

# The White Boats

By Mark Marinovich

EXCERPT

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All that remained of Cesar's deep sea fishing magazines after he cut out all the pictures were words he could not read. The excised pictures, of blue marlin leaping, twisting and fighting hooks and lines of unseen anglers, ringed the walls of his small gray cinderblock room. The ocean horizon in each image was carefully aligned with the next, creating a continuous panorama. The boy yearned to catch a blue marlin of his own. He would release his trophy catch to fight another day, but before he released the fish he would capture it again with a photo, just as they did on the white boats, and he would add his blue marlin to the wall. Soon, he thought.

Cesar lay on his bed—a narrow plywood board spanning two stacks of cinderblocks and padded with foam rubber—and thumbed through a deep-scissored magazine. Declining daylight backlit a faded floral curtain in his bedroom's small window. An overhanging light bulb provided the only other light.

In the next room his mother, Rosa, and an unfamiliar male voice were locked in a heated quarrel that buzzed through the boy's delaminated hollow-core door.

Cesar tossed the magazine on the floor, unplugged the bare bulb, and buried his head under a sarape that served as sheet, blanket and pillow. The late Baja evening was hot and would still be hot for several hours. Cesar, wearing only jeans, flung the sarape aside and cupped his hands over his ears.

A shadowy form in a high corner of the room twitched and drew the boy's attention. Cesar made out the contours of a scorpion that had found an unsealed fold in the corrugated metal roof. The arthropod's claws stretched wide and a segmented tail extended straight back from its flat body, terminating in a thin, curved stinger. Night was descending and the scorpion was on the hunt. Cesar knew that this climbing scorpion, a bark scorpion, was especially poisonous. He also knew that it did not see well.

Voices in the next room crescendoed and now their words were clear. "How did you find my house?" Rosa asked.

Cesar's mother entertained a diverse array of suitors—shy men, bold men, gruff men, men of assorted ages, shapes and capacities. She was of medium build and pretty, with high cheekbones, long black hair, and quick dark eyes. She did not want for enthusiastic admirers, but they seldom visited more than once before fleeing her volcanic temper, which erupted as soon as they fell short of her uncertain expectations.

The man said, "How I found this place, you do not need to know." He is different, Cesar thought. He will not be moved.

"My son is nine and he is more of a man than you."

"I need a woman, not a child. Tonight you are going to be woman."

“You’re drunk. Get out of my house.”

The bark scorpion inched along the ceiling. Its hard exoskeletal legs scratched the rough cinderblock. Cesar whisked straight black hair away from his dark eyes and watched the scorpion move over his bed.

The boy formulated a plan: He would furl his discarded magazine into a club and vanquish the scorpion with a single blow. He knew he must not miss. The scorpion would pose an even greater threat if fell to the floor and hid.

“Get out of my house,” Rosa said.

“Put that down.”

Cesar heard furniture tumble and glass shatter. The bark scorpion froze and its stinger arched.

“Let me go,” Rosa said.

“You asked for it.” A slap sounded and Rosa shrieked.

The scorpion released from the wall and fell toward Cesar. He rolled off the bed and the scorpion landed behind him with a smack.

Cesar grabbed the magazine and twisted it into a tight baton, and swung the baton at a glancing angle that swept the scorpion onto the cement floor unharmed.

“Cesar, get Abuelito!” Rosa shouted.

The bark scorpion scurried toward the protective cover of the bed. Again the boy swung his paper club down. He reared back to strike another blow, but saw no scorpion.

Glued by its bodily fluids to Cesar’s baton, the injured scorpion detached and dropped to the boy’s bare shoulder and tumbled down his back, stinging wildly at the air. Cesar whirled around and saw the scorpion writhing on the floor. He smashed it again and again, and kneeled, panting, over the crumpled mass.

Rosa screamed. “Abuelito!” Her voice trailed away as she fled the house.

Cesar’s bedroom door burst open and the boy sprang to his feet. The man standing in the doorway, Ramiro Ramos, was not tall, but his upper body was thick and his legs thin like a Brahma bull. Ginger whiskers and close-cropped hair framed his meaty, pale face, the rarest of complexions in the Baja. Ramos did his work at night.

“You must be the man of the house,” Ramos said. He perspired and breathed fast, and his bloodshot eyes squinted through heavy lids.

