

A Change of Heart

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I've no idea where I am going or where I've been. It doesn't matter. I keep going toward the lights. I walk at the edge of the road in dusty Levi's, jean jacket, and cowboy boots that look as though they'd traversed the entire Southwest diagonally. I've got a drum-banging headache.

I cross the highway to the Sagebrush Diner, no traffic in either direction as far as eye can see. I am famished. The two cars and three pickup trucks in the gravel lot all bear New Mexico license tags. The newest is a cream-colored Hudson from about 1947. I'm not sure how I know this. It's a classy set of wheels. It drives away before I get to the diner.

The five men at the counter are dressed similarly in dusty boots and blue jeans. I leave an empty seat beside the last man and sit down on the next red leatherette stool.

"What'll it be, Six?" the ginger-haired waitress asks. She looks over her glasses at me.

I wonder for a minute how she knows me. Is it because I am the sixth man at the counter? In the quilted stainless steel wall behind her, with the pass-through to the kitchen, I see my distorted reflection. On my faded blue T-shirt is a backward white number six.

"The usual, Fanny," I say, taking a chance I know her, too. Her name is embroidered on her white blouse.

"You got 'er."

Each of the five men at the counter nods at me in the shiny diamond-pattern wall.

"Mornin', Six," recites the male chorus.

I'm pleased to note I am not disliked in these parts. Fanny whisks past, leaving a welcome cup of black coffee. She turns the handle towards my left hand. I pick it up and inhale the steam before swallowing. It clears my head. I feel as though I've awakened after sleeping for years, except that I've awakened in the past, not the future.

I think of eggs and thick bacon and a stack of flapjacks drowning in peach syrup. Fanny sets the heavy china plate in front of me—exactly as I'd craved—and refills my coffee. I'm beginning to like it here. I remove my cowboy hat and set it on the empty stool.

"Where's Antonio today?" one of the men asks, leaning forward across the counter and cocking his head toward the empty seat beside me.

“And where’s your truck? You need a jump or somethin’?” asks the second man at the counter.

Fanny stops in her constant back-and-forth and puts her hands on her ample hips.

“Let him eat his breakfast, y’all,” she tells them.

I’m off the hook; I don’t know the answer to either question. She turns to the pass-through and loads her arms up with plates of food for one of the booths by the window. From the conversation up and down the counter I learn that the Korean War is about to commence. It is June of 1950. I shiver.

Fanny stops on her way back behind the counter and stands beside me with the speckled blue enamel coffee pot.

“Six. What’d you do to the back of your head? There’s dried blood all over your collar. And your hat,” she adds, picking it up and turning it over.

The five men at the counter get up and stand around me in an arc buzzing like drones, talking all at once.

“Maybe you better see Doc Morgan.”

“That’s quite a goose-egg.”

“Phineas’ll drive you home, Six.”

“There’s nothing getting between me and these flapjacks until they’re all safely packed away,” I tell them, brushing aside the many hands eager to help.

They sit back down while I finish my breakfast. The conversation, now more hushed, returns to the Communists. When I swallow the last of my coffee, I am all but lifted out of my seat by a man at either elbow. They escort me to the door. I reach for my wallet, but it is not in my hip pocket. *Where else would it be?*

“You settle up later,” Fanny tells me. “And though I know it don’t matter much to bachelors, you soak your shirt and jacket in cold water and crush in a couple aspirins.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I tell her.

The others laugh, holding me firmly as we descend the five steps from the Sagebrush Diner to the dusty lot. They get me into the cab of a dark blue Ford pickup and sandwich me between the driver and the second fellow, who keeps his arm around my shoulder so I don’t tip over.

The dirt road to wherever it is I live is potholed and deeply rutted. Steering seems pointless. My head bounces and bobs, and my headache gets louder. A plume of dust billows behind us. There is still snow on the mountain to the east, but I don't remember its name.

