

Ito Romo

Susan Bergholz Literary Services

word count: 2750

Flatbed

They could hear the fire engine coming for a long time before they could actually see it. The father cried. The mother, holding the youngest, an infant, a little boy, in her arms, cried, too. Two others, another boy about nine, and a girl, six or seven and freckled, stood by the ranch fence, collecting pebbles to throw at each other.

“You’re gonna get bit by a rattler,” the father yelled at the two between sobs and between wiping his face with a handkerchief. “And don’t come a running to me when you do.”

They took after their mother, white as could be. No one ever believed him when he’d say proudly, “Yes, sir. They’re my kids. All mine,” especially when they’d go up into the panhandle to visit her family. Once, when they were visiting some relatives in Sweetwater, the boy, the oldest, around five or six years old pulled his shorts down to show everyone a light brown birthmark that covered the back of his little thigh. He said, “See, just like my daddy.” Everyone who had come for miles from all over the county, some even from way past the caprock, laughed at the kid. The faulty window unit made the air in the dark living room humid and heavy. Roberto laughed, too, nervously. Not a dark face around them, not even his kids.

But four years in South Texas had toughened their fair skin; it glowed a golden pink, like looking at the sun through the dried husk of early corn.

Roberto stared at what was left of the flatbed. Everything they owned packed tight and high had been covered with a \$3.99 polyurethane canvas from Wal-Mart, then secured with a hundred feet of zigzagged yellow polyester rope he'd had for years but never used—all gone now, all charred, black, unrecognizable.

He had flicked his cigarette butt out the window at the end of an old Hank Williams song he'd been singing for the kids.

Fire catches fast at 60 mph.

When the kids and his wife had started yelling, he'd looked behind him through the rearview mirror at the blaze following them. The trailer hitched to the truck was overwhelmed by flames. He pulled over onto the shoulder of the road, made sure they got out of the truck safely, then made them stand far away, close to the barbed wire fence. They watched.

“Look out for snakes,” he yelled, then left them there while he walked towards the road to meet the county fire truck. The fire had almost burned itself out. A fireman only had to douse the glowing embers to snuff it. Black smoke streaked against the baby blue South Texas sky.

“What are we gonna do, Meagan?” Roberto said to his wife. They were back in the truck, headed into the underpass to the Shamrock station on the other side of the interstate, the relief from the coolness of the underpass momentary.

“Well motherfucking quit smoking for one,” she answered. “I kept telling you not to throw the darn cigarette butts out the window. But I thought you'd start a *grass* fire.

Not this, no, not this. How many times did I say it, huh? How many?" One of the flatbed trailer's tires had popped with the heat of the fire. The rim screeched as they rolled onto the pavement of the Shamrock station.

"Jesus on the cross," he answered.

"Stop swearing in front of the children, Robbie. I've told you over and over and over," she yelled at him. "We ain't got nothing left. All gone. No beds for the kids. No refrigerator. No clothes, Robbie. Do you realize that? All we've got left of clothes is what we're wearing. The kids don't got nothing left, and they start school next week. What we gonna do now? You're an idiot. I can't believe you. Give me the fucking pack of cigarettes." She opened the door and stepped out of truck, the baby in her arms. The two other kids followed.

"Give 'em here," she snarled.

Roberto pulled the cigarettes reluctantly from his shirt pocket and handed them to her as he came around the front of the vehicle toward them. She threw the pack on the ground and started smashing them with her sneaker.

He stared at the ground, not at what she was doing, just at the pavement in front of him.

"I start working tomorrow, Meagan," he said.

"You ain't gonna get paid for two weeks, Robbie, two weeks. What are we gonna do till then, huh? How much you got in your wallet? Tell me."

"You know how much we have. You were with me when we cashed the last check at the groceries. Eight hundred went for the money order for the apartment, four hundred for the deposit and another four hundred for the first month's rent. That left us

about two hundred. Thirty dollars for gas. We have about one-hundred-seventy-five dollars left, something like that. We'll go to Wal-Mart. Stuff's on sale now for back-to-school. We'll get the kids T-shirts and jeans for now. One pair of jeans each and two or three T-shirts. We'll get the baby some more diapers. Something for the kids to sleep in. They'll be all right, Meagan. They will. Look at 'em over there. They're playing, friggin' throwing rocks at each other. They're kids, Meagan. They'll be all right. I'll look for more jobs. Lots of building in San Antone. Lots of work. The apartment's paid for for a month, Meagan. We got a roof over our heads." He looked down again, focused on the hot asphalt.