Ramos saw Cesar’s paper club and he raised his hands. “Look, I’m unarmed.”

Cesar threw his magazine on the floor. “Now we’re even.”

Ramos grinned and advanced. “You and me are gonna teach your mama a lesson.”

Cesar’s grandfather, his *abuelito*, entered the front room clutching a long, thin fillet knife. “That’s far enough,” he said.

Ramos turned and regarded Abuelito through Cesar’s open bedroom door. Abuelito wore a sparse silver beard and a tattered T-shirt hung on his thin frame. Abuelito’s skin was earthen brown and his chin came to a point.

“Wait there, old man. I’ll take care of you in a minute.” Ramos looked at Cesar. “First you, kid.”

Abuelito entered Cesar’s bedroom. In a calm, steady voice, he said, “You must make a choice. I have made mine.” He waved Ramos toward the front door with the fillet knife.

Ramos smiled. “You are loco, old man. Your whole family is loco.”

Abuelito locked eyes with Ramos. “Leave now.” Ramos grinned and sidled around the knife. He fainted toward Abuelito and the tip of the knife rose to Ramos’ chest.

Ramos tensed and lost his grin. He backed into the front room, never taking his eyes off Abuelito.

“This isn’t done,” he said. Ramos backed out the open front door and vanished into the night.

Abuelito walked to the front door and watched for a moment, then returned to Cesar’s bedroom.

“Are you okay?”

The boy’s hands trembled and his face was glossed with sweat. “Fine.”

Rosa raced into Cesar’s room. She knelt before her son and clutched his shoulders. “Did he hurt you?”

Cesar shook free of her grasp and looked away. “Why do you bring a man like that into our home?”

“I didn’t bring him here. I don’t know how he found this place.”

“Well, he did, thanks to you.”

“I will kill him if he touches you.”

“Nobody’s going to kill anyone,” Abuelito said. “Let’s all get some sleep. Or try.”

Abuelito walked into the front room and righted a toppled chair. Without turning around, he said, “A recently-dead scorpion can be as dangerous as a living one. Take it away before you step on it. And lock the door.” Abuelito left the house.

Cesar looked down. The lifeless bark scorpion lay between his and Rosa’s bare feet. Abuelito sees everything, the boy thought.

In predawn darkness, Abuelito touched his grandson's bare shoulder. Cesar rolled out of bed and slid his feet into his sandals. He tugged on a T-shirt and followed his grandfather into the front room.

A small lamp lit the modest space. A single square window, the same size as Cesar's bedroom window, admitted little light at any hour.

The room was outfitted with a cabinet, small counter and sink, two-burner electric hotplate, bookcase with no books, and square table surrounded by four mismatching chairs. Yellowed clear plastic overlaid a pear-and-plum-motif tablecloth. In the center of the table a bouquet of pink plastic roses in a chipped faux crystal glass vase stood between glass Eifel Tower salt and pepper shakers. A mournful ballad of lost love droned from a portable radio on top of a small white refrigerator.

Rosa stood at the counter and placed two burritos in a brown paper sack. She wore a powder-blue maid's uniform and her hair was coiled in a bun.

Rosa handed the sack to Cesar. "Save the bag," she said. "I'll use it again."

A horn tooted outside. Rosa stuffed a third burrito in another sack and carried it out the open front door.

Cesar and Abuelito trailed Rosa into the faint early morning light. They watched her enter the backseat door of a dilapidated station wagon and join three women who wore the same powder-blue uniforms. Rosa rolled down the window and waved as the station wagon pulled away.

Abuelito's squeaky VW bus ground in and out of first and second gears as it trundled along a winding dirt road between slate gray hills. The bus's dim headlights lit the rutted road five feet ahead. Cesar sat next to Abuelito in the front seat and clung to a ceiling handle as the timeworn vehicle lurched and pitched. The bus arrived at the paved two-lane coast road and turned north, and Cesar released his grip.

"Would you have used the knife?" Cesar asked.

"If someone intended to harm you or your mama, I would use it without hesitation. It would be my duty."

Cesar had heard Abuelito discuss duty before. The old man only invoked the word in matters of greatest importance. Two years earlier a powerful hurricane grazed the coast and threatened to tear away their house's tarp-and-metal roof, which terrified and delighted the boy beyond measure. Mud and rock washed down from the hills above the village and backed up against homes and cars, and knocked down just about everything else in its path before it slopped over the road and spilled into the sea. Abuelito defended the roof for two days and two nights in howling wind and hammering rain. Lives were

lost during the tempest, but the old man never shrank from its fierce assault. Abuelito explained to Cesar that it was his duty.