We come to a stop beside a small, two-storey adobe house with deep, tin-roofed *portalos* in front and back. There is a corral, but I see no horses. Chickens run in and out of the leaning, unpainted barn. I'd be surprised if the roof didn't leak, too. *This is where I live?*

When the two men—Phineas and Lance, as I learn—get me down out of the pickup and on my feet, I realize I am not going to make it. The house and the corral and the enormous cottonwood tree overhead swirl as though they're about to spin down a drain. I see the front door swing open, but that is the last I recall.

* * *

I awake on my back with a cool rag over my eyes and forehead. I can tell my boots and jean jacket have been removed. I attempt to sit up. My head throbs.

“Easy, buddy,” a male voice intones. “Go slow.”

The damp cloth falls from my face. The man is a handsome mestizo with the best features of both worlds. He has sun-browned skin and longish hair that is so black it looks almost blue. He extends his forearm to help me sit up.

“The waitress at the diner says to soak my jacket in cold water,” I tell him.

“It's already hanging outside. I thought we'd lost you when you didn't come home last night, Six. Doc Morgan's been here. He said you've got to rest.”

I feel a bandage taped to the back of my head and wonder how I will pay for a doctor's visit. I ask the man if he is my nurse or something.

“Among other things,” he says, smiling. “Let's get you under the covers.”

The man lifts up my T-shirt and carefully slips it past the wound at the back of my head. I unbutton my Levi's and he pulls them off me. Then he takes my socks. When he reaches for the waistband of my longjohns, I stop his hands. I can feel they are used to work.

“I'll keep 'em on,” I tell him.

The man looks at me and shrugs. He swings my legs off the side of the bed, tugs back the covers, and pivots me back around. Then he pulls the sheet and quilt up to my neck. He leans forward and gets right up to my face. I turn my head away. The man pulls back and stands up.

“I’m going to be downstairs so you get some rest, Six. Don’t try coming down on your own. Call me—for anything. And use the chamber pot if you’ve gotta go. Good night, buddy.”

The neighbor, or whoever he is, turns off the electric lamp on the bed table and lights an old railroad lantern with a match. The sulphur stings my nose. He sets the lantern atop the small dresser in the corner. It casts just the right light, enough to see where I’m going in a strange house, but not so bright it keeps me awake. When he reaches the doorway, I ask him if he knows who Antonio is. The question stops him in his tracks.

“Boy, you really clunked your noggin a good one, Six. I’m Antonio. The Doc said it’ll all come back to you. Now get to sleep.”

He pulls the door partway closed and shoots me a wink over his shoulder. I close my eyes. His face is vaguely familiar, but I cannot recall a thing about him. I trust it will sort itself out in the morning.

* * *

I am awakened when Antonio jostles me. He is dressed in fresh jeans and a denim workshirt. I smell food. There is a speckled enamel plate on the bed table. It is steaming.

“I’ve got to get to work, Six. With both of us off yesterday, Nicolás will be frantic. Make sure you eat that. I’ll be home at lunch.”

“We work together?” I ask.

“Among other things,” Antonio replies.

He seems to like that answer. He again leans over me, as though to kiss me good-bye. I quickly put the cup of coffee to my mouth. He stops, looking a little bewildered, and heads out the door. I hear a truck drive into the yard and the door downstairs closes. I sit up straighter in bed and set the plate in my lap. The tortillas are filled with scrambled eggs and beans, and flooded with cheese and green chilies. My appetite’s not quite what it’s been, but I do my best.

I eat distractedly. I’m not sure what’s going on and why I remember so little. The plate is soon empty though I recall only the taste of the first bite. Once again sleepy, I lay back on the pillows. The more I try to think, the more my head hurts. I give up and surrender to sleep.

* * *

I awaken when Antonio sits down at the edge of the bed. He touches my hand. The light seems so bright, even with the curtains closed.

“You were sleeping so sound I didn’t want to wake you for lunch.”

“That explains why I’m so hungry,” I say, and pull my hand away.

“I’m gonna get back to supper. Maybe you can take a bath. I’ve got water on the stove.”

