

FIELD TRIP: Day of the Dead

Ensenada, Mexico (Ten Years Earlier)

LATER HE remembered the far away sounds of wooden guitars and singing, the moon balanced above the dark sea so close he could lean against it if he started to fall, the salt air thick with smoke and perfume, the bones that swam in the dark. And Ethan, his son, Jerry would remember him too.

"Nothing like a Mexican holiday to make you see the world for what it is, right, pal?" he said to Ethan.

"You look weird wearing your sunglasses."

The boy slumped harder against the wooden railing where they stood on the bluff above the beach. He had a right to be tired after the long drive from San Francisco on the Volvo's hard seats, but a small body could fall through the fence slats and tumble unseen onto the sand. It made Jerry's head hurt just thinking about it. Even so, he wished he'd brought the bottle of Jack Daniels.

He sipped his beer and looked out toward the blackening sea. "Step back away from the edge. Your mom might kill me when we get home, but it doesn't mean you have to get hurt."

"I'm fine," said Ethan. "I'm grown up now."

"You and me both."

The boy stood away from him, still leaning against the slanted railing. "So are you and mom going to split up?"

"We came to see the dancers, Ethan. That's all."

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"We've been gone a while."

"I thought you'd have fun."

It was just like his son to worry about his mother, Evelyn, to see right through all of his father's ridiculous plans. Jerry had promised her to quit the crazy field trips and act like all the other fools in the Haight. Why chase electric butterflies when he could obsess about retirement plans, pay attention to his cholesterol, trim the heirloom roses on weekends and go to bed at a reasonable hour?

"Throw a ball in the yard," Evelyn said. "Go to the zoo. Shit, a porno flick would be better. I'm sick of it. Act like a real father, why don't you, not his friend. No more trips. And I'm sick of you and the bars and the girls, too."

He'd been watching TV, sipping his whiskey, when the silver-haired host started talking about *Día de Los Muertos*. Something about the music in the background reminded Jerry of the moonlight over the water, the way it lingered in a line from the horizon, the way the people danced in the dark in Baja, like the old days.

"One more time with Ethan," he scribbled in a note, taping it to the fridge for Evelyn. "Gone to see the ghosts."

Now this, half-stoned in Mexico, waiting for the dead.

They could hear the bus before they saw it, from somewhere on the road behind them. It careened onto the sand, engine bellowing, stopping by the closest fire where the silhouettes of the revelers circled the raging pits. The doors opened and more dancers climbed down on to the sand, bodies almost disappearing, the white bones painted on their shirts hanging in the dark.

"They just want to see the spirits," Jerry said. "Nothing to be scared about."

"You still sick?" Ethan asked.

Still sick. Jerry knew what that meant. The words

seemed to hang in the air, fouled with the smell of burning diesel and mesquite that billowed from the fires. He needed to change, he knew that, but later, because tonight was a night to celebrate the dead.

"Your head still hurt?" his son asked again.

"This really is supposed to be fun."

They walked down the path to the closest fire, the heat so near Jerry felt it on his cheeks. Ethan walked ahead. A year or so ago, when they had driven to Big Sur to see the trees, Ethan never quit clinging to his pant leg with his small hand. Closer to the flames a dark faced man knelt, jiggling tiny skeletons on strings while three or four kids stared. Ethan pointed at them.

"Go on. Just stay close," Jerry said.

He watched his son find a place between the two children about his own age, his body blending into the other shadows. Above the water the thin trail of a firework arced silently into the sky and then exploded, the shards of white light reflecting like a spider web on the slate sea. In that instant Jerry saw the faint outline of horses walking in the shallows, the shapes of two boys waving sticks alongside.

Ethan was gazing up to the sky. The crowd of dark shapes moved, dancers snaking around them. You really got to stop this, Jerry thought.

"You're from the other side," came a voice — a girl's voice.

She stood beside him, staring up at the embers going black, her curls as translucent and golden as the bottle she dangled in front of the fire.

"A fellow traveler," she said, holding up the thatched bottle. "Shit, I'm wasted."

"I'm here with my boy," Jerry told her. He made a face

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towards the puppeteer.

"Cute," she said, "like his father."

"How old are you?"

"What kind of question is that on a night like this?" she asked, laughing.

"I'm twice your age."