“He is bigger and stronger than you.”

“I would also have an advantage. When a man commits fully to a thing he cannot be stopped.”

“Why would mama take up with someone like him?”

“The lonely heart is complicated.”

“She has us.”

“Your mama works at the hotel six days a week. She is tired. She is lonely. She takes her chances.”

“Is it worth it?”

“Sometimes, no.”

A southbound school bus whooshed by and rocked the VW bus. Cesar thought about the students who waited for the bus each morning by the side of the coast road. The girls were dressed in white blouses, plaid skirts and shiny black shoes; the boys wore white shirts, gray slacks and scuffed shoes. Cesar could not understand why they would choose to spend their days in school and he prayed that they did not despair their fates. He was happy with his sandals, T-shirts and patched jeans, and whiling his days on the ocean with his grandfather. He looked forward to a life on the sea—especially the day when he would catch his blue marlin.

The VW bus pulled into a long, narrow parking lot that extended between a small harbor and row of ramshackle restaurants. Lights were already on inside the buildings as staff prepared for the morning rush. Low sand dunes marked the western boundary of the harbor, which opened to the sea between parallel rock jetties.

Sport fishing boats with white fiberglass hulls and blue canvas canopies were tied up to the docks closest to the harbor mouth. Cesar referred to them as *white boats* ever since his first visit to the harbor. The boy revered the white boats and their preeminent position in the harbor’s nautical hierarchy, and he always thrilled at their sight. The white boats embodied everything Cesar wanted and everything he did not have. He planned to crew on a white boat when he was older, as had his grandfather when he was young.

Abuelito parked the VW bus at the end of the parking lot, where the smallest craft tethered to a dilapidated wooden dock, and turned off the headlights. He stepped out of the bus and slid the side cargo door open. Inside, four 5-gallon plastic buckets, assorted fishing tackle, rope, rags and a long-handled fish net lay a heap.

Abuelito gathered the buckets and two light fishing rods, and set them on the ground. He placed fishing tackle and the brown paper bag that held the burritos in one bucket. Only an occasional squawk from a restless seagull broke the early-morning calm.

“Don’t forget—”

“The net,” Cesar said. The boy shook the fish net free from the heap inside the bus. Abuelito shut the door and they tromped down the narrow springy dock. A cluster of small craft, none recent, wedged together on both sides.

Abuelito stopped in front of a 12-foot wooden skiff, red with blue trim, and slippery with dew. Plastic fenders hung off the sides of larger boats in the harbor, but not the skiff, which had achieved a hardened immunity to further damage after decades of rugged service.

The old man set the buckets and fishing rods on the dock, then pulled a rope tie to bring the skiff close. Cesar boarded first, sidestepping two splintery wooden oars that lay on the floor. He laid the fish net down and sopped dew off the benches with a rag, and sat on the middle bench.

Abuelito handed the rods and buckets to the boy, untied the skiff, and stepped into the boat. He sat on the rear bench and swirled a red gas can to measure its contents, then tilted the propeller of a tarnished Evinrude outboard motor down into the water. He squeezed the Evinrude's primer bulb and yanked the pull cord, and the motor sputtered to life.

Abuelito grasped the tiller and backed the skiff out of its place in the line of boats, then guided it through the harbor past the white boats and entered the open sea.

The ocean was placid and a hue deeper than the indigo sky. The skiff motored north and Cesar gazed up at the stars, finding familiar arrangements that expressed forms and figures known only to him.

With no prompting from his grandfather the boy picked up a fishing rod and unhooked a snap swivel that secured the end of the line to a guide. He unrolled a rigging from a plastic spool—four feathered jigs on a three-foot leader—and connected it to the line.

Cesar and Abuelito's preparations followed a similar routine; only the baitfish that they sought changed. Sometimes they fished for green jack, distinguished by dull white underbellies and light green vertical bars. When sardines were running, Abuelito's silvery jigs might bring in several at a time. Flying fish were elusive, but always valued bait stock. In recent weeks caballitos, with large eyes and forked tails, had been hitting the feathered jigs hard. All of the baitfish were esteemed by captains of the white boats for their appeal to big game fish—sailfish, tuna, dorado, yellowtail, white seabass, roosterfish, and especially marlin.

