

Alex Neely

A Wrangler

I was at a gas station in the desert of West Texas when I met the man I wanted to kill. His name: Arturo Del Toro. My wife's ex-husband. My family's *El Cucuy*. And up until this particular night, similar to the Mexican boogeyman, I only knew the man through stories.

There was the time he held a shotgun to my wife's chest. Which only reminds me of the story, when he hit a person with a car to "shut 'im up." And of course, who could forget the time he bit a police officer in the throat? He surely was the perfect combination of American arrogance and Mexican bravado; a character, if not for life circumstances, I would have only met in the waiting room to Hell.

And yet, I couldn't wait to see him, to catch a glimpse of the ghost-monster in his natural setting – nighttime. What a treat? My skin crawled with anticipation. Mouth dried. Fingers pulsed. And this was all before I left the house. All before I entered the family Jeep. It was my body's raw response, a biological preparation for the unknown.

But how did my wife see it? "We have to go pick up the little one." Pick up the little one!?! Is that all you have to say? Can't you see there is far more at stake? My very manhood is hanging in the balance! No, this not just any pick up; it was a meeting of primordial proportions...an ol' school, Wild West stand-off. A quick draw of daddy love. Two men enter. One man leaves.

It was the sky I remember next. The clouds, eerie errant strokes of gray, spread across the darkness. Slowly moving, they continued to expose and hide hundreds of visible stars, like spiritual spectators, all

watching a stage lit by a bright white moon. I, the protagonist, obliged. Entering the Jeep, I was more conscious of the plot than the path.

The Jeep seemed to drive itself. A left onto Pendale Road. A right onto Gateway Boulevard. A left onto Lee Trevino Drive. A merge onto I-10 West. The traffic was of the Sunday night variety. Families heading home from a day of religion. Trucks, packed with supplies, coming from or heading to a far-off destination. Men and women who worked the graveyard shift. And us. A mother. And a stepfather.

To the others, we must have seemed like just another vehicle on the highway. To us, we were “picking up our little one.” But to me, we were passengers on a ride to a spousal showdown. There must have been music or conversation at some point, but I can’t recall. Who could in a time like this? Well, I guess my wife could....

She sat in the passenger seat exuding the calm nature of a seasoned warrior. Her eyes seemed to calmly ripple like two mirages set in a sanctuary of tanned skin. I felt myself oddly aroused. Not sexually. But in the awe-inspired sense, like a young boxer hypnotized by the presence of a legend. She had *seen some shit*. Conquered demons. Overcome pitfalls. And most importantly, defeated her ex-husband.

Sure, there were many nights he left her bruised. Beaten. Crying alone and bloody on the living room floor. He even stole her truck, furniture and money. But, through it all, she kept her daughter. Kept her daughter alive. Safe. Happy. Healthy. It was a victory only a mother could truly understand. And one that provided her with an unyielding confidence.

I asked if she was nervous, and she chuckled. Not a laugh. A chuckle. The sort of bouncing exhale a parent gives a child, when they ask: *how was I born?* She placed her left hand on my right thigh. “Why? Are you nervous?” A half-smile crawled up her right cheek. Two rows of pristine whiteness flickered like light off a blade. “Nervous? Me?”

I instantly saw flashes of my stepdaughter, Arlina, clinging to her father. Crying. Screaming. Wailing. *No, I don't want to go with Alex. Please, mom! Please! Don't make me go! He's not my dad. He's not my dad! He's not my dad!*

“Nervous? C'mon...let's be serious.”

She was. I wasn't. My puffed up chest and flexed muscles were filled with more air than my answer. A pin or butterfly knife would send the entire structure crumbling. “Alex, you'll be-”

A cell phone rang. The patriotic tune of a country singer pushed at the seams of my wife's purse. "Sorry," she said, sifting through the handbag. The singer kept on twanging away about something to do with America. John Deere tractors. And beer.

"What now, Arturo?"