"Did you subtract the money you paid for the damn cigarettes, Robbie, huh? You subtract that?"

"Come on, Meagan, for heaven's sake. You ain't gotta be like that. You think I did it on purpose? You think I wanted to burn everything? You think I wanted to burn the kids' clothes, their toys? What the hell?" He started walking away from her, still staring at the ground, then yelled, "I gotta pee. Stay away from the tall grass, kids. There's snakes out there. Don't think that just 'cause we're by the goddamn store that there ain't no snakes out there."

"Stop cursing, Robbie," Meagan yelled at him. "Stop cursing."

"Goddamit," he said again, when he found the door of the bathroom was locked. He started making his way toward the store for the keys.

* * *

In the bathroom, door safely locked, he pulled a little plastic bag from the coin pocket of his jeans, laid it on the sink, then grabbed for his keys. He scooped some of the sticky yellow powder onto the key and held it to his nose, felt the sting in his nostrils, in his eyes, in his brain. He ran the water, dipped two fingers into the stream, then held his fingers up to his nose, snorted the water to push the shit down. He closed the lid on the toilet and sat down. Tried to gather his thoughts. “Fuck,” he said, shook his head, woke up. What the hell am I gonna do? he thought. And then I go and spend fifty bucks on this shit. He took another hit. Felt the sting again. The exhaust up above him by the light went on suddenly. It startled him. He sat on the toilet and put his hands on his face. He could still smell the burning; it floated in the air around him, followed him.

He’d poked through the rubble for his toolbox to change the busted tire. The red paint had peeled right off the box except for places where the metal folded in to make a corner. But the tools were there, amazingly intact. Then he had remembered that he didn’t have a spare.

The speed up his nose intensified the smell of the burnt plastic.

* * *

They met at the parking lot of the Alamo Drag races one hot evening five summers ago, at the concession stand, under the T-shirt vendor’s yellow light.

“I know that the T-shirts look a little off color with the damn yellow light, but it’s the only way I can keep these damn mosquitoes away. Y’know they have the malaria, I

mean the damn West Nile virus,” the vendor said to him when he’d finally stepped up and gotten the courage to ask, “Which one you want? I’m buying.”

She smiled at him and pointed at a red tank top that read *Smokin’ Alamo Dragway* in burning black letters. She wore big Mexican hoop earrings from the border. They sparkled as if glittered with yellow diamond dust. She couldn’t stop looking at him, at the color of his skin, he was so sexy. She couldn’t stop smiling. She felt a tingle between her legs when he finally reached in and play-punched her in the arm after a stupid joke about a blond. He swore to her he’d never seen a woman so white.

“I can see your veins, man,” he said to her, touching her skin gently with his lazy finger, “I can see your blood pumping. That’s amazing, man.”

Not two weeks later, in that very parking lot during the last race of the season, they fucked as if they were in a movie, hard and sweaty. She came as spinning tires burned rubber into smoke. He came right after she did, right as Jack Harris’ Nitro-Thunder’s chutes whooshed opened.

They were quiet for a long time. He stayed inside her . . . way past the yelling and the clapping, past the announcer’s voice bidding them a good evening and a safe drive home. They finally stirred when they sensed the crowd walking around them, a kid cried because his dad wouldn’t buy him a corndog, “You wanna get all fat like your mom?” The mother just turned around as she walked ahead of them and shot him the finger. He could barely see them through the windows, tinted just one shade past legal.

She stayed pregnant for the next four years.

* * *

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. He panicked. Quickly shoved the baggie into the pocket of his jeans.

“Robert, what you doing in there?” asked Meagan. “Open the door.”

“I’m coming. Hold on a second. I’m coming.”

She heard the toilet flush, saw him walk out, stared at him.

“What were you doing in there, Robbie? What the hell were you doing in there?”

The baby started crying.

“I was peeing. Meagan. What do you think I was doing in there?”

“I know what you were doing in there, Robbie. I can tell by your eyes. You’re tweakin’ again aren’t you, Robbie? Goddamit, Robbie. I can’t believe you.”

“I ain’t doing it again, Meagan. I promise. I was crying, dammit. I just burned everything my family owned because of a stupid mistake and you think I’m doing crank because my eyes are red? You’re heartless, Meagan. Heartless.” He sniffed. It stung.

“You better not be fucking doing it again, Robbie. I’ll leave you. I promise I don’t care what happens to you. I’ll take the kids and head back home. I promise, Robbie, you do that shit again, and I’m gonna leave you for good.”