Abuelito knew how to catch the baitfish and he knew how to sell them. Today Cesar and his grandfather would travel one mile out of the harbor and five miles up the coast, fill their buckets with caballitos, and motor back in time to intercept white boats laden with American tourists as they left the harbor. The captains relied on Abuelito for fresh, live baitfish and he always delivered. Years earlier he learned that the captains would find other sources for live bait if he missed even a single day and he never disappointed them again.

The white boats travelled far offshore to chase the most prized of the billfish—blue, white and black marlin. Cesar was proud that a caballito that his grandfather reeled in might entice a trophy marlin. One day he would tempt a blue marlin with his own baitfish.

Abuelito scanned the glassy water and cut the engine. The boat's momentum carried it forward a short distance before it surrendered to the ocean's undulate grasp. The hushed break of small early morning waves on the shore carried across the silky surface to the skiff.

Cesar handed the fishing rod to Abuelito and filled the buckets with seawater. Abuelito cast his line and the rig broke the glassy surface with a delicate plop. He raised and dipped his rod to release line from the open-face reel as the feathered jigs sank.

When the rig reached depth, Abuelito cranked the reel and fluttered his fishing rod to make the jigs dance. Cesar watched the rod against the dark sky. The tip trembled and Abuelito jerked the rod back. The line went taut and the rod bowed. Abuelito brought a



caballito close to the skiff and Cesar wet his hands in the ocean. In the low light the ten-inch fish emitted a ghostly shimmer.

Abuelito raised the wriggling caballito out of the water and swung it toward Cesar. The boy closed his hands around the fish and lowered it into a bucket. He removed the hook and covered the bucket with a wet rag to prevent the vigorous fish from escaping. Abuelito cast again and brought in another caballito moments later.

“The ocean is good to us today,” he said. “Of course, the ocean is always good.”

Every time Abuelito cast his line a caballito struck, and he reeled in fish after fish. Cesar removed the hooks and deposited the caballitos in the buckets as fast as they came over the side of the boat. Before the sun rose over the hills to the east, all four buckets were full with frisky baitfish.

“Let’s eat,” Abuelito said.

Cesar and his grandfather ate their burritos and the only sounds they heard were the gurgle of water under the skiff and break of far-off waves. Onshore, vehicles’ headlights flashed along the coast road. Above the road, lights inside resort hotels that climbed the hills began to flicker on. Many of the hotels were designed in a style indigenous to the region, with stucco arches and adobe roof tiles. Abuelito viewed the buildings as another sort of bait, aimed at luring affluent tourists.

“You always know where to find the baitfish,” Cesar said. “And you always know what they’re biting.”

“Not always.”

“Look—four full buckets. Every day, four full buckets.”

“It takes many years to know the fish. And then you learn that you will never truly know them.”

“Tell me about the caballitos.”

“I have told you about caballitos.”

“One more time, in case I missed something.”

Abuelito was pleased that his grandson was eager to learn the ways of the fish and he was glad to share his knowledge. “Caballitos come up from deep water after the sun sets and they use their big round eyes to find food. They like warm water; you will not find them much further north. If the water is quiet and the skies are clear, caballitos will chase the feathered jigs with a passion, as they did today. Marlin may be tempted by many baitfish, but they cannot resist a caballito.”

Cesar committed Abuelito’s words to memory, as he did whenever his grandfather shared bits of wisdom that might help him catch a blue marlin.

The sun had cleared the hills by the time Cesar and Abuelito motored back down the coast. A gentle breeze brushed glimmering ripples across the awakening sea. Curtains opened in the hotel rooms and vehicles drove the coast road with headlights off. Abuelito wore a weathered white cap, the bill tipped toward the sun, and Cesar tied a rag around the top of his head for protection.

Along the way, Cesar dipped the fishing net in the water and scooped up plastic bottles and bags, foam sandals, Styrofoam containers, and all manner of plastic debris, and dumped it on the floor of the boat. “On your left, Cesar,” Abuelito said, guiding the skiff toward a new target. “To your right.” Some of the debris was labeled with exotic markings that absorbed the boy’s imagination.

