

Underpass

by Daniel Passamaneck

The sky was very black; the moon was new and heavy clouds masked the stars. They were out on I-5, deep in the heart of the central valley, far from any town worth the name, far even from the occasional motel where they'd never stay anyway. The old Vega staggered along, headlights unfocused and wan, engine complaining and occasionally cutting out. The real problem, though, was the radiator. They were only able to make 75 or 100 miles at a shot before steam began to seep from the edges of the hood and in through the cracked plastic dashboard, at which point they had to pull over for an hour or two to cool off. Luckily, it was a chilly night and the engine returned to a safe temperature fairly reliably; they also had a few jugs of antifreeze and plenty of water, so once things were cool enough for them to pop the radiator cap they could pour in some automotive lemonade and keep the damn thing from blowing up for another hundred miles or so.

It was tedious and stressful, driving like this, but they needed to get south and this was the only way. The harvest would be starting soon in Coachella, and Luis wanted to see his new daughter, too. He was a family man and it hurt him to have been away for her birth. He hadn't seen any of his four children born, and each time it had felt to him like a betrayal. Jorge felt no such familial pull; he was a loner and liked his freedom, but he was hungry and he loved money so he was, in his way, equally motivated to coddle the old rustbucket down to the southland. But motivation was beside the point when the sour steam began to crawl around their faces again about thirty miles north of Buttonwillow. It was the middle of nowhere, and time to stop again.

Both men could feel that a serious downpour was imminent - the clouds had been lowering pregnantly for hours, and the air had been growing increasingly moist. As they glided to a shuddering stop, fat drops of rain finally began to splash heavily on the dusty windshield. With a grind of the starter they coaxed the tired old car

a few hundred yards further down the double ribbon of concrete to an underpass where an unnamed country road hove itself up and over the interstate. They crept to a second stop under this slender shelter just as the heavens really opened up and months of drought were gullywashed away. The plains soaked it up thirstily and then began to pool, black water in black puddles on a black night. They shut off the headlights and listened in the dark to the storm.

Minutes passed; other traffic did not. It had been some time since any vehicles had overtaken them, and no one now came up from behind them nor the opposite way on the northbound lanes across the median of oleander and garbage. It was easy to forget, after a while, that the rest of the world even existed. They were an island, alone in their own night.

Sudden lightning disabused them of this fantasy. A single bright flash was followed by several more, a sudden crescendo in the storm. These flashes first suggested, and then confirmed, a matter which surprised them both: they were not alone. Off the opposite shoulder, across four empty lanes and that grimy median, was another car - parked, as theirs was, as if left there to recuperate or die. The lightning's sudden glare did not give their night-accomodated eyes a chance to pick up any more details than that, but it was clear that they had company.

Jorge and Luis debate briefly what to do with this information. They were pretty sure the others weren't locals, or at least not rich ones - no one but migrants and poor folk drove a car that required this kind of shelter. Maybe they were meth-heads, or criminals hiding out. Maybe they were very hungry, or desperate, or dangerous. Maybe, maybe, maybe. On the other hand, maybe they had lots of food to share, or useful information about where to find work. Maybe they had more engine coolant, or needed water. Maybe, said Jorge, they were pretty, and eager for company. Whatever the facts turned out to be, it seemed that the potential positives outweighed the possible negatives. Who knew how long they'd be stuck there? They decided one of them would cross the

highway and see what he could see. The other would stay behind in case they found they had a maniac for a neighbor.

Jorge volunteered for the mission, still hoping to rescue some senioritas in distress. Luis stayed back to watch for a muzzle flash, as if he'd be able to do anything about it if he saw one. And so Jorge creaked open his passenger door and stepped out into the night, letting the old Vega fill suddenly with cool air, the crashing sound of rain, and tangible darkness. He carried a bottle of water and a tire iron, in case either was needed, and, partly, for protection.