"Maybe more," she agreed. "Age is in your head, right?"

"Right."

"What brings you to the dark side?"

"Used to come down here with my friends in the old days. Thought he should see the place. It's different now."

She held the jug out again.

Without thinking he took a gulp, the warm liquid burning inside his ribs. He took another and handed it back to her. The mescal flared inside his stomach and rose like warm water to his brain.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them the girl swayed to the music, her hips turning slowly. She held the bottle up and the ghouls cheered. "At least we're alive, aren't we?"

"My wife's really going to kill me when I get back."

"You're here now, right?"

She set the bottle down in the sand. Then she took his hands, leaned back and started dancing. Behind her a starburst shuddered against the faint veil of moonlight as she tugged him closer.

When she kissed him, her lips felt warm and strange, tasting of cigarettes and medicinal cactus and lip balm.

He closed his eyes and kissed her again as everything receded, replaced by a dull sensation he associated with long ago bottle-spins and make-out couches in spider-webbed garages, with stolen bottles of peppermint

Schnapps and the long hot nights of summers when he was a boy.

"I can't," he said, pushing her away. "I'm married."

She lifted off the long necklace of colored beads and slipped it over his head.

"Nobody's married down here." Her words slurred into the guitar chords.

"I have to go home."

Her laughter sounded like water. And then they fell, his body tumbling onto the sand with hers, all around them the sparking light from the fires. She dragged up the bottle of Mescal and took a swallow, then fumbled it over to him. He took another drink, though he knew better.

She kissed him again, this time holding on tight to his shoulders, a long and slow kiss that made him dizzy. He kissed her back, then felt a flush of embarrassment on his face.

"Come on," he said, touching her cheek. "I'm just an old hippie."

"Don't you love me?" she teased. "All the boys love me."

He pulled the beads off and helped her to her feet. When they managed to get upright, she blinked at the fire.

"Your son," she said, "he's gone." Then she turned. "Jesus. Look at that."

She was talking about the bus. It had caught on fire. The undercarriage roiled with flames that climbed up the sides. Jerry wasn't listening anymore.

He peered at the black forms retreating from the fire-pit. The kneeling puppeteer was gone; so were the kids. Everyone was moving away, pushing towards them, a mass of black heads.

One of the bone-shirted ghouls danced atop the bus,

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tipping a can like a cartoon in the moonlight. In another instant the side of the bus exploded with blue and yellow flames, dispersing the crowd in all directions.

"Ethan," he yelled at the shapes. "Where are you, son?"

His voice sounded faint in his own ears, swallowed by the cheering of the crowd and the sound of the sea, but he kept on yelling. He pushed against the dancing bodies as he ran, while his feet churned the sand beneath him and his eyes burned.

Just past the last fire pit something caught his eye, something moving above the smoke, the yelling, the skeletons. He was doubled over, gasping, his breath gone.

He looked past the bus, smoldering, black smoke drifting towards him. He could make out the horses at the edge of the water and the thin shapes of the two boys.

With a hundred yards to go, he could barely breathe. He ran past bodies, flailing, pushing, screams trailing, laughter, bottles and cans flying past him, until he finally got free from the smoke, just in time to see the outline of his son fall from the horse, his black shape disappearing into the sea.

The water was thick and warm. Jerry gasped, hurling himself through the shallows, the white surf curling on both sides of him. He kept moving, each step longer, the water half way up his thighs.

When he got close enough to see the faces of the boys, he dove headlong under the thick surface, skimming his hand on the sandy bottom until he finally collided with his son, the small limbs entwining with his own as he yanked the boy to the surface. Out over the sea, the moonlight looked electric as the man opened his eyes and pulled his son's face close.

"You're okay, son," Jerry yelled, getting his feet under

him.

Ethan was laughing, his black hair slick on his face in the half-light. So were the other two boys, waving their sticks at the night.

Ethan tried to free himself. "I just wanted to ride the horse."

Jerry released his hold, and they both stood in the shallow tide, the sea swelling around them. The horses, small and white, skittered away, while the two boys waved their sticks behind them. On the shore the fires sent ruby sparks into the sky and they waded towards the flames.

"You scared me," Jerry said.

"Sorry."

"Let's go home."

"Is it like you remember?"

"It was a long time ago, Ethan."