Up ahead, the two-dimensional shadow of mountains rose on the horizon, like knuckles on a fist. We were in *God's country*. Buildings were less frequent. Farmhouses were more visible. Yucca bushes and sun-fried patches of grass stretched into the darkness. Tire tracks, pressed into the sand, cut random paths through the desert. A billboard displayed an advertisement for Abundant Living, the local mega-church. The site of two white trailers was followed by miles of barbed wire fences. A lonely antique warehouse displayed a parking lot full of stage coaches. Fucking stage coaches! To city-folk, we were in *the middle of nowhere*.

"Why not?" My wife's voice split the air like an audible razor. "Babe? What's wrong?" I said it and immediately regretted it. Her left hand patted the air near my face. It was a silent act of *quiet, the adults are talking*. But I read it as: *quiet, the real parents are talking*. What a bitch, I thought; doesn't she understand, how much that hurts?

"Fine. Okay. Fine. You better be there." And with that, she shoved the phone back into her purse. I figured I'd wait to ask. Better to get reprimanded for not caring than pandered to about timing, I thought. "Now, he wants us to meet him in Horizon," she said, staring bullet holes through the windshield. "Where?" I hesitatingly pushed the question forward. It was a cop out; the way I treated that word. If she got angry, I would make it look like the question escaped my mouth. "At a gas station off the highway."

The exit for Horizon, Texas, is number 214 on I-10. It has two gas stations. No point in asking which, I thought, she would direct me later. So, I refocused on the road. Black concrete. Painted white lines. Dimly lit by speeding lights. It gradually ascended. Higher. Higher. Higher. Until the highway touched the sky. And then, a downturn. To a flat road.

Soft yellow lights, like candles held by the darkness, poked from either side of the highway. There, in the distance, stood the gas stations. The exit. Horizon, Texas. *It is there, my enemy awaits*. I felt my upper lip snarl at the idea. Hands tighten on the steering wheel. Right foot press a little harder on the gas. This was my march to the fatherly frontlines.

My wife adjusted in her seat, straightening her back. Phone, once again in hand. On the screen, a message: "I'm running late." Her sigh was not of shock but exhaustion. I didn't bother to ask if she was alright; I knew she wasn't. She was tired. Tired of the games. Tired of the bullshit. Tired of being tired. "He's running late, so we'll just wait in the parking lot." I nodded. There was nothing my voice could settle.

The truck turned off the highway at exit 214. It slowed to 40 mph. A sign at the intersection read: Stop. And naturally the truck did. On our right: Petro's Stopping Center. And across the bridge, on our left: Love's Gas Station. "He's going to meet us at Love's."

Of course he is, I mumbled. And smiled. "But he's running late, so just park near the back; that way we can see when he shows up."

"No problem." The sign to Love's has a bright red heart in place of the letter "o." Lit up and mixed with the cheap yellow, overhead lights; the heart produces a strange color on the gray concrete...somewhere between jaundice and fungal nail infection. At this hour, only seven cars are in the parking lot. However, a variety of work trucks – all different sizes and shapes – surrounded the property. Locally, rumors swirl of a prostitution ring at truck stop gas stations in Horizon. But, so far, no hookers were spotted.

The truck parked. Time: 11:17 p.m. I hadn't thought to look until this very moment. It's a strange time and day to be at a gas station. *What are all of these people doing*, I wondered. Buying gas. Eating snacks. Going the bathroom. And us? Picking up a child. And, at that very moment, my stepdaughter seemed similar to a possession. Christ, the entire thing felt illegal. Like a drug deal. Or human trafficking. I felt dirty for me. I felt dirty for my wife. Moreover, I felt dirty for the child. I mean, look what it's come to? A fucking gas station at 11:17 at night on a Sunday.

"There. He's here." I looked but saw nothing. Just strange lights, cars, trucks and darkness. "Over there," my wife said, as if she heard my silent suffering. There, beyond the gas station pumps, below the glowing heart: a black Ford Excursion. Silver grill. 32-inch tires. It didn't really drive as much as it pushed its way through the parking lot, rolling past inferior machines. This is the kind of vehicle marauders will masturbate to after Judgment Day.