Jorge pushed the door closed behind him and took a deep breath of wet air washed clean as the night itself; he glanced briefly up and down the road to confirm the lack of traffic, and then crossed over to the other side. "Hello?" he asked uncertainly. "Quien paso?"

The car was dry and dusty, no more roadworthy than theirs - a misbegotten Hornet, once green, now growing slow deep continents of rust. The tires looked to be inflated, but quite bald, and though it rested low on its rear shocks it did not appear to be occupied (to his disappointment) by any fair maidens, or (to his relief) by any escaped murderers. He walked slowly around the car twice before he fully embraced his opinion - it was abandoned. He crossed the interstate again and returned to the Vega to confer with Luis.

"It's abandoned."

"Okay. American car?"

"Yes. So what, though?"

"Maybe we could use their tires. Or their battery."

"Hey, that's smart thinking. The tires are no good, but we could check under the hood. I bet I could get it open. Come along, let's see what we can find. Take a little treasure hunt, eh?"

The men laughed dusty laughs as they stepped together into the night to explore the Hornet. Jorge still carried his tire iron, and grabbed his knapsack too. He left the water behind. There was plenty of it falling from the sky anyway.

Luis was still cautious as he approached the defunct vehicle across the way, calling out a tentative salutation. Jorge knew no such restraint and, with a well-aimed swing of the tire-iron, smashed in

the passenger window. Luis jumped at the unexpected noise, tried to glare at Jorge, but his countenance was hidden by the murk of night. And anyway, Jorge was already opening the door and slipping into the car, brushing broken glass off the seat and unlocking the driver's door for his compadre. Luis hopped in and closed the door quickly. "Did you have to do that? Was there no other way?," he demanded as he groped blindly for the hood release.

"Yes, there was another way, but it is less convenient," Jorge replied, sucking a finger where he'd sliced it on the blizzard of glass he'd created. "We're in, anyway. I didn't hear the owner complaining. How's that hood coming?"

"Got it." Luis pulled the release and the hood clunked a little, reluctantly releasing. They both got out and walked around to the front, felt for the latch and hoisted the bonnet. "Magnifico," Luis muttered. "I can't see a thing. Hey, did you bring your... your stuff?"

"Yeah," Jorge replied. "How about I work on the trunk while you see if you can tell what we have up here? Just use one finger, in case the battery is live - don't get shocked, okay? I don't want to finish this drive alone. It's lonely enough out here as it is."

"Sure." Luis began delicately poking around in the engine compartment while Jorge took his knapsack to the trunk of the slumping car, where he pulled out a leather pouch of fine files and picks.

"No one likes that I carry this stuff, till they need it," he mumbled cheerfully as he began to work by feel on the trunk lock. "But everybody needs a lock opened up sometime or another. I'm a public servant. And now maybe we find a spare tire, or jumper cables. Trunks, they're full of treasure...." And with a quiet click, the lock released; the trunk lid lifted a fraction of an inch and a dim gleam shone through the crack. "Mira, watch out!," Jorge called forward. "You've got a live battery there! The trunk light is working!"

Luis gave a small cheer. "Let me give you a hand, then; we'll see what we've got." He had overcome his qualms about breaking into and entering the moribund vehicle and eagerly trotted around to

help raise the recalcitrant trunk lid. It creaked painfully as they hoisted it.

For a while they both gazed down, hands above their heads, dirty fingers resting on the upraised bottom of the boot bonnet. Jorge's cut finger began to drip a little blood but neither of them noticed. The weak yellow light illuminated their faces, now shiny with sudden sweat and opaque with confusion. After a few moments of silence, unbroken even by the sound of breathing, surrounded only by the night and the crash of the heavy cloudburst, their eyes unwavering from their find, Luis finally whispered to Jorge, "Compadre, do you think that is real money?"

"I think so, amigo," Jorge slowly replied, fixated on the bulging sacks that filled the trunk. "And this is one hell of a lot of cocaine." For a few more minutes they stared down and said nothing. On the highway, no traffic approached.