Antonio gives me an arm to hang onto and helps me up. He descends the stairs in front of me, ready to catch me in case I fall.

The kitchen and the rest of the first floor are one room. The old claw-foot tub is behind a faded curtain of palm fronds and tropical plants separating it from the kitchen proper. I see no indoor plumbing except for the pump at the kitchen sink. The tub drains through a rubber hose out to the garden.

He pours another bucket of hot water from the stove and tests the bath with his hand, declaring it warm enough. I step behind the curtain, recognizing myself in the shaving mirror on a nail in the wall. I’m nearly Antonio’s opposite: fair-skinned and blond, but also sun-tanned.

“You can toss me your longjohns. I’ll be doing laundry on Sunday.”

“What don’t you do around here?” I ask, but Antonio is back at the stove.

The water is hot. I descend into it slowly. I soap up the brush and washcloth, and enjoy feeling clean again. I forget about my wound and wince when I pour soapy water over my head with a chipped enamel mug. The bandage floats in the scummy water.

“How we doin’?” Antonio asks, pulling back the curtain.

I don’t want to admit it, but I tell him I think I need help climbing out of the tub. I’ve got the same equipment Antonio does, so I swallow my embarrassment. I feel helpless.

He dries my back with the rough towel and hands it to me to finish the job. He puts clean clothes on the wooden stool beside the tub. He’s brought me moccasins instead of my boots.

When I am dressed, I come to the table, just in time for him to set a huge plate of pinto beans and tomato salad and a pair of chicken enchiladas before me. I am ready to dive in, but Antonio closes his eyes and says grace. I bow my head, staring at the steaming food.

“They found the truck,” Antonio tells me. “Over near Dry Gulch. Nothing wrong with it, Lance says. Your wallet was in the glove box.”

My mouth is too full to respond. I don’t know what kind of truck I own, or even if I own it, and I’ve no idea whether there was money in my wallet. Antonio tries several times to find out whether I remember anything of what happened. I am far more interested in the dessert he’s brought to the table: cherry jack *empanadas*, with green chilies in them. I know what most things are called, but I don’t remember what they taste like, so I dive into the dessert.

“Nothing wrong with your appetite, either,” he declares. “Doc says it’s a good sign.”

Antonio clears the table and puts another log in the stove for hot water for dishes. I offer to help, but he does not let me. He insists I go on up to bed. He takes my arm as we go up the stairs. I look at the small sofa—a settee, really—where he sleeps. The cushions look lumpy and the seat has caved in, the bottom almost touching the floor.

I let him help me undress down to my longjohns, but no man is pulling off my underwear as long as I can manage it myself. He dims the kerosene railroad lantern and smiles at me from the doorway before going downstairs. Each step has its own creak or squeak.

The clatter of dishes keeps me awake at first, but soon it becomes the rhythmic clacking of train tracks. I hear the mournful whistle in the distance—perhaps only the teakettle—and wonder when and where I will awaken.

* * *

On Saturday Antonio and I drive to *Mila-grow Nursery & Greenhouse* where we both work. Our truck is a 1941 Ford pickup which Antonio painted turquoise blue. It looks like he used a brush.

I’m introduced—or re-introduced—to the owner, Nicolás, who resembles a skinny, rumped Santa Claus, his whiskers more gray than white. His accent is hard to understand. I nod my head even when I don’t quite get it. He and Antonio exchange a couple of sentences in Spanish. Antonio intends to put in a full day, but he will drive me home at lunch. Then he walks out among the trees and shrubs and flowers.

“You getting better, Six, before you coming back to working,” Nicolás tells me, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“How will I pay bills?” I ask him.

He laughs like there’s something I’m not getting.

“But Antonio is working. Why do you worrying?”

“Sure,” I say. “He’s gonna pay all my bills for me, too.”

“Él es tu amigo, no? And maybe I pay little something while you getting better.”

“Thanks, Nicolás, but I pay my own way.”

He shakes his head.

“No, you still not right, Six. You working when you getting better,” he says, and walks out to the gardens.