“Dammit, Meagan. Trust me for Christ’s sake. Trust me for once. I’m trying to do a good thing. I got myself another job. Got us an apartment. We’re moving to the big city like you always wanted us to. Dammit, Meagan. Trust me, goddamit, trust me for once in your fucking life.”

His eyes started watering now. The drip stung his throat. He sniffled, went with it, took his dirty handkerchief out of his back pocket again, wiped his tears, bowed his head.

“Okay, Robbie. Sorry. I’m sorry. I’m all worked up. I’m worried, y’know. What are we gonna do?”

“I told you, honey, we’re gonna be all right. We got some money left, enough to buy some clothes for the kids, some food. The kids are starting school. They get the damn free breakfast and free lunches, don’t they? We’ll buy snacks and stuff for dinner. I’ll get a couple of them blow-up mattresses for you and the kids in the meantime. I can sleep on the floor. I’ll go downtown tomorrow morning, work all weekend doing day labor. Make a few extra dollars for us. We’ll be all right, promise.”

They heard the kids yelling, turned towards the field.

“What’s going on over there,” he yelled, “You two get yourselves over here right away. You hear me?”

The kids came running towards them.

“I promise, Meagan. Believe me, we’re gonna be all right. I can feel it. This is just a temporary thing, a temporary setback. I’m going back into the store right now and calling my dad’s friend, you know, Mr. Ramirez, and I’m gonna ask him if he ain’t got something I can do to make a few extra bucks on the side tomorrow, some clean-up somewheres, some paint job, fuck, cleaning bathrooms for alls I care, and if that don’t work, I’ll do day labor just like I said. We’ll be all right. I promise.”

“Daddy, can we buy a Coke? Can we buy a Coke? C’mon, Dad, we’re thirsty. We’ll share it. Promise. Me and Cindy’ll share it, huh, Dad? Can we buy a Coke?”

Robert stared at Meagan for direction.

“Sure, let ‘em have a dollar. And don’t be fighting for it once you get it. Share proper. Be good.”

He reached into his pocket for some cash, and, as he pulled his hand out, the crank slipped out and fell onto the pavement. He saw it fall. The kids held their hands out. Robert looked at Meagan to see if she had seen it.

Baby at her waist, she stared at the crank on the ground, then up at Robbie, then away into the black smoke spun out across the blue sky, wondering how they ever got to this point. The blue sky made her think of her mama, of the endless white of the cotton fields back home in West Texas, of the peace she’d known, it seemed, just a short time ago.

The kids didn’t notice anything. They started fighting for the can of Pepsi and dropped it. Meagan yelled, “Give it here.” The girl quickly picked it up, handed it to her mama, and ran off.

She couldn’t even look at Robert. She walked around him towards the back of the building where she sat on the sidewalk in the shade of the dumpster. She put the near-empty can of soda to the baby’s mouth and let a few drops trickle in. The baby licked the now warm liquid. She said quietly, “My baby. Sweet, sweet baby.” She stared at the baby’s tongue, amazed at its fleshy pinkness. She remembered a bunch of baby mice she’d found back home once in her closet in a shoebox, squirming. To be back home in my daddy’s farm, she thought.

The sun brightened, got hotter, it seemed. She swooned, felt faint. The baby grew heavy. She was sure she'd drop him. She mouthed the name "Robert" then mouthed "help me" but nothing came out.

She slowly raised the can of soda to her lips and let the last of the tepid liquid flow down her throat. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, gathered her strength, and yelled out this time, "Robert."

He came running round the corner, saw her struggle, helped her up.

"Give me a quarter, some change, anything."

He reached into his pockets pulled out a handful of change and poured it into her cupped hand.

"Meagan, look, I threw it away, flushed it down the toilet. All gone. Never, never again. Never. Promise," he said as he followed her to the store's entrance.

She stopped at the pay phone, leaned on the newspaper vending machine. She picked up the phone, put two quarters into the slot, and pressed "0". The operator answered. "I'd like to make a collect call, ma'am. Yes. 806-791-4091. Meagan, yes ma'am, Meagan Ramirez. Thank you."

"Hello."

"Yes, this is the Southwestern Bell Operator with a collect call from Meagan. Meagan Ramirez. Will you accept the charges?"

"Yes. Yes, ma'am. I accept."

"Go ahead."

Meagan. Is that you? You all right?"

"Yes, Mama. It's me. It's me, Meagan. Mama, Mama, I'm coming home."