hear the children in the park, smell the smoke of barbecues. In the stillness I feel the garden merge into me, so that the garden is pulsating within me and the garden, the house, and I hum to the same melody. I am reminded that when I do not look, is when I see. And when I do not listen, is when I hear. And when I do not think, I am.

Cocido

Larry Hill

The street looked much the same as when he’d left four years ago. Same hazy San Joaquin Valley sunlight landing on neglected buildings tagged with Chicano graffiti. Same trio of vagrants, or their successors, bum in the middle holding the paper sack of grape, other two eyeing it and rubbing their faces. Same sign on the family restaurant, just Villarreal’s, nothing else, the red maybe fainter, because he could detect the brush strokes forming the tall V. He noticed, too, the sign in the window. Cerrado. Christ, early afternoon and it was closed.

He pulled over, took his hands off the wheel and spread his fingers. Not a tremor. Still he thought of Specialist Reinhardt’s one-on-one inquisitions after the Baquba missions, those tense inquiries happening for weeks into months, until you feared a Reinhardt shooting investigation more than you feared not shooting at all. Except for Kavanaugh. Fucking Kavanaugh feared nothing. As the rented pickup rested from its drive over the Grapevine, Alex felt the pull of a memory, one he couldn’t permanently switch to off, something still in his head about the Medevac to Ramstein.

A Marine medic explains the 11-7-2 rule to him. “Eleven on liters, seven walking wounded and two of us,” he says, like the equation is religion. He’s placed on a liter, blood from the one above landing on his left hand when the plane banks toward Germany.

Behind the restaurant, he got out of the truck and tested his gait. Not bad. He felt for pain, thumb and finger opposed on his skull as if checking a cantaloupe. Shit. Not good. His decision to return home began in the Palo Alto Hospital, that female doctor teaching him to pick out small memories to meditate on, ones that calmed him, her words soft, her smile nice before she moved on. Then, after months of staying at Kavanaugh’s pad in L.A., he’d told Kav his plan. “I’m going home to help my sister in the family restaurant.” They’d been watching Iron Chef on the Food Channel, both of them stoned and full of take-out pizza.

“Big family?”

“No,” he said, seeing in his mind just the three of them—Tensia, Mama, and himself—posed apart from a town full of Mexicans, none of them blood related that he knew of.

“This involves the sister you used to e-mail?”
“Yes.” Used to? Had it been that long? Kavanaugh had smiled like a snake. “Cool, but take it slow, bro, and go with the flow.”

Tensia surprised him at the restaurant’s rear screen door. “So, you made it.”

He felt his limbs go weak. “Finalmente.”

They kissed and he held her, feeling in her tense shoulders her familiar contrariness. Year and a half younger, she’d never taken a back seat to him. Now she turned away, as if dodging a face off. He followed her into the dim kitchen. The collection of odors here included the unmistakable taint of neglect. A few notes of Tejano music found his ears, but it carried none of the passion he remembered.

“Tensia,” he said, halting where they’d so often toiled side by side, the Villarreal kids, always working, too busy to get into real trouble. “What’s going on, m’ija?”

She moved out of a band of sunlight that had found its way through the front window. “Don’t look at me.”

But he had seen enough. Her appearance had nearly buckled him. It made him think of what the grunts called inevitable doom. Hang anybody out long enough and a shit storm will happen. “How long you been doing meth?”

“Heard you were coming home one of these days.” She stood at the back door, her silhouette a stranger. “And if there was anything left, you’d know what to do with it.”

Then she was gone. Likely on foot, for he hadn’t seen any cars outside when he’d parked. He lifted his eyes to the decorative tiles set there by his father and cursed his inability to chase her.

He called Anson Peak’s number and left a message. His brain ran wild with a mix of language he didn’t understand. Appliances he reached for seemed to shun his touch. In the ancient walk-in refrigerator, he shut his eyes and slumped in the cold. At least the power hadn’t been turned off. A picture came to him. He and Tensia, five, six years ago, exchanging confessions about trying weed. How they swore they’d never become a stoner, a drop out, a kid messed up in the dope life.

He thought of words he’d been hearing about victory. All he’d seen since the day he’d been hit were the fallen. The rumble of war shocked his eardrums and he wondered what noise in Tensia’s head had taken her down. He walked the food line to the station at the end, opened the cash register. Nada. “What are you going to do?”

“Tex at the Drop Inn says he’ll pay me to make antojitos.”