I wander aimlessly up and down the rows of plants. I cannot name a single one. I run into Lance from the diner and learn I am the resident expert on stonework: walls, ponds, and walkways. I also find out Antonio and I have shared the *casita* out on the mesa for the past three years, after serving our two years in the army, drafted right after high school. His *abuela* left the house to him. Nobody remembers a time Antonio and I were not best buddies.

Yeah, but does anyone think there's more to it than that? I want to ask. Lance is not getting my drift. He reminds me Antonio and I get along really good, and pooling our wages makes us both richer. What more did I want?

Around noon the company pickup pulls in after the morning on the job, two men in front, two men and the shovels in back. They spill out and surround me, slapping me on the back. It feels good to have so many friends. They all talk at once.

“Easy, guys,” Antonio warns them. “Six, I gotta get you home. Let’s go.”

From the rear window I see the men waving as we pull out. They’re all at least ten or fifteen years older than Antonio and me. The truck lurches and weaves, but I know it’s the road and not Antonio’s driving.

Back at the house, Antonio slices a chunk of salami from the larder and slaps it between two crusts of homemade bread.

“Make sure you eat something. You need help getting upstairs?” he asks.

I shake my head. He rushes out, then turns on his heels and comes back into the kitchen. He grabs an apple from a basket of them on the table. The screen door slams again.

I sit at the table and down the last of the cold coffee from breakfast. An apple seems like a good idea. I slice one up with my pocket knife. Then the drowse comes over me again, but I resist. I’ve been entirely too lazy lately.

After a second apple, I rummage through the larder to see if there’s something I can make for supper. If we really live together, it’s not fair to let Antonio do all the work.

There are the fixings for a rice and bean casserole, and flour and lard for biscuits. There are plenty of onions, a *ristra* of chilies, cheese, and spicy sausage. I decide I can make a cobbler with the three remaining apples. I can’t think where I learned to do this. Maybe it’s like riding a horse: you never forget how. I bring in an armload of firewood.

The afternoon passes quickly. I watch the shadows of the fence posts march across the corral. When I hear the truck coming, I check the casserole. It needs more time. I stir the embers.

Antonio strolls in grinning. He holds both hands behind his back. Standing an inch away, he puts his hands behind my neck, resting his forearms on my shoulders. He is sweaty and dirty. I expect not to like it, but it's all right. It reminds me of my father after a day's work.

"Which one?" he asks. "Left or right?"

"Your left or mine?" I question in return.

"Yes," he replies.

I receive a chill like a pump handle in February at the base of my neck. Antonio kisses my cheek, and produces two bottles of cold beer. He pulls off the caps with an opener mounted in the window frame beside the table. He raises his bottle of Dos Equis and clinks mine.

"You put more wood in the stove? It's hot in here," he declares.

"I'm making supper. It'll be ready pretty soon. I thought you deserve a break."

He looks like he's about to land another kiss on me. Instead he puts his arm around my shoulders and leads me out back to the corral. We sit in two oak rockers in the shade of the rear *portalo*, sipping our beers to make them last. When they are empty, he lines them up with four other bottles against the wall. He tugs off his boots and hangs his socks over them.

"I got time for a bath?" he asks.

"I'll have to get more wood."

"No, I mean outside. We use the old water trough in summer, remember?"

"You got about a half hour," I say, going back to the hot kitchen.

I watch him from the window. He pulls off his workshirt and undershirt and works at the pump handle like it's a contest or something. When the trough is half-full, he strips out of his Levi's and peels down his longjohns. His bottom half is paler than his chest and back. He plunges down into the water, bending forward to immerse his head. He puffs out his cheeks and whistles. I shiver, despite standing at the stove. The well-water is as cold as a melting stream.

I realize he does not have a towel. I take him one from the hook beside the indoor tub. With the side of his fist he knocks out the wooden plug near the bottom of the trough. The dirty water gurgles into a sluice that carries it out to the garden.

“It’s great to have the old Six back,” he tells me, drying himself.

