ago a candidate for mayor had broken into headquarters in the middle of the night and had stolen all the file cabinets, typewriters, even the waste baskets with all the trash—common practice Mexican crooks use to destroy the evidence of their crimes.

One thing I was sure of: our rings were not in his shirt pocket. They were not in his suitcase. I know, I undressed him for the funeral. I searched all his bloody belongings. I stored them along with everything that the police recovered from the wreckage in a box under my bed for years. The rings must still in the glove compartment, or in the ashtray, in the trunk, under the floor mat on the driver's side, or somewhere in the car. There was possibly a vestige, living proof of our time together, two gold bands, simple, still polished, but now surely colored by time, our initials inscribed on the inside. I could not go on with my obsession. I had to find the car. I had to retrieve the rings, whatever it took, with what little information I had. I sat on my bed in the predawn darkness, held the empty silver bowl in my hands, eyes closed, squeezing my fingers hard against the cool metal, and I suddenly saw it, glistening like a projection inside my eyelids, within reach: a mile marker with a number sixty-seven painted in black on the white wooden post.

In the morning, I called the office and took a leave from work, a minor medical procedure, just a few days, I told them, and I went to the accident site where his car had where his car had hurtled down the steep ravine. It should still have been at the bottom of the ravine. That's usually the fate of totaled vehicles in Baja. They're abandoned right where they ended up. I'd seen them everywhere along the road during a previous trip to San Ignacio—some belly up, some on their side, others rusting away, disfigured metal stoically decomposing publicly right before every traveler's eyes. Why go through the expense of sending a tow truck hundreds of miles into the desert just to get a piece of junk that's worth nothing?

I parked on the shoulder of the road and carefully clamored down slowly, holding on to the chaparral and shrubs, hoping to find the jewelry box, perhaps half—buried in the shade of a yucca tree. I combed the steep slope, zigzagging my way toward the bottom. I picked up a broken piece of red plastic, part of a taillight. Something shimmered further down—a shattered piece of glass that once was the windshield. Chrome adornments were randomly scattered here and there, twisting like reptiles under the Baja desert sun. I finally arrived at the spot where the car had landed. Screws, bolts and debris everywhere; oil still staining the soil, so densely that no plant dared to grow anywhere near it in that dark domain; badly crumpled pieces of sheet metal, perhaps part of a fender. But no car. I made my way up with a great deal of difficulty. Even my new hiking boots were no match for the task, only aggravating the pain from the chronic arthritis in my left knee, Then, just to be sure, I double-checked the milepost: "Sixty-Seven."

"The federal government picked them up last year," they told me in Cataviña. "Those abandoned cars were bad news. They were scaring off the American tourists." Never mind the cartel wars, I thought. And since I insisted, I was sent to the vehicle cemetery not far from town.

Even with no sign to indicate where the cemetery was, the remains of hundreds of cars piled up together were easy to find; some on top of each other, most just thrown haphazardly, like corpses in a common grave, battered, decrepit, discarded on a desolate

field by the side of the highway. I parked on the shoulder and got out to take in this unearthly, glinting metallic landscape. It looked for all the world like some unlit pyre, cords of stacked firewood, awaiting the Rapture.

When people travel at eighty miles an hour on smooth, black asphalt, they're not thinking, *I could get killed in an instant.* Another vehicle could hit them from the side, or the front, or they could get rear-ended, all in a split second. A coyote could be crossing the road, and by trying to avoid running her over, the driver could veer out of the lane and roll over and over into fields, if he's lucky, or a precipice if he's not. Sometimes people might not see the detour signs and drive off a broken bridge to certain death. Someone driving in the opposite direction might get distracted by their cell phone and cross over into the other lane, hitting the oncoming car head-on. But in spite of any of these and myriad other potential accidents, people lounge idly in the comfort of their driver's seat and, if they're alone, allow their minds to wander into worlds of trivia. *Did I lock the backyard door? How much is Jake's tuition going to be next year? Someone should really build factories, fisheries, and ecological parks in this forsaken land. I forgot my meds. How am I going to tell Martha I'm seeing someone else? I need to ask for a flex day at work to fix the attic leak.* People might even occupy themselves with counting saguaros or counting the weeks until Christmas, or counting backward just to pass the time. How many of these wrecks were driven by people who died alone? How long did it take for anyone to discover them? Did they die instantly, or did they bleed out before someone could rescue them? In the few seconds the accident took place, did they become aware of what was happening, of the fact that they were probably living the last moments of their lives?

What about when more than one person was traveling in the car? Couples. Families. Friends. Coworkers. One killing the others unintentionally. Where were they going? A wedding in Valle de Guadalupe? A relaxing weekend in Cabo? A drug deal in Ensenada? A business meeting in La Paz? Were they moving to another town, with hopes of a better future? Did the driver feel a flash of guilt during the last millisecond of his life for taking the passengers with him to the place where the dead go?

What was on Raúl's mind in his last few breathing moments? He'd sometimes say, "It's all good until it isn't." I always took this as his ultimate warning. He would leave me some day. He knew it. Perhaps as he drove, he was recounting all the mistakes I'd made during our marriage; or he was loathing my annoying need for routine, for keeping things stable, always the same, day in and day out. Or maybe he was thinking about something more mundane, like realizing that he hadn't brought a swimsuit and would have to get his pants wet in the waves to be able to throw the rings as far into the ocean as he could. But his trip, whether it was planned for months or was just decided that night, ended sixty-seven miles from the border into Baja. Now our rings were somewhere in this cemetery. All I had to do was find them.