The previous week, Cesar spotted a seagull standing on a floating mass, tearing away bits of food with its sharp yellow beak. Abuelito steered a course for the mass and stood as the skiff drew near. He eyed the mass and gunned the Evinrude, veering away and tumbling his startled grandson to the floor of the boat. The seagull took flight and abandoned its meal, but circled back to its perch after the skiff pulled away. "It is not your Abuelito's ocean," the old man said, and he did not speak of the matter again.

Abuelito guided the skiff between the jetties and into the harbor. Cesar wound the rig with the feathered jigs around the plastic spool. Caballitos splashed in the buckets.

Inboard motors rumbled as white boats pulled away from the docks and started toward the harbor mouth. Abuelito jockeyed the skiff close to the procession and cut the engine.

A captain puffed a cigar on the fly bridge of a passing white boat. "Should of got here earlier, amigo," he called. "Already got our bait."

Abuelito smiled and waved. "Good luck."

Another white boat passed, then another. Abuelito smiled and waved at each passing boat.

The next white boat slowed. "What do you have for us?" the captain asked. He wore a crisp white cap with a nautical insignia.

Abuelito raised a squirming fish from a bucket. "Caballitos."

"Scad, huh?"

"You catch big marlin with these."

The captain conferred with a crewman. "How much for a bucket?" the crewman asked.

"Thirty-five dollars," Abuelito said. "Many fish."

"Twenty-five sounds better."

"Thirty-five," Cesar said. Abuelito glanced at Cesar and frowned.

"Twenty-five," the captain said. "Our best offer."

"Good, good," Abuelito said. "Twenty-five."

The crewman extended a long pole to Abuelito. He grabbed the pole and pulled the skiff alongside the white boat. Cesar hoisted a bucket. The crewman took the handle and brought the bucket aboard, and poured the caballitos into a live bait well. He tossed the empty bucket back to Cesar and paid Abuelito.

After they sold their baitfish, Cesar and Abuelito would fill their empty buckets with the plastic debris that they collected on their return trip to the harbor and deposit the trash in 55-gallon steel drums at the end of the parking lot. Sometimes they climbed over the sand dunes and gathered more plastic debris on the beach, of which there was an unending supply, and contributed it to the drums. The trash was hauled away by municipal workers at irregular intervals and the drums often spilled over. Abuelito once brought several empty drums that he found in a field to the harbor to address the surplus, but they soon overflowed, too.

A couple years earlier, two university students—a petite girl with long, straight hair and attentive eyes, and a tall, gangly boy with curly hair and a warm smile—visited the harbor. The students arrayed a folding table with literature that warned of the dangers of plastic pollution. They told Cesar and Abuelito about a giant island of plastic in the

middle of the ocean, and the threat that it posed to fish and wildlife, and even people. Cesar and Abuelito admired the students' passion for protecting the ocean they so loved, and they accepted every piece of literature the students offered, even though they could not read a word of it. They pledged to do their best to curb further damage to a natural resource that had provided for their family for generations.

For a time, Cesar thought he would like to attend the university and tell fishermen about the great plastic island, but he knew his future was on the white boats. Cesar would be able to catch marlin and protect the ocean without burdening himself with the unnecessary distraction of school.

In the parking lot, Abuelito closed the VW bus's cargo door and watched a creaky wooden boat dock near the skiff. The words "El Bucanero" were painted in crude orange script on the boat's peeling green hull. The small wheelhouse was a mottled yellow with white trim.

Abuelito climbed into the front seat of the bus next to Cesar and said, "We sold many fish, but we did not account for our dinner. Maybe Miguel brought in some tuna." He handed several bills to his grandson.

"Me?"

Abuelito rested his arms on the steering wheel and gazed out the front window. "If you can catch a fish, you can eat. But sometimes you must buy a fish to eat."

Cesar stared at the bills in his hand, more money than he had ever held in his life.

"Bargain well," Abuelito said. "Miguel is a shark."

Miguel and his son Guillermo secured the El Bucanero to the dock as Cesar approached. Their jeans were stiff with dry fish blood and guts, and an acrid stench of guano clung to the boat.

Miguel's face was soft and round, unlike any shark the boy had ever seen. Guillermo, a smaller, pudgier version of his father, smirked when he saw Cesar.

Miguel said, "They were biting today, Cesar. Did you catch many fish?"

Sensing an opening, Guillermo asked, "Or did you catch more buckets of garbage?"