“Maybe,” I say. “I don’t remember much. It comes in bursts, like a swarm of bees. Did we use to have horses, Antonio?”

“In a way we still do. They were beautiful Appaloosas, though they were getting on. Mayflower’s on the roof and Ferdinand is under the hood of the truck.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m glad you don’t remember, Six. You cried when the man came with his horse trailer to take Ferdie away. But we had bills to pay: a new tin roof and a new engine. You were glum for a month.”

Antonio wraps the towel around himself and follows me inside. He stands next to me at the stove, turning himself around to toast all sides. I send him upstairs, snapping the towel at his behind. He laughs. I’m not sure what came over me. It just happened.

He descends just as I set the casserole on the table. He’s in fresh Levi’s and an old gym sweatshirt. We again bow our heads for grace. We dig in as though we’d been fasting all day. Antonio smiles with salsa dripping from his chin.

When I bring the apple cobbler from the stove rack, he is beside himself.

“Except for my Mama’s *conchas*, this is my favoritest dessert. You remembered.”

I don’t tell him I just wanted to use up the last apples before they went soft. He clears the table and draws water for the dishes. He shoos me back outside, reminding me our agreement is that whoever cooks is released from kitchen patrol.

The sky ranges from star-speckled indigo above to rose and gold outlining the mountains. I settle into the rocker and watch fireflies emerge from the garden. I feel peaceful and content—and full.

I come out of my drowse when Antonio gently sets the rocker moving with his foot.

“Maybe we better turn in, buddy. Need help?”

I shake my head.

“Think you’re up to sharing the bed tonight? That loveseat is torture.”

“You mean we share the same bed?”

“It’s the only one we got.”

“Well... I guess so... As long as you stay on your own side.”

Antonio laughs. “We’ll put a fence rail down the middle. But watch for splinters.”

We go up to the bedroom. Antonio lights the lantern. He takes off his sweatshirt and kicks off his moccasins. He pulls down his Levi’s and I see he is not wearing underwear after his bath. He climbs under the sheet completely naked. I decide to keep my longjohns on.

“Good night, Six.”

“Que pases buena noche, Antonio,” I reply, unsure where I’d picked up Spanish

I move to the edge of the mattress. I swear I can feel the heat from his body, though he’s at least a foot away. His breathing grows shallow, but I have trouble getting and staying asleep. Each time he moves I think he is going to roll over on top of me. It is hard not to slide towards the middle of the mattress. At last I doze off. It feels like hours have passed.

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The windows brighten and a breeze comes up. I awaken on Antonio’s side of the bed, spooned up against him, my arm across his chest. An inch further over, and we’d be on the floor.

I roll him onto his back. He makes a contented noise like deep purring. I slip out the other side, and realize I’m tenting the front of my longjohns. I’m glad Antonio doesn’t see it.

I slip on my moccasins and a shirt, and steal downstairs, closing the bedroom door softly behind me. The wind-up clock on the sideboard points to five. I decide Antonio deserves to sleep late after all he’s done for me this week. I go out to the shed and fetch more wood for the stove.

It is after six before he wanders downstairs, barefoot in just his Levi’s. I set a mug of coffee on the table and serve him eggs and bacon and biscuits. There are two loaves rising in their bread pans on the stove shelf. A big kettle of water is near boiling.

“You’ve been busy. Thanks for letting me sleep in. It felt great to sleep in a bed again.”

I serve myself and sit down opposite him. He studies me like I’m the most interesting book he’s ever read. I’m sure my face is red. I can always say it’s from working at the stove.

After breakfast, Antonio shows me the ropes on doing laundry. Beneath the rear *portaló*, he props a wooden washtub atop a stool and brings the lye soap, washboard, and the kettle of hot water. The wicker basket of dirty clothes is full. He instructs me to clamp the ringer on the edge of the horse trough. I fill it with water from the outdoor pump.

When he's rubbed a soapy item to death across the galvanized washboard, he rings it out by hand and tosses it into the trough. I rinse it in the ice-cold water and feed it through the wringer. I hang the clothes on the lines between the house and barn, propping up their sagging middles with forked poles. It is getting warm. I take my shirt off.

