

Excerpt from *Camaronero*

Manolo stared at the plastic sheet serving as Cacho's shroud.

Cacho and the other boys, seeing the signs, changed too. Most found other ways to make a living or moved away. Cacho saw his father, grow old and broke, with nothing to show for his hard work and religious faith. Saw his mother, Alma, dying from cancer, the family unable to pay for treatment which might save her.

Cacho drifted. Stopped showing up at the docks. Began hanging with pachucos, gang bangers, in Brownsville, bringing home wads of cash for his mother, driving her to the doctors himself. He desecrated his bronzed, athletic body with gang tattoos. When Alma died, he drowned himself in booze and cocaine.

He got mean, Manolo heard. And he got rich from smuggling drugs.

Smuggling was nothing new in the Rio Grande Valley. Along the barren border, a place without pity, a man did what he had to do to feed his family. Shortcuts, the skirting of laws which kept a man from making do, were not condemned. Like the revolt of Pancho Villa, such actions were revered in some quarters. Manolo remembered his own father talking of friends, good men, who bought "sotol," cactus moonshine from bootleggers in Mexico, and smuggled it across the Rio Grande to sell in the States. In Southwest Texas entire families worked to harvest then smuggle the product of the candelilla plant, a wax used for chewing gum and make-up, through the canyons and over the mountains in the dead of night.

To these people the border was a meaningless contradiction. A line drawn in the sand, illegal to cross but crossed with impunity and without repercussions by everyone. The laws

concerning candelilla were just as ass-backward. It was not illegal to smuggle the wax into the States, but it was illegal to smuggle it out of Mexico.

“Chingao,” Manolo’s father would say. “Who gives a shit. Who they hurtin’? They got to eat.”

Even so, there were limits, unspoken lines which, unlike the border, no one dared cross. Belief in the wrath of God and the condemnation of the Catholic Church kept many from going too far.

*But all that changed with the drugs, Manolo thought.*

For one thing the money was bigger. It made men do things they would not do for liquor or wax. For another it destroyed the people who used it and sold it, along with their families and the community. Some wrote ballads about the narcotraficantes, praising their defiance of the two-faced governments on either side of the Rio Grande, but nobody gloried in the destruction they left in their wake. Too many had been battered by it.

People in Port Maribel knew about Cacho. They walked silently past Carlos after Sunday Mass, still on his knees, wispy gray hair wafting under the hot breeze flowing down from the white ceiling fans, praying for the repose of his wife and the soul of his son. Some stood outside on the church steps, whispering about Cacho. Blamed his actions for the cancer which struck Alma, then Carlos. The boy was a curse upon his own family. But Manolo and the shrimpers never talked of Cacho. Never asked Carlos about the boy. They knew why Cacho did what he did. They did not like it. Did not agree with him. But who were they to judge Carlos for the sins of his son?

*Children live their lives – Asi es la vida.*

Manolo remembered when Cacho was sentenced to Huntsville. Remembered when Carlos died. One day the bank repossessed his boat. The next, his neighbors found Carlos in bed. Natural gas from the stove permeated the small, wood-framed house. Carlos, callused hands clutching silver rosary beads given to him by Alma on their wedding day, lay alone. They told the priests he died in his sleep afraid Mass would not be said if they thought it suicide.

Cancer, they said.

*More or less, Manolo thought. Que es la diferencia?*

The sight of Cacho brought it all back in a rush. In the few hours since he pulled Cacho from the sea and turned the boat towards port, Manolo changed his course. A lifetime passed. His lifetime. His wife and daughters were right. The signs had been everywhere. He simply refused to read them. He was an old fool. The final piece of proof lay before him, secured under a bird shit splattered tarp.

“No mas, no mas,” he whispered, making the sign of the cross toward Cacho.