"We filled our buckets with caballitos and sold them all," Cesar said.

"We had a good day, too." Miguel opened a waist-high metal cooler on the rear deck and pulled out a blunt-headed dorado that stretched from his shoulder to his feet. Squawking seagulls converged from all directions and hovered over the boat like scraps of white paper in a whirlwind.

"That's a big dorado," Cesar said. "One of the biggest I have seen."

"Almost as big as you, but stronger," Miguel said. He laid the Dorado back in the cooler and slammed the lid closed, silencing the birds. "The biggest dorado are as smart as they are strong. That is how they got so big, no?"

"One of these times you should show us a fish you caught," Guillermo said. "Just so we'll know you wasn't lying."

"Do you have any tuna to sell?" Cesar asked Miguel.

"Some excellent albacore. Come look."

Cesar stepped onto the rear deck and Miguel cracked the cooler. Cesar peered inside and saw a dozen albacore tuna, each fish not less than ten pounds, lying beside the dorado on a half-melted bed of ice.

"Each one a meal," Miguel said.

The seagulls resumed circling and squawking.

“How much for one?”

“Ten. Fifteen for two.”

One side of Guillermo’s mouth curled in a grin. The other side frowned. “Can you afford it?”

“Hush, Gui. I’m conducting business.”

Cesar turned and saw Abuelito sitting motionless in the VW bus, staring straight ahead.

“I’m sure they are fair prices,” Cesar said.

“Fair prices? They are the best prices you will find.”

“We can only spend five dollars.”

“I must feed my family too, Cesar. Seven.”

Cesar’s eyes sharpened. “Six.”

“Six?” Guillermo protested.

“And I choose the fish. My best offer.”

Miguel gazed into Cesar’s eyes and measured his resolve, then laughed and shook the boy’s hand. “Just like your grandfather. When you make up your mind there is no changing it. This time, six. But just this time. Take the fattest, juiciest albacore you can find.”

Guillermo glared at his father. “Papa!”

“Do something useful,” Miguel said. Guillermo threw a menacing look at Cesar and ducked into the cabin.

Cesar handed Miguel six dollars and selected a tuna, and Miguel wrapped it in newspaper.

Cesar walked down the dock and glanced back at the El Bucanero. Guillermo waved his fist and mouthed some unbearable oath through the cracked cabin door window.

Cesar climbed into the front seat of the VW bus. He unwrapped the newspaper and displayed the tuna for his grandfather, who continued to stare out the front window. “Six dollars,” the boy said, exalting in his triumphant negotiation. Abuelito started the bus and Cesar rewrapped the fish. The engine idled and the bus remained stationary.

Cesar’s victorious moment was fading fast. “Are we going?”

“Trash.”

Cesar set the fish down and stepped out the door. He dashed to the front of the bus where the four trash-filled buckets rested. He toted them to the 55-gallon drums and dumped their contents, and raced back to the bus, the empty buckets swinging at his sides. He flung the buckets into the back of the bus rejoined his grandfather.

Abuelito looked at his grandson and smiled. “You did well, Cesar.” The boy glowed with pride as the bus pulled away.

A long train of cars, trucks and service vehicles formed behind the VW bus as it poked south on the coast road. The vehicles sped around the VW when there was an opening in the northbound lane and honked, but the bus did not move any faster.

Abuelito swung the bus across the road and drove beneath a beige stucco arch onto an immaculate blacktop driveway, lined with evenly-spaced cacti and uplights, that curved up a hillside. Adjacent to the arch, a stucco sign with raised lettering read “Posada De Tortugas.” A bas relief of a lime green sea turtle angled toward the letters.

“Where are we going?” Cesar asked.

“A place I remember well.”

At the top of the driveway the bus pulled into the drive-through entrance of the hotel and stopped. Stucco arches similar to the one by the coast road rimmed the overhang and bore the same raised lettering and bas relief sea turtles.

A bronze-skinned valet wearing khaki shorts and a white polo shirt with an embroidered Posada De Tortugas logo appeared at Abuelito’s open window. “The service entrance is around back,” he said.

“I would like to show my grandson the property. We won’t stay long.”

“Do you have business with the hotel?”

“I stayed here once.”

