

Prologue - On the Lips of Children

by Mark Matthews

Between 2008 and 2012, US authorities discovered at least seventy-five drug-smuggling tunnels along the length of the 1,950-mile border between Tijuana and Southern California. This is the story of one of them.

Prologue

Particles of cave dust stirred in the air. Lupita felt them hit her nostrils, damp bits of subterranean soot going through her nose and then in and out of her lungs. The darkness was thick and impenetrable by sight, but movements of others were felt, and one of the hostages had just shifted. The tourists hadn't tried to flee or she would have felt a small sandstorm in the dust. Even their breath made shadow particles move. They were still tied up and could only inchworm across the floor. They were done begging for help now; only small whimpers remained.

Dante had stabbed one who wouldn't stop his begging and be quite. The high-pitched words of the captive screeched, and she could still hear them echoing forever in this cave. Now he was quiet and may have bled out. He could even be dead.

Hours went by, or days, or maybe months since this whole place had gone dark. The tunnel was shut down, caved in on the Tijuana side, and her husband was off to look for the way through. That was days ago—or hours. It was all unclear. It had been long enough that the flashlight batteries were all dead.

“It goes to da USA, all da way. I know it; smuggled meth all through here before. Smuggled people before. My brother went through before I did. And you and me, we're going to go soon. Just got to hit one good lick.”

If they ever had a chance at getting anything for the hostages, it was over. One captive had proved promising after some cell phone calls. A family from the U.S was to meet them at the duty-free shop. That was supposed to have happened already. She imagined them waiting there now; maybe still looking, maybe gone, maybe they changed their minds and really thought the police might help.

The other ones were unclaimed, but stripped of all that they had and tied up tight.

Now she was buried alive with them in this dark tomb. This wasn't one of those big tunnels, built like an elevator shaft with electricity; this was a pit, dug with barely a shovel, started but never completed, and now caved in, maybe on purpose.

All she knew was the flesh by her side, her babies, T and Q. Q, her little boy, hadn't fed in a while and T, her girl, tried to suck at her breast, which had gone dry long ago. Q was starving and wasting away. Sometimes he shook, sometimes he gasped for air, but mostly he lay unconscious or asleep. She felt both of them disintegrating and eaten by the dark. Her and the bones of her two children lying side by side would be all that remained. They would never be found, but that might beat a life with Dante.

Their tongues were dry, her milk was gone, and the last bit of water in the plastic jug had evaporated. She wondered if her monthly bleeding would arrive to help her measure the time. She urinated often at first, had even lost count, but this had stopped, and there was little bowel to pass. Her fingers clamored over the flesh of her children, always feeling their skin, comforting every piece, holding them against her flesh, cradling them together. They may have been better off had their eyes never opened.

The cave was crude, but the room they were in had been given the most attention and made into a small chamber. There was space for small belongings, a little table set up, and some crates of supplies. But it was now all swimming in the dark pool of ink surrounding them and the voices of the hostages.

"Please, please, lady. Just let us go now. Please, let us out. We can all go together and get out of here."

"I have children..."

"I'll forget I saw you..."

"You don't have to do this..."

They whimpered about wanting a Bible, threatened to have us killed, and swore they could get money if we just let them go. They all had that chance and failed. Then they cried and screamed for help from someone who would never come. They cried, and this made her babies scared and cry even harder.

After the light had gone away, Dante spent hours blaming her and then started stabbing the hostages. He was angry that his life was crumbling. It was the same way he had stabbed her and made these two children, the way he had ripped a knife through her old life when he took her from her garbage-picking family.

"You aren't as dark as them. You're half *gringo*. You learned English good. I can use you. Me and you together."

She was seventeen then and ready to go with him. She never had a father, just tired men with skin full of dirt looking after her.

Yes, her father was a white TJ day-tripper. He came across the border with twenty-five dollars in search of Tijuana sex. Her mother told her so; she said, "I took twenty US dollars from him. I left him with five dollars, and he left me with you."

Her father was just like one of these men they had cornered, maybe even one of them. All their captives had some US money, and Dante had grand schemes of thousand-dollar licks, but the best they found was one man with a hundred on him. Most had under fifty and nobody who would pay to recover them. Now they were all buried in this hole.

Lupita felt the fleshy heat on her palm start to get clammy and cold. Her child's muscles seemed to be fading. A rub on the back, a fast rub as if to move her heart, did nothing. One started crying; the other was fading. Baby Q was going, slipping; his heart pumped so hard she was sure it would shoot light out of his eyes, light up this hell. Light it up! *Going*, her baby was *going*, and something had to be done.

She thought about smashing in her baby's skulls and giving them a quick death, then finding a way to destroy herself, but their last thought would be that mommy killed them. This thought would stay with them into heaven. The orphanage told her all about heaven.

One baby was slipping, but the other baby's tears echoed and crashed off the cave walls and sliced into her ears. Rocking back and forth didn't soothe them. Hushing noises and melodies did nothing. Yes, both were still breathing but starving. Their tiny legs kicked, and it felt like holding the tiny little frogs she had caught as a child at the pond. Lupita closed her eyes and let an imaginary light shoot through her head. She saw a vision of her baby dying.