There are four pairs of Levi's, plus an assortment of denim and flannel workshirts, longjohns, boxer shorts, T-shirts, socks, and the bed sheets. When the clotheslines are full, we take a break. Antonio's chest glistens with sweat. He wrings out the bandana he's tied around his forehead. We glance at each other now and then, but hardly a word passes between us. I'm a little embarrassed by how he looks at me, but maybe I only imagine it. The rest of the morning passes lazily. The day is warm and windy and our clothes dry quickly.

After unpinning the dried items from the wash line, I fold them and put them into the basket. Antonio gets back to the washtub and I to the water trough. I knock out the plug, draining the filmy water into the garden before refilling it.

At last I pin the final items to the line. It is well after lunch and I'm beat.

"We're good for another couple weeks, buddy," Antonio tells me. "Let's eat."

We are just about to go inside when we hear a car pull up in front. I don't want to pull a fresh shirt on over my sweaty torso, nor does Antonio. He's at least got his Levi's on. I'm still in my longjohns.

"Probably one of the guys from work," Antonio suggests. "You're OK."

A young woman in a sleek red dress and high heels, and an older woman in a billowing flowered dress and hat come around to the back. Antonio and I freeze in our tracks.

"Mama. Benita," he calls out.

I scurry into the house to fetch my Levi's from upstairs. Our shirts all hang on the line. I hurry back down and Antonio hands me a shirt that's still damp.

"You forgot we were coming, didn't you, dear brother?"

"You boys didn't go to church."

"We had a tough week, Mama. Six had..."

"No excuse."

"Why don't you write it on the calendar so you don't forget?"

“Six had an accident last week. He’s still woozy.”

“What happened?”

“Poor boy. What happened?”

“He conked his head some place. He doesn’t remember.”

I feel like I’m listening in on the party line.

Antonio’s mother and sister barely let me get my shirt on before swooping down on me.

“Let’s see.”

“Did you go to Doctor Morgan?”

“You don’t remember? What don’t you remember?”

“Mama, let him be. Let’s have our lunch.”

As Antonio and I bring the kitchen table and chairs out beneath the still-shaded *portalo*, his Mom and Sis fetch a basket of food and a jug of lemonade with ice from their car. It is the cream-colored Hudson with burgundy trim I saw at the Sagebrush Diner.

The table is set with the least-chipped enamel plates and freshly-laundered napkins. There is a fat roasted chicken, a salad with tomatoes and onions and jalapenos, tortillas with corn and rice, and more cherry jack *empanadas*. I know where Antonio learned to make them.

Benita is quite a looker—like her brother. Her hair is as dark and glistening as his. They also share the trait of dimples. Mama has given her children her good looks, but she covers over her own with too much makeup. She catches me staring at her daughter.

I ask about the gleaming Hudson. Antonio taps the side of his head, explaining that I’d forgotten a couple things. He tells me 1947 Commodore convertible had been his father’s most cherished possession. He washed and waxed it weekly, and built a garage to protect it from the sun and weather. He was killed at work when a truckload of lumber slipped off its bed and crushed him. The Hudson went to his Mama, who permits Benita to drive her around in it, but forbids her to use it for her own errands. Her boyfriend is not even allowed to look at it.

It is a friendly gathering with plenty of laughter. I’m happy Antonio and I get a break from cooking. When the sun creeps up to the edge of the table, Mama announces they are going home. Benita packs up the basket. She gives me a hug, and a kiss on the cheek. Mama enfolds me, overlooking Antonio. She wears too much perfume.

“You take care of him,” she tells Antonio. “I love you both. And next Sunday you boys go to mass two times.”

She gives me and then Antonio a kiss, and crosses the side of the house to the car. She tightens the bow on her hat and tells Benita she may drive now. Benita winks at me from the sideview mirror. They drive too slow to kick up a single mote of dust.

