

Benjamin Joe

BACK IN BOSTON

The situation was summed up to me in Central California. I was in a bar at the time, sitting at a table and staring at the walls as they slowly began to close in.

It wasn't special. The bar was one of those places old natives would reminisce to me about when they talk of the old-days. I thought about this as the boy continued speaking across from me. I thought about him, about them, remembering them often telling me how they'd ask the white man for change and gifts by the doorways of bars, cafes and concert halls. The stories and the places were real, I thought. Solid.

I thought about the boy's eyes, too. Dark pools. Innocent. Said his name was Tony. He'd come out of nowhere, popping out of the streets, said he'd found me on the Internet as one of those small-time artists who worked in the area. When he showed his findings to his mother, she was impressed. He said this woefully, as if behind a veil of loss.

She told him that if anything went wrong, to find me. I stared at him. His mother, Dawn, was stuck somewhere or another, I couldn't get it out of him. He was crying, distraught over something I could only imagine. Finally, he told me she was in a rehab center on Cape Cod. Often living on the edges of society she'd found herself desperate for help and turned to her biological family who immediately put her away. She was about 40 now. The family was looking to adopt her boy, strip her of her rights as a parent. He wasn't having it. He'd run to me. He was 16.

I understood. I didn't have to hear anymore. The long trip stood in front of me as faithfully as a doorway. I told him everything would be fine, left him at a youth center. Drove east.

As I stopped and started on a well-used highway, I thought of all the things I didn't know. About him. About his mother. The situation that I never knew to be possible. Through the desert, through the towering Rockies to the endless miles of valleys with their low-rising houses, and mammoth barns, catatonically standing in an endless horizon, then into Appalachia and New England with its to sheer rock passes carved by the dynamite that was used to ever expand our influence westward. I thought about what monsters we were to this beautiful land as we piled our hopes and dreams onto someone else's home. I Facebooked each rest stop for my fans and kept thinking. Really thinking.

After a long time, I got to longer lines of traffic that had been waiting for me as I entered Cape Cod. I wondered if the tribes in this area were active. Did they approved of the Kennedys burying their dead on these beaches?

I got to the rehabilitation center by the midmorning. Got up out of the car and walked to the double-doors. I signed in on the clipboard and was led into a room. Dawn had on hospital scrubs and a look of disgust on her face.

"Hey," I said. My voice was strained from hollering along to the radio on my drive

"Did you get it? The paternity test?" she asked.

"Well, not yet..."

"Why not?"

"I wanted to hear it from you." I said the words unconsciously, thinking how little and late they were. The rummy face of the man on the corner opposite to the bar I frequented came to my mind. He was native, always trying to tell me to expose my own blood even though I was half-Asian and not the real deal for all the words he had to say.

"Well, you've heard it," Dawn said, breaking the reverie.

"Can I do anything for you?" I was determined to remain civil, despite my rage. The man's face became blurry in my mind as it had so many times in our late-night discussions.

Her face contorted as she coughed into her arm.

"Got any cigarettes?"

I didn't. She wiped her face with her small hands.

"Well, get back there... they have a phone number you can call... you'll take him in, won't you?"

"Is there anything else?" I avoided her eyes.

"No."

"Really?" I felt like I was leaving with work unfinished. She looked up.

"I don't need anything from you." She barely opened her lips.

"Ok." I could feel the rage between us now, just barely below the surface. Thoughts of old men and bars and lineages plagued my mind. I didn't know what to say except that maybe I wasn't the solution she supposed me to be. And I couldn't say that.

"Just find out, ok?"

I nodded then got up to leave. At the desk they gave me a card with a number. I walked back to my car.

The sun's rays crossed the parking lot with me and photon after photon pounded into my back. The pictures of the indigenous peoples flashed before me again. I pondered the fate of an entire race as I pondered what to do about this boy.

I put the car in reverse and backed out of the parking spot. I didn't know what to do with this newfound legacy. The people I thought of had done their best to protect their progeny, the land, their customs, their children. Well, maybe it was time for me to protect mine, too, I thought.

The sun was in my eyes, but I fought through.

I'll be the perfect parent, I thought, then pushed the pedal down.

Breakfast in a Ditch:
Closest thing an American gets to a refugee camp

I picked up my bones. Damn tired. Sleeping in a ditch. My partner was already up. I'd begged a sheet off him to wrap myself in the early dawn and watch the light come over the sky. Not really sleeping, but I needed to lay down for a moment. We'd gotten a ride only about an hour or two ago. Directly to a Labor Ready. Apparently, we could work there to get a ticket to Tucson or Hawaii or Montana or where-ever we wanted. The driver said it himself. He had no pity for those who never worked.

Oh, we'd worked alright. We'd washed dishes and dug trenches and cooked burgers and planted flowers. Chopped wood, mowed lawns. Once I'd scoured a parking lot for a plate of food.

I'd done all these things and more though, but I'd never felt like I'd spent the whole night with a saw blade in my ear and a dungeon master flaying my thighs. I could barely speak because my throat was hoarse. I felt as though I'd been up all-night sniffing cocaine and smoking meth but I couldn't remember getting high.

I walked over a ridge and wasn't surprised to see the owner of the sheet kneeled over a campfire that was pouring smoke out around him. Sprawled out on the outskirts of the fire were men of various ages. Senior citizens to teenagers. I could see in the morning twilight that they were all dark. Black hair, dark eyes. One of them was licking what I hoped was a joint but by the way he lit it up and leaned back on his arms, I knew it was a cigarette.

I walked up and my traveling partner looked to me as I knelt next to him. In front of him and the fire was a small man saying something I couldn't hear and shoveling eggs into a tortilla. The two of them were speaking small bits of English. As my partner muttered something, the man pointed to me.

“Hungry?” He asked my partner who grunted. The man shoved the food into my hands. One of the other men held a bottle of hot sauce over his head. He said something in another language.

I nodded and as I walked over to him, my partner got out his CD player and he and the cook started to go through a book of albums. They sat there, huddling over the CDs and the fire.

It was about then that the morning sun came out. I talked to the bearer of the hot sauce. He said his name was Juan. He told me he’d come to pick vegetables but there was no work.

“Like ‘The Grapes of Wrath?’” I asked. Juan grunted. I don’t think he understood.

“Did you come from Mexico?” I was too tired to really be polite. Juan nodded.

“We came over at Wares,” he told me.

“Do you, um, have a, um, green card?”

By this time the cook and my hitching partner had come over.

“We go to work now,” said the cook. Juan immediately got up and coughed hard. My partner shook the hand of the cook. I looked at this all quizzically.

“We going, too?” I asked him. He shook his head.

“They don’t need us,” he said.

“Do you need an ID?” I pursued the subject because of reasons I don’t know. The cook intervened.

“No, no,” he said. “You know framing?”

I admitted I did not.

“Oh, well maybe you could clean up?”

“We’ll be ok,” my partner said firmly. I looked at him, then to the cook.

“We’ll be alright.”

“Ok, alright,” said the cook then walked back to the fire.

My partner and I turned towards each other. He grunted. We walked over the ditch to the highway. There was a red truck parked in front of the empty temp service.

“Alright,” I said. “I guess we can go.”

My partner grunted again and we walked to a nearby bus stop and watched the workers pile into the truck. The cook was holding a bag with his pots and pan in it. My partner sat heavily on a bench.

“Good thing to get breakfast,” he said. “We don’t need the work. They’re crazy to do that. They’re not being paid shit.” I looked at him because I was still hungry and wondered where our next meal would come from. The red truck pulled out and my heart went with them. My partner took out a Newport and offered me one.

“Yeah,” I said. “That was crazy.”