There was nothing left to give them. The only food was beef jerky. She had chewed on a stick and mashed it up as much as she could, placing pieces in their mouths. Their tongues moved; she could tell they wanted to eat it. They needed it inside of them, but they just gagged, cried, and spit it out.

She had tried foraging for food, rummaging through the old supplies, and then feeling her way with her hands blindly in front of her, inch by inch. Nothing was found that could be put in their stomachs, just some loose stones, more rope, empty water jugs, and one of Dante's favorite weapons of choice: an X-Acto knife. She then blindly tried to return to her babies and had to follow the crying. She had lost them briefly in the dark.

Every instant in the darkness became the moment just before Dante returned, but the moment never happened. Her nails were worn down from the scratch marks she left on the plank of wood above the hatch, but did little damage. She smashed rocks against the wood until her shoulder ached. Her screams were heard by nobody but her children. Nobody was there, and nobody was coming.

These hostages were her only adult company; they were all she had.

"My father was someone like you, someone just like you," she said, speaking to one who was tied up securely, yet still struggled off and on to break free. His breathing was heavy and labored, and his

skin was sweaty with fear. He had soiled his shorts, and the stench surrounded him.

“Why don't you have sex with women on your side? Why do you come here? Are you my father? Did you do this and leave me with my mother? She left me too, left me to the orphanage nuns, and then to the smell of garbage that is still in my nose... Are you him?”

She grabbed the man's calf, felt the thick muscle, and thought of a turkey drum stick. He tried to jerk away, but before he could move her knife shredded his pant leg and delved into his flesh, twisting and turning. She felt an incredible life-force in him flinch. A shriek came from underneath his gag, but she was surprised and thought it would be more. His fight was gone, but the blood was coming. She could feel it trickle onto her fingers, let it cup into her hands, and then placed a drop on her child's tongue.

Baby Q's tongue took moments to notice anything, but soon the tiny mouth of the babe began to suck on her finger. She pulled the finger out of his mouth, dipped it back into the pool of blood puddling in her other hand, and then tapped it back on the child's tongue. Q's tongue lapped, became wet, and then he swallowed, coughed twice, and somehow found enough energy to cry. Then he cooed.

She wouldn't let them die; she couldn't. All that had been done at birth to keep them healthy and alive, and now they were near death before their eyes had barely seen the light of day. In each of them was a promise that part of her would go on living, instead of feeling like she did; just grey meat that had died long ago.

She sliced the captive's leg a bit more with the knife. His screams echoed, but he was too tied up to struggle. The others fought against the cutting when it was their turn. Dante could tie anyone up securely; he could trap anyone, and now it was easy to draw blood. Cut the flesh, wait for the warm spurt of blood, make a nice pool in her hand, and then dip a finger into the thick fluid before placing it on her baby's tongue.

Just a bit more until Dante comes back. She would survive this; she would see to it that her children were fed and cared for. And

they would live... because it was working. Three hours later, after more feedings, she felt Q pass urine. And then T.

During her days of garbage picking, they had eaten worse: meat with flies on it, animals captured in wreckage, dogs that had died, soup made from bones with maggots.

She found she could feed alongside her children. Q and T needed their mother, and she would eat and nourish with the same meat and blood, just as they had. They clawed at her with their new energy, and she had some to give back.

They sat and waited for Dante's return. Her baby's life depended on him; all of their lives depended on him. Her whole life revolved around if this man was strong enough and cared enough to come back. She waited. They waited. He'd left them, found a way out and left them... or just forgot about them. She would have felt it if he was coming back. His orange-booted feet, the scent of his breath, the glare of his eyes, all of it would have been picked up by her senses in advance. The metal edges of the knife became an extension of her hand.

Her babies started to move. Tiny limbs started to reach and stretch, heads turned side to side, and they cooed when fed regularly. Only three of the five bodies in the chamber were still alive, all three of them making noises behind their gags, but none of them mattered. She picked the ones who moaned the most, the ones closest to dying, and drained them carefully so as not to push them over the edge. Small cuts bled them, but kept them alive.

Bloody fluid started to cover her precious children. She couldn't see it, but could feel it thick and spread all over. Her shirt was sticky with it, and Q and T had it on their chest, their hands, and their lips. She tried to keep them clean, but was unable. Nobody was to see them again, she knew, and these moments were her last with them. People like her don't get to be with their children forever, but their bodies can rest here and remain.

These children, these bits of flesh pulled out of her, now as bloody as the day they were born, were being kept alive by the blood of

these TJ men, who didn't deserve the organs inside that kept them alive day after day.

So she pulled tiny bits of flesh off of the TJ day-trippers, chunks she could sliver off and chew herself, like the beef jerky before, but mashing and mashing and mashing until it was almost as smooth and liquid as the blood.

Bowels came and went, sleeping patterns become regular, playtime was moving their fingers together, playing Itsy Bitsy Spider, letting the twins feel the flesh of each other, telling them stories, pulling them as tight together as they had been inside her womb.

And the darkness in the air seemed to be lifting.

Then the noise came.

And soon after... the light.