“There are parking spaces around the side.” The valet leaned close and spoke in a low voice. “Security might hassle you.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

Abuelito drove the bus around the corner of the hotel and parked. He and Cesar walked to a low stone wall high above the coast road. A warm breeze carried the sweet fragrance of dry grasses up the hillside. A yellow convertible Mustang curled down the black driveway and turned south on the coast road. Beyond, a line of brown pelicans flew low along the shore.

“You stayed here?” Cesar asked.

“I was not much older than you when my papa went to California. He found work in the lettuce fields and sent us money. It was a great help for we had no other means. His letters became fewer and eventually the money stopped. In his last letter he said the lettuce ran out and he would need to find a new crop. It was hard for my mother, but she kept faith. She could not find work—there were no hotels here then—and it was a losing battle. For a time, we survived on the fish that I caught, but it was not enough. One day I came home and my mother and sister were gone. She told a neighbor that she would send for me as soon she could. I was on my own. I had to take care of myself.”

“What did you do?”

“I resolved to find my father and reunite my family. I packed a small bag and started walking north. Some older boys confronted me and took my sandals. They were all I had but the boys had to steal something. They left me bleeding on the ground—just down there—and said they would finish the job if they saw me again.” Abuelito hooked a finger in his mouth and pulled back his right cheek, revealing a gap in his upper teeth. “My encounter with those boys has made for much unrequited work by those unfortunate teeth on the other side.”

Cesar stared at the coast road and imagined his grandfather as a boy lying by the side of the road, bleeding and alone. He swished his tongue over his teeth.

“I took refuge here, on this very spot. Nature owned this place then.”

Cesar glanced around the grounds and imagined the hill before the hotel came.

“I sat here and watched the sea for several days. The warm breeze, the aromas, the light—they are still familiar. I had nothing to eat and I became weak. Then the sea spoke to me, as clearly as I am speaking you now. The sea told me that I should not worry, that she would provide. I was afraid, and yet I was never more certain that things would be alright. Ever since, the sea has provided, just as she promised those many years ago. A good thing, too. For a while, the coyotes sang to me. Then they stopped singing and announced their intention to eat me. That was when I left this place and returned home.”

“Did you see your mama and papa again?”

A beefy security guard wearing a black uniform and black wraparound sunglasses approached at a brisk pace. He tilted his head toward his shoulder and spoke into a tiny device.

“You have business with the hotel?” the security guard asked.

“No,” Abuelito said.

“Guests?”

“No.”

“Then you got to go. This is private property.”

The security guard talked into his shoulder as Cesar and Abuelito drove away.

The VW bus turned off the coast road and lurched along a one-lane dirt road that snaked through brown hills blotched with low brush and cacti. The bus cleared the hills and pattered over a rise, and descended into the remains of a tiny fishing village, sustained now by a dribble of water and electricity that an ambitious resort developer brought through the hills before he abandoned all further efforts to tame the remote place. The village stretched along a sloping strip of land between the hills and sea that fell off at a low crumbling cliff by the water’s edge.

A roadrunner dashed in front of the VW bus as it passed a tumbledown adobe hut that the villagers scrupulously avoided. Twisted, riven driftwood rafters and beams jutted from the rubble at odd angles, goading the villagers’ unease that the hut was in the malign grip of some sinister invisible force.

The bus pattered by several well-spaced cinderblock houses topped with plywood and corrugated metal roofs. Further along, two naked toddlers sat on a weather-beaten sofa spooning rice out of bowls in front of a decaying RV that rested on blocks. Behind the RV, laundry swayed on ropes strung between driftwood posts at opposite ends of an infilled yard braced by stacked bald tires. Across the road, six ribbed fingers of a cardón

cactus reached skyward. Cesar secretly watched the cardón whenever the bus passed, but he never caught the fingers moving.

Few objects started life new in the village, but they usually lived longer. Several abandoned structures—some half-built, some crumbling, all uninhabitable—provided replacement parts for the other dwellings. Half of the homes had cisterns of a sort, mostly repurposed plastic and steel barrels that caught winter rainwater that ran off the roofs. On the hillside, a corroding steel water tank that Abuelito rigged up decades earlier still provided for some of his family's needs.

The village offered no stores, businesses, services, schools, cell towers, doctors, or help when needed—only isolation and privation. The residents depended on the abject bleakness of the place to discourage further encroachments by those who might disrupt their tenuous, but treasured solitude.