“Appetizers for derelicts.” He opened the cabinet below the register that served as Mama’s office, and spread his hands. “What did you do with everything?”

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Opening his eyes, he said no to a line of four Corona beers. Instead he chose two packages of Rumba beef shank portions off a depleted shelf and gathered a few vegetables still firm enough for the stock pot. Bumping the heavy door open with his one good ass cheek, he murmured to the walls, “I’m going to start a pot of cocido.”

The drive out to Anson Peak’s was a straight shot that ran parallel to the Santa Fe tracks. Cotton rushed by one side, vines the other. Then Anson’s pistachio trees started to appear. He’d bragged to his buddies occasionally about this belt of agriculture between L.A. and San Francisco. No boasting though about his hometown. Like many others, it lay stymied and neglected amid the immense fields. The sky had clouded, and far out above the land, a streak of gun-metal gray threatened rain. Alex listened as the endless crops hummed an undertone that matched the pickup’s tires. Somewhere in this very landscape,
his mother and father had toiled as youths, both of them waifs in their own way, both of them determined in unison to rise above the labor camps.

A black Bronco passed him at high speed. Alex watched it slow down and come to an angled stop that blocked the off road leading to Anson's acreage. Rather than squeeze past it, he braked next to its left rear tire so he could study the driver. This sudden ambush proved to him who was running the methamphetamine trade around here. Troy Ledbetter, bearded and wearing a cowboy hat, sat at the wheel. With him, a huge Mexican leaned to the dash and turned off blaring hip hop.

Alex opened his door, held it like a shield. “Morning, Troy.”

“Villarreal?” Ledbetter removed his hat and spat. “With that hair and all, I thought you was a hippie or a violin player.”

Alex’s grimace into the sun pained his temples. “You following me, Troy?”

“Just in hopes we might talk business.” He fingered granny-sized dark glasses and grinned. “And to welcome you back.”

Alex saw little in him resembling the tough high school scatback to his fullback, not that many years ago. “Well, let’s get to it.”

“My man riding shotgun,” Troy said, displaying a hand toward his passenger, “is a champeen cage fighter.”

“That don’t mean shit to me, Troy.”

“Well,” he cackled, “guess you had to be here.”

“Guess so.”

“Your sister,” Troy said, pursing his lips as if he detested his message, “is in to me four grand.”

Alex felt the familiar ripples, the kinetic warnings ringing in his ears. “You want to think that over some?” He could see the big cabrón next to Ledbetter move, causing the vehicle to groan.

Ledbetter looked off as if searching a workable sum in the sky. “How’s about we knock off one grand for that bronze star you brung back?”

“How about another grand for my purple heart?”

“Shit, Alex, give me $2,500 and I’ll call it square.” Ledbetter stepped out of the Bronco. He looked to be no more than a scarecrow against the drab backdrop of the hushed fields.

A dry gust riffled Alex’s hair. He heard the faint howl of a hound. Above, a hawk dipped. He smelled smoke and beer breath. From the truck’s glove box, a whiff of gun oil. Everything around him looked to be a good place to shoot somebody.

“Fucking Kavanaugh is displaying the body of a hajji, holding him up against a blood-splattered wall like he would a prize fish. A woman screams. Five kids lay flat on the floor, their eyes enormous at the sight of their father being a marionette. The dead man’s pajamas have been blown away, and Corporal Kavanaugh asks someone to capture this on camera, the horror his M-16 has performed.

“I’ll give you two large, Troy.” He swung the pickup’s door out of his way, walked over to Ledbetter and counted out bills from a roll he’d been packing in the front pocket of his Levi’s. “Haggle over this, and there’ll be a death for someone to investigate.” He winced at the scream in his head, nodded toward Troy’s passenger. “Maybe two.”

Under Anson Peak’s shading oak, he stared at his hands, the way his knuckles had gone white on the steering wheel, the pickup at rest, smell of rain drifting across his face. A large Lab showed itself and ran off yapping. Alex had been out here before, while his father and Mr. Peak shared Vietnam War stories. His father always spoke well of the attorney, how Anson had come from an Okie mother who’d picked cotton in Bakersfield, and a father from Oildale who’d once played in a Merle Haggard band.

