

## JUANITO'S STORY

A few unfamiliar trees stood in front of me. My torn shoes were soaking, but they still had miles left. The water dripped as I twisted my shirt, and my forehead's sweat followed. I checked my neck to ensure I had my rosary. My grandmother had blessed it the morning I left my beloved home in search for a better future.

“Julio, what now?”, I asked with a heavy breath as I stepped over his fresh footprints.

“Now, we wait”, Julio responded as he squinted his eyes.

The fierce sun was bright, and all I could think about was my grandmother looking up at the same sun. I sat behind a tree and placed my backpack in-between my legs. I took out the wet photo out of my backpack hoping I could still see the image.

“This is my daughter”, I proudly said as I rose my hand.

“You get to see her soon if you're lucky.”

“If I'm lucky? There's no such thing as luck.”

“You get to see her if that rosary of yours protects you”, he smirked.

I chuckled.

“I have one of my own in the States”, he said as he tilted his head down. “She's graduating high school in a couple of days. I promised her I'd be there.” He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his blistered hand. Julio had been deported a few months ago, but he knew the path.

I looked around and noticed the hundreds of crosses emerging from the ground. Some had been made with brown sticks and tied with rubber bands. Others were wooden white, but they all had one thing in common: they were looking straight at me.

“How much longer?”, I asked Julio as I looked at the few ounces left in my red one-gallon jug.

“Until they can no longer see clearly.”

I began to think about those that had been left behind; it helped time go by faster. *Who were they? How old were they? What was their mission?*

A high-pitched whistle distracted me from questioning the lives of my fellow brothers and sisters. I looked up. An eagle flew above our heads. I often wondered if animals ever struggled as much as humans did.

The sun began to go into hiding.

“Watch for snakes, we’re taking off in a few”, Julio remarked.

My heart initiated a faster pumping as I gave Julio a firm nod. I tied my shoelaces.

“¡Corre!”, he cried out.

I ran kilometers, and continued to run distancing myself from the flashlights’ brightness that could be seen in the dead of night. I could feel my body deteriorating, but the thought of seeing my daughter and the eagle flying high gave me the strength I needed to keep going. Giving up was not an option.

I lost my backpack in the journey, but I saw the beginning of a road where the dirt ended. Various cars sped in front of me. “Texas”, their license plates vaguely displayed.

“Rápido, get in!”, I heard someone shout fifteen meters from where I was standing bent down, holding my knees, and gasping for air.

A tan stranger with a grey mustache who appeared to have just finished putting air in the rear right tire of his semi-truck on the shoulder of the road looked at me. He waved his hand as if he were blowing air on his face. Confusion occupied my brain, but I could sense goodness in him. I rapidly jumped in his semi-truck with my body’s remaining strength.

“I’m heading to San Antonio”, he said as he lowered the volume of the stereo, which was playing a song in my native language—Spanish. “I have a delivery to make.”

I crouched but said nothing. I looked up, and saw a rosary hanging from his rear-view mirror. The smell of avocados filled my nostrils.

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“I have not seen Julio since that day. I still keep him in my prayers hoping his cross was not added to the bulk, and that he made it passed the border patrols.”

“That’s tough, man”, my construction coworker, Peter, said as he took another bite of his sandwich and continued scrolling on his cellphone.