We set the dirty dishes in a pan of water at the sink and haul the basket full of clean clothes upstairs, each of us grabbing one of the handles. After putting the fresh linens on the bed, we take off our shirts and lie down for a nap. Since we’ve got our blue jeans on, I don’t mind if he nudges a little closer.

“I really like your sister,” I say.

“She fell for you pretty hard,” Antonio replies. “But I fell for you harder.”

He thumps my thigh. I don’t know what to say, so I close my eyes.

* * *

Our nap takes us almost to supper time. Neither of us is hungry, but there’s an empty corner in each of our stomachs for the two *conchas* Antonio’s Mama left for us. We sit out back and discuss whether or not I can work half-days next week. I decide I’m up to it.

We turn in a little before sundown. Antonio again strips down to his skin. It is still warm and the breeze has died. I decide, when it’s hot at night, that it’s all right if we both sleep naked—as long as he keeps a safe distance.

By morning, that distance has narrowed. The sheet is twisted in knots and we are folded around each other. It’s hard to figure out which limb belongs to which one of us. Antonio is not embarrassed.

“Good morning,” he says, already smiling.

We untangle ourselves and race downstairs to the outhouse beside the barn. He beats me. I dance around outside until I can’t hold it. I pee at the bottom of a fence post.

We get dressed upstairs and go back down to the kitchen, eating the last of Mama’s chicken on a tortilla with rice. There’s no time to make coffee. We head to the nursery. Nicolás has an electric hot plate in his office and his missus perks coffee for those of us who want it.

The guys slap me on the back again as if they hadn’t seen me for a month. After our coffee, I drive with Lance to a ranch with a long stretch of stone wall on each side of the driveway. It belongs to a Texan with more money than he can figure out a use for.

I am faced with piles of irregular stones harvested from the surrounding fields of sagebrush and chamisa. There are sacks of Portland cement under a tarp and a mixing trough with a hoe. As I figure out the puzzle, Lance mixes the Portland with sand. He has to haul water from near the barn. He tosses me worn leather gloves that conform to my hands perfectly.

The puzzle seems easy enough if I don't think about how to solve it. The right stone always comes to hand. Lance remarks that I haven't lost my touch. But when the noon hour rolls around, I'm exhausted. Lance takes the company truck back to *Mila-Grow*, and Antonio swings by to drive me home for the day.

This is the pattern for the rest of the week. Antonio and I work together only rarely. Maybe this is good. We get along and I like being around him. It doesn't bother me as much as it used to when we get ourselves into pretzel positions while sleeping. Sometimes one or both of us awakes with a boner.

"Good morning, you two," Antonio says with a sly smile.

I'm sure I've turned the color of a poppy.

* * *

A week after the Fourth of July, Antonio and I work our last Saturday until autumn. It will be a chance for us to catch up on repairs around the house and maybe paint the barn.

It is hot and dry. It looks and feels like rain, but the sky has fooled us all week. A saying of Nicolás' comes to mind from some place: *Everybody talking raining, but talking is not wet.*

Antonio and I swing by *The Ornerly Burro* to celebrate our coming free Saturdays. We have two beers apiece instead of our usual single one. The bartender and everyone in the joint ask how I'm doing. We stay a little longer than we planned.

A clear line of dark-bellied clouds and walking rain stretches from The Gorge to The Mountain. In the rearview mirror I see the lightning flash. We can't outrun it. The wipers can't keep up. I am afraid I'll get the truck stuck in the mud a mile from home.

I credit Antonio's calmness and confidence in my driving to help us make it home. I pull up to the corral gate in clear sight of the back door. The rain lets up, but only a little. A burst of hail pelts the roof and hood of the truck.

Antonio makes a dash for it, but slides on his rear end in the mud. He attempts to get up and slips again. I can't tell which of us laughs harder.

Taking it slow in the slippery mud, I reach over and give him my hand. But instead of pulling himself up, Antonio pulls me down into the mud beside him. Two splats coat my face

and hair. Antonio rolls over on top of me and pushes my backside down into the mud. My boots fill with muddy water. My Levi's weigh fifty pounds.