At the south end of the village the VW bus circled a turnaround on a flat bluff that rose twenty feet above a potbellied cove. A shallow, soft-yellow beach curved along the back of the cove and could be accessed by a steep path that angled down a lumpy wall of dirt, stone and brush. At the bottom of the wall, piles of small boulders formed a natural riprap erosion barrier.

The water in the cove was crystalline close to shore. Ripples in the sloping yellow sand were still visible toward the middle of the cove, where the sand disappeared under emerald green water that transitioned again to a deep, luminous blue.

The VW bus stopped in front of Cesar and Abuelito's house. A dense bougainvillea grew up one side of the gray concrete structure and arched over the front door, creating a natural arbor. Its papery crimson bracts held the sunlight and glowed. Abuelito groomed and trained the bougainvillea like a cherished pet, maintaining its luster with a steady diet of dishwater and fish scraps. The house's front door was open, as it usually was when the family was home, as much to allow daylight as fresh air.

Annexed to the house was a tarpaper-clad plywood structure. A blue plastic tarp, fastened with tacked lath, served as a roof.

Across the road, Señora Muñoz and her middle-aged daughter, Fatima, sat in the narrow shade in front of their cinderblock house. They wore bright, colorful shawls and loose cotton dresses, and their long thick hair was parted down the middle and tied back. Señora Muñoz's face was brown and furrowed like the hills above the village. Like other village residents, the Muñoz women kept to themselves. Cesar never once saw them on his side of the road.

In the afternoons, the Muñoz women crafted colorful Huichol yarn paintings on boards that rested on their laps. The yarn paintings' intricate motifs of nature, birds, animals, corn and peyote expressed the Huichol people's belief in a sacred relationship between people and nature.

Once each week, a blonde sales agent who favored tan pantsuits pulled up in a shiny SUV to pick up the Muñoz women's newest yarn paintings, which she sold to gift shops and art galleries. The sales agent kept the women well-stocked in plastic fiber—polyester, nylon and acrylic—delivering skeins of synthetic yarn with each visit. The brightly-colored yarn paintings sold well; tourists were eager to acquire examples of authentic Mexican culture. Had the sales agent asked, the Muñoz women might have shared that they were themselves of the Huichol people, and that their yarn paintings, destined to



hang in tourists' living rooms and offices and dens, whispered wisdom of the ancients. The sales agent never asked.

"Good day, señoras," Abuelito said. "Cesar, take half of the tuna to Señora Muñoz."

Abuelito entered the plywood annex through a hatch. Cesar opened the cargo door and gathered the fishing gear, and followed Abuelito inside. The blue tarp roof lay atop spans of rope and crackled when the hatch opened and closed. Fresh air entered through two screened vents.

During the daytime, the tarp cast a diffuse blue glow. Cesar liked to imagine that he was entering a magical undersea realm when he stepped inside. He set the fishing rods, buckets and net in a corner, and placed the spooled rig on a shelf in a bookcase that held reserves of canned food and sacks of beans and rice. A small round table and two chairs stood on the plywood floor in a corner of the annex. A sarape lay atop a deteriorating foam rubber matt on a platform bed similar to Cesar's. An upturned plastic crate served as a bedside table. Deep sea fishing magazines leaned inside the crate. On top, literature given to Cesar and Abuelito by the university students was organized in a neat stack.

Above Abuelito's bed a dusty deep sea fishing rod with a corroded chrome Penn reel rested on two nails. Monofilament line threaded through the guides to the tip of the rod and attached to a metal leader. At the end of the leader a large J-hook dug into the rod's pocked rubber grip.

Cesar knelt on the bed and inspected the deep sea rod. "Did you catch blue marlin with this?"

"Many blue marlin, as I have told you many times."

"When will I catch mine?"

"When you are ten."

Cesar looked at Abuelito. "Ten? I'm almost ten."

"That's right."

The boy's eyes glowed. "Really?"

Abuelito nodded and smiled. "Really."

Cesar leaped off the bed and hugged his grandfather tight.

"We will need a boat that can chase the biggest blue marlin far out to sea," Abuelito said. "We will need a white boat."

Hope drained from the boy. "We don't have a white boat."

"When you are ten I will buy a day for us on a white boat. I have saved the money. You will catch your blue marlin, and I will be there to see it."

Cesar hugged his grandfather again. The boy wondered at the transformative power of aging and prayed his years would come fast.