He tried for little or no limp as he walked toward the house. The white-enameled porch boards creaked, reminding him of the day Anson had held a kind of wake after his wife’s funeral. Half the town’s women, brown and white, had tramped across this porch, carrying casseroles, while the men lagged behind to grab a smoke. He’d just started his senior year, Tensia her junior term. Few months later, Papa’s work truck was discovered one foggy dawn, wheels up in an irrigation ditch. Alex had always hated that truck, the smell of his father’s plumbing and electrical tools mixed with the sweet breath of his tequila nights.

At Anson’s door, he heard light voices and saw movement in a window to his right: Anson and someone else, a young woman’s light laughter he recognized at first note.

“Hi, Alex,” Yolanda Medina said as the door opened. “It is so good to see you.”

He sat in a big leather chair across from the attorney and Yolanda. They conferred side by side, Mama’s folders open in front of them on the large desk. Yolanda explained that she still had a year to go at Fresno State. She was helping out Mr. Peak, hoping to go on to law school and become a lawyer herself. Dressed in jeans and a simple white shirt, she appeared less shy than he remembered, her glossy black hair shorter. The quiet, skinny one, he recalled, who always refused the star fullback’s come on.

Anson hunched his shoulders over the spread of papers, big stone fireplace behind him a dark pit. “You’re sure this is the way you want to go?”
A large man, he carried his girth like a person to be reckoned with. “You
won’t end up with much.”

Alex recollected his father saying that Mr. Peak could make you feel like a
man calling a raise with pennies. “If I can get out of this flat even, I’m good.”

“Well,” Anson said, “your name’s on everything, so it should be workable.”
He looked at Yolanda, and then came back to him. “How’s Tensia feel about
this?”

“She closed the restaurant,” he said, as if that explained everything.

Yolanda stood and moved around the desk, and placed her hand on his
shoulder. “The town won’t be the same without Villarreal’s,” she said. “Why
not take some time? We might be able to get some help for your sister.”

“Only help for meth is getting far away from it.” Yolanda’s hand moved
away as if she’d felt the silky scars at the base of his skull.

“It’s tough,” Anson said. “You see much of it over in Iraq?”

“Iraq isn’t Vietnam.”

Anson leaned forward. “Is that right?” Then he sat back as if he’d lost his
air supply. “Shit, Alex, do what you think best. The economy has bottomed
out. Tensia has borrowed against both the restaurant and the house. You’re
tap city, as we used to say. Give me some time and I might get you a couple
thousand.”

“I’m leaving soon as I can.” He hadn’t caught up with Tensia since this
morning, but he had to get her away from here. “You’ve got my number.”

“Well...”

“And your mother was sent several notices that Tensia evidently answered
with lies or flat-out ignored. And it’s going to take some work to find out how
she borrowed all that money.”

“I hear borrowed money is a hot subject these days,” Alex said. “Right
now, let’s wipe it up quick as we can.” An unrelated thought snuck up on him.

“You still have lots of roses at the end of those southern trees?”

“Wild roses,” Anson gazed southward. “Living off a bit of irrigation
run-off that is drying up.”

“That’s a yes?”

“Last yes you’ll get on that patch before it turns to hard pan.” Anson
shook his hand. “You sure you want to take off so soon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Not thinking about revenge?”

“I settled with Troy Ledbetter coming out here. If I wanted revenge I
would have shot him.”

Anson smiled. “So you didn’t?”

“Sir,” he said, lifting his left leg into the pickup after him. “I only shoot
people I’m paid to shoot.”

Driving off, he could see Anson being joined by Yolanda Medina, both of
them waving goodbye, rain starting to form tiny explosions on the sideview
mirror, his hands shaking again, and that untraceable screech traversing
between his ears.

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them waving goodbye, rain starting to form tiny explosions on the sideview
mirror, his hands shaking again, and that untraceable screech traversing
between his ears.
His cocido stock warring against the dull odor of neglect spiked the empty restaurant’s spirit. He watched the simmering pot, thinking Mama would laugh at such a meager supply. Letting it be, he went outside the rear door and lit a cigarette. As if waiting for him, a figure moved from the vacated service station across the alley. The man’s hooded sweats shadowed his face, but Alex brought him up from the past by his cool stroll.

“If it aint Ray Mendoza.”

“Hola, Alex.” Mendoza’s dark features screwed into a wicked wink. “Fuck, man, with that hippie hair, I hardly could tell it was you. Heard you got shot or something.”

“Got my ass blown off,” Alex said. “What’s your excuse?” He saw the meth in Mendoza’s eyes, in his yellow