I checked into a roadside motel with a partial view of the desert. All night I heard the hum of cars passing by. Sometimes the rumble of a big rig downshifting rattled the windows and made me think of an earthquake. My night was sleepless. The rings waited.

After enjoying the complimentary breakfast of yogurt, prepacked muffins, and coffee with half-and-half in paper dinnerware and plastic cutlery, I packed a toolbox, my hat, and sunscreen, and drove to the cemetery.

I left the motel early in the morning every day and came back at dusk. I was methodical; for me, it was the only way. I started at the southwest corner of the lot and worked my way to the northeast. In total, the vehicles—sedans, convertibles, pickups, minivans, campers and motorcycles—were all sprawled out over about five acres. I'd wiggle myself in through broken rear windows, or holes where a door had once been. I pried open trunks long sealed. I am an archaeologist of rust. I looked for the jewelry box in the interior of every car. I'd check the glove compartment first. Sometimes the entire dashboard was gone. But other times I found things people had left in them and forgotten they even existed, like cafeteria receipts, love notes, grocery lists, coins, a deck of cards, chewed-off pencils, a broken pair of sunglasses. Even an empty revolver. No gloves, though. Car makers should really update the names of things according to their actual use. Glove compartments could be called junk compartments, for instance.

I also looked under the floor mats. Most cars didn't have floor mats. Many didn't even have a floor at all. With the chassis gone, the greedy weeds grew up through the floorboards twisting and turning around the steering wheel like subterranean serpents seeking the sun. Sometimes the weeds wrapped themselves around the emergency brake–how useless it must have felt during-that ultimate emergency, when it failed at its one and only task. I imagined the driver in his final moments, sweating, praying, his car fishtailing off the road at sixty miles an hour, and him, the poor soul, desperately pulling the emergency brake off its hinge and coming up empty. Another car part destined to get a name change: parking brake sounded just about right.

On the fourth day of the search, I climbed out of a heap of rust that once had been a metallic bronze Nash Rambler and cut a three-inch gash along my thigh with the edge of some scrap. It ripped my jeans and dug into my skin. The pharmacist in town gave me a tetanus shot and a free word of advice. "That's no place for a woman. I suggest you get your parts at an authorized dealership." I was not about to explain to him that I was not looking for car parts, and even if I were, I would not find them.

Trunks were the hardest to search. I figured that if a car was left for dead by the side of the road, the first place where any scavenger would look would be inside the trunk. Who knows? There may be suitcases, spare tires, food, even sporting equipment. But many were so smashed that they were impossible to open unless you had the right tools. So, I went to town and bought a chainsaw, a crowbar, and some other things I thought I might need, like a powerful flashlight, as my days were beginning to extend past sundown. One aqua El Camino was so rusted that when I pressed the chainsaw against its door, little flakes of brownish metal flew all over the place, some of them clinging to my damp face, so I went back for a pair of plastic high-impact safety goggles.

Most cars had already been stripped of every usable part, but sometimes I'd find perhaps a bent wiper, a driver's-side mirror, broken, of course, deck emblems, and a few cars still had license plates. But nothing of value. Some automobiles were so destroyed that it was hard to tell what was the interior and what was the exterior. One had suffered severe trauma to its body. The make was unrecognizable. Others were easy. A violet Plymouth showed terminal scars on its frame, but its chromed trim work gave it away. A vermilion Mustang Cobra's deteriorating soul longed for its once powerful V8 under the hood. A moss-green two-door sedan, maybe a Datsun, was now just a shell waiting for someone's gratitude for having donated all its organs. A bamboo yellow Opel, rigor mortis having set in long ago, was notably complete on the exterior, with its distinct round badge crossed by lightning still in place. Of course, the seats, the engine, the steering wheel, and everything else was gone. I particularly looked for the rings in that car. I guess the deep maroon brown stain on the floor carpet attracted me. Was it blood? I wondered if physical evidence of my husband's suffering at the time of his death might have proved perversely and surprisingly rewarding. I recognized I still harbored a certain resentment against him for having made the unilateral decision to dissolve our marriage. But it couldn't be blood, as much as I wanted it to be. I wondered if blood could survive for so many years in that miserably hot and dry desert weather.

If I had started at the northeast corner of the cemetery, I'd have finished my search days earlier and I wouldn't have had to call the HR manager at work to lie a little about a small complication from my procedure. I explained that the doctor wanted me to take a few extra days of much-needed bed rest.

Nearly three weeks into the search, when I had about eight cars to go before I reached the end of the lot, I found the jewelry box with the rings in it, side by side, gleaming, with our initials still perfectly legible. I had pried open the driver's door of a 1974 Blue Glow two-door hardtop Ford Galaxie 500 and the little black box fell out into the weeds. It must have gotten stuck in the door's side pocket as the car overturned, and all my pulling and jerking with the crowbar probably freed it. With the box in my hands, I searched the car, every cubic inch of what was left of it. A dark brown stain still covered part of the driver's seat. Perhaps this was it: the proof of Raúl's suffering, a slow death.

I climbed on the roof of a crumpled pick-up truck resting alongside to get a good look at the entire expanse of this graveyard, the piles of scrap, the shattered glass, this topography of loss that I now knew too well. My plan had been to find the rings, take them to Cabo San Lucas, and throw them into the ocean. Forever. But that was not oblivion. Oblivion was here, and I was willing to fulfill Raúl's last wish. So, I returned the rings to the Galaxie.

CARCASS

MARÍA AMPARO ESCANDÓN

WRITER.