

DIEGO'S CROSSING

ROBERT HOUGH



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Para el gran país de México

1



WE'RE ON THE TWO-LANE HIGHWAY running out of our village toward Nuevo Laredo. The sun is a smeary white light that bakes the inside of the car. The windows are open, and I'm blinking away fine bits of desert sand. We haven't even reached highway speed, and already the car is trembling like an old man's hands.

"Fourth," Papi yells. "Put it in fourth, *hijo!*"

The Datsun is light blue, though rust has eaten away the panels so every time you close the door, little flakes of red-brown flutter onto the toes of your boots. It backfires when you start it, coughing up clouds of blue-gray smoke, and then struggles to do the speed limit. When it's running, it makes a weird smell, like the engine is roasting coffee beans.

"You know I took your mother on our first date in this car," Papi is always telling me. "I'll keep it till it turns to dust."

In the meantime, he's taken the clutch apart and put it back together a half-dozen times, always insisting that it should work

fine now. Yet it never does, and getting the transmission into gear requires a bit of magic, which Papi's teaching me today.

I reach toward the gearshift. The plastic knob split and fell off long ago, so the only thing to grab on to is a grooved piece of metal where another knob would go if we could find one. I press the clutch with my left foot, shift into neutral, and pump the clutch again. Now comes the hard part: you have to slowly move the gear lever until you feel where the teeth haven't quite opened all the way. Then you waggle the shift until the gear finds its way around the block in the mechanism. I try, and hear a loud noise that's halfway between a rattle and a screech.

"It's okay," Papi says. "Try again."

I nod. We've already lost so much speed that a truck full of day workers races by us, the driver honking his horn and the men in the back all pointing and laughing. I shift again, and this time when I get to that point when the shift doesn't do what it's supposed to, I give a quick wrist flutter, just like Papi showed me, and the clutch finally engages.

"Good!" he says with a smile. "You're getting it."

I bring the car back up to speed. It's shuddering and the motor is howling and the wind is screaming through the windows. All around us is sand and scrub and low spiky cacti. A desert eagle floats high above. We can just barely make out the blanket of smog that hangs over Nuevo Laredo. Our plan is to drive there and go to our favorite taco stand, the one where the owner, a young guy named Miguel, is famous for his tripe in a chipotle sauce.

"*Dios mio*," Papi says. "I've been dreaming about those tacos all day."

I press my foot a little harder on the accelerator. At first the Datsun speeds up, but then it starts to tremble, like it's about to fly into a hundred pieces. "You better slow down," says Papi. "This car ... she's the one who decides how fast we go. Don't worry, we'll get there eventually."

I ease off just as we're entering a long, slow turn that circles one of the few hills in Coahuila state. After I round it, it'll be clear sailing all the way to Nuevo Laredo and Miguel's lunch stand. With any luck, we'll get there before the lineups start.

I round the bend and that's when I see the same truck full of day workers come to a full stop amid a group of seven or eight vehicles, most of them pickup trucks as badly rusted as our Datsun. I wrestle the gearshift into neutral and slow down. Papi says nothing, but from the corner of my eye I can see his jaw muscles gnaw beneath his stubbly bronze skin. I notice that my heart is beating hard, like I've just run a race.

Someone has strung a long white banner across the highway. As I cruise to a stop, I make out what it says: *This is what happens to those who offend the double letter.*

The Datsun shakes and stalls.

There's a wall of people, standing and looking down. They're mostly laborers, sturdily built campesinos with dark skin and tattered ball caps; most of them look like they're from the south, where the people are built wider and lower to the ground. None of them are speaking. They're just standing still, heads tilted downward, looking.

"Diego, don't," says Papi.

We both sit in the car, waiting, until I can't bear it any longer. I get out and walk toward the line of men, Papi calling for me

to come back. Once there, I stand on my toes, gazing over the shoulder of an older man wearing a flannel shirt with a rip in the shoulder.

Instantly, I wish I'd listened to Papi.

THERE ARE FIVE OF THEM on the roadway, hands tied behind their backs. Three are lying on their stomachs and two are on their sides, their legs drawn up to their chests. Three are obviously cartel members because they're wearing baggy jeans and their arms are covered in tattoos, while the other two look like regular people—they could be our neighbors back down in Corazón de la Fuente. I blink, half-thinking that when I open my eyes the dead men will have disappeared. They haven't, and I blink again. I can't look for more than a few seconds at a time, the scene coming at me in flashes of red and brown.

I hear Papi's footsteps, nearing.

"Ay no," he mutters, and I swallow away the stomach acid that's splashed up into my throat. "Ay no," he says again. The men are headless, their bloody neck stumps buzzing with flies.

We hear sirens. They're getting louder.

"Come on," says Papi. "We better go."

Without his saying it, I know our driving lesson is over. I hand him the keys and we climb in the old Datsun. Papi turns the ignition and the starting motor whirrs away. Papi is usually amused by the car's failings, but now he curses and slaps his palm against the steering wheel, a lock of hair falling over his forehead.

"Come *on*," he growls.

The car finally starts in a cloud of burning oil. He reverses

and turns around and we head back to our village. Neither of us speaks. Neither of us is hungry anymore.

After a while, Papi turns off the highway onto a little track that leads north to the river. It's probably a path used by migrants planning on swimming their way into the United States. For a minute, I think he's going to try to drive along the track, which would probably make the Datsun's suspension fall right out of the bottom of the car.

Instead, he stops and shuts the motor off. We both sit looking ahead—topping a stretch of green-brown scrub is a thin ribbon of muddy river, and beyond that is *el norte*. I hear Papi's breathing.

“Don't tell Mami what we saw today.”

“She'll hear about it anyway.”

“But she doesn't need to know you've had a look. You hear me, Diego?”

“I hear you.”

The gas fumes creeping through the floor are making me feel queasy. Or maybe it's the images of those dead men scrolling through my head. Those fastened hands, swollen and bleached by the sun. All those flies, buzzing like they'd gone insane. Those circles of red-brown where the victims' heads should have been, each the same size around as the plates Mami uses to serve up lunch.

In a second I'm out of the car, throwing up my breakfast onto the desert floor. I cough a few times and wipe my mouth and get back in the car.

“You okay?”

“*Si*,” I say.

“I told you not to get out of the car.”

“I should’ve listened.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes. It’s like we were part of it, just because we were there afterward. Just because we’re from the country where things like that happen.

Papi points across the border. “None of this would happen if *that* country didn’t like drugs so much.”

I can’t tell whether he’s thinking or fuming. Likely both.

“You have to ask yourself,” he finally says, “why people living in a country so wealthy and free of problems would do that to themselves. Do you understand it, Diego? Do you know why that could be?”

I don’t answer.

Papi turns the ignition and we hear that grating *whirr whirr whirr* once again. For a second he gets that glassy, quivering look people get when they’re about to start crying.

He doesn’t though.

The motor catches and we drive back home.