We roll around and rattle until we are mudmen from head to toe. Even Antonio's smile is muddy. I pin him on his back and climb on top of him and straddle him. He squirms trying to break free, our crotches rubbing together. I slide around inside my mud-soaked Levi's.

Like a thunderbolt, I shoot my load—and shudder. Antonio smiles. I'm sure he's seen my face. I wait for his remark, but it does not come. He rolls out from beneath me and hauls himself upright. He offers me his hand. I nearly slip out of his muddy grasp.

We strip at the water trough and take turns pouring icy well-water over each other's head. Antonio pumps more water into the trough as I stomp around on our clothes.

I realize the rain has stopped. A rainbow emerges above The Mountain. Antonio hangs our rinsed clothes on a fence rail and sets our boots upside down on four of the posts. Then he rinses his muddy feet at the back door. I wait for him inside with dry Levi's. I rub his back with the rough towel.

We each eat two bowls of goat stew from Nicolás' missus. I want to talk about what happened in the mud, but, even more, I don't want to think about it. I'm embarrassed, but I can't deny what I felt was pleasurable.

Tonight I'm not so comfortable lying naked next to him. I put on my longjohns. It's much cooler after the cloudburst. Antonio looks at me and climbs beneath the sheet. He is a patient man.

“I had fun today,” he says. “I don't have to ask if you did.”

I see his smile in the dim light from the railroad lantern. I turn on my side and close my eyes.

* * *

The next morning, after mass, Antonio, his Mama, and Benita drive to a cousin's for a birthday party. Not up to a roomful of strange faces who all know me, I'm happy to be excused.

Antonio gets behind the wheel of the Hudson, his Mama next to him. She tells him which way to turn. Benita gets a break from her constant directions by sitting in the back seat.

I wait for a minute in the truck, watching the other cars and trucks pull out from Santa Monica's church lot. I prayed to know what I should do, but I haven't heard. Antonio is a kind and gentle man, but I'm not sure I can ever be who he thinks I am. I drive home.

The imprints in the sun-dried mud of our wrestling match are easy to make out. Only one puddle remains. I take our dried, but now dusty, clothes from the fence. Rolling up the pair of Levi's I think are mine, I toss them on the front seat of the pickup. I shake out the other pair and bring them upstairs. Our T-shirts and undershorts I drop in the wicker laundry basket.

I take my bedroll from the bottom of the wardrobe and pack my army duffel with items of my clothing from the laundry basket.

On the way out I see our work boots are nearly dry. I put mine on the floor of the truck and toss my duffel and bedroll on the front seat. My chest feels tight, like there's not enough air. I drive away before I talk myself out of going.

I pull up to the *Sagebrush Diner*. It's closed on Sundays so they won't know where to begin looking for me until tomorrow. I'll go back down the road the same way I wandered into Red Willow two months ago. I don't know what else to do. I leave the key on the seat.

Lacing my work boots together, I hang them around my neck. I shake out my dusty Levi's before stuffing them in my duffel. A folded piece of paper flies out of the hip pocket, stained reddish brown with mud.

Dear Six,

I want you to know I don't ever expect you to do anything that makes you uneasy. You are the sun in my life. I'd never do anything to hurt you.

Please trust me. I will wait as long as I have to until you remember all of what we used to share, even if it takes forever. In the meantime, I can't possibly love you any more than I do.

Your Antonio

How can I leave my best friend, *mi compadre*, and just walk away from him? In the mud I learned that I have feelings for him beyond our friendship, though I'm still discovering what those are and what they mean. Two tears splatter down on the note, smearing the lines and the ink even more. I fold it and slip it back into my pocket, tossing my gear back in the truck. Maybe I need to give myself as much time as Antonio has given me.

* * *

Back at home, I carry my things upstairs and put them away. I unfold the piece of paper from my pocket and put it on the dresser where Antonio lights the old railway lantern at night. Reading the note again, I smile at how God answered me with a letter in Antonio's handwriting.