The truck slowed. And I searched for his face. But the passenger door faced us. The truck slowed. I couldn't see his face. It was all so dark. Then, the truck stopped. Just feet within my stock 2004, Jeep Wrangler. The contrast made me feel like I was showering next to Peter North. My wife felt it. I was certain

of it. And I'm sure he did too. Just sitting there in his apocalyptic Trojan horse, staring down at us. What a pathetic sight I must have looked like!?! *Oh please sir, have mercy on us. We are but commoners of the machine. And know no better.*

My wife released an exhale, either in exhaustion or in appreciation. "You wanna stay here?" The words exited her mouth behind a breath. I couldn't tell if she wanted me to go or not. Did she want me to valiantly parade myself out in front of the Jeep, pound my chest and frantically bark? Full-on primitive intimidation. Or take the high road, and sit in the truck quietly? Modern male silence. I didn't know. So, I made her say it again. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Just stay here, I'm goin' to go get her." *Wait, what happened? Hold on! Give me a second chance! Let me think!* I heard the door close and watched her walk toward her ex-husband's truck. *Oh Christ, what kind of man am I?* This man was a felon in two states. And I just sat and watched. Watched as my wife walked. All alone. The passenger door opened. My five-year old stepdaughter emerged. She appeared to me as an infant; too small to exit the truck and too young to understand the situation.

My wife, holding Arlina's hips with both hands, helped her onto the concrete. Safe. Happy. Healthy. The little girl wore a Hello Kitty backpack and held a white, Styrofoam bowl of Ramen noodles. No doubt her dinner, from the fine cook her father is. I winced at the thought.

From inside my Jeep, I saw my wife's mouth move. She was speaking to her daughter. The little one responded with enthusiasm, wildly waving the bowl through the air while spilling noodles. Her mouth and body moved in a spastic fashion: part adorable and part retarded. I couldn't help but laugh. *Oh to be young...*

The truck engine roared. My wife motioned to Arlina. They both walked to the back of the truck and over to the driver's side. Save for the slim and short image of legs, they were out of sight. I could feel my heart beat. Sweat. Nerves. A third set of legs – denim and muscular – fell into the frame under the truck. He wore white cowboy boots, ribbed and pointed. Perfect for a shootout. Each step. Slow. Calculated. Heel, toe. Heel, toe. I could picture his fingers, thick and tan, elevating over a Remington Steel six shooter. Heel, toe. Heel, toe.

My wife's legs were now several feet from the boots. My stepdaughter's: inches. They were there. And I was here. They were they. And I was I.

I heard only breathing. My breathing. Inhale...exhale. Inhale...exhale. Inhale...exhale. I wrapped my left hand slowly around the door handle. I pulled. The door opened slightly, enough to hear the world but remain closed. My Jeep filled with the pungent scent of gasoline. *Do something, mother fucker; I dare you. I fucking dare you.* And then, I felt it. I felt the bizarre liberation that washes over you the moment you understand you have the capability to kill. Murder. End a life. It is a primeval epiphany. *Do it. Do it! Do It!*

The cowboy boots moved, rose and disappeared. Into the Excursion. Out of sight. Hidden. Invisible. My wife and stepdaughter came around from behind the truck. Both smiling. I smiled. They waved. And I waved. My left hand opened the driver door, closed it and rested on my lap. I inhaled and released a loud sigh. The radio stayed silent. No music could soundtrack this moment.

I leaned over the console, grabbed the passenger door handle and opened. My stepdaughter mid-story about a dog she saw. "...it had brown spots, and blue eyes," crawling onto the middle console, "and it was so nice mommy, so nice, and guess how big it was...like this big," spreading her arms open. My wife sat and closed the passenger door.

The thin, little arms of Arlina wrapped around my neck. She kissed me, in only the way small, thin little kid lips can. My wife began to laugh. I laughed at her laughing. She laughed harder at my laughing. And our little one laughed at our laughing. It was an auditory cocktail: part love, part exasperation and part insanity. We made it. Everyone was alive. Safe. Happy. Healthy.

A red light cast onto the concrete, up the Jeep hood and over our three bodies. All three of us squinted. It was the brake lights of *the* truck, Arturo's truck. The Excursion growled. Switched gears. Growled again. Lumbered through the parking lot, onto the road, over the bridge and into the dark. He was there. He was he.

Yet, we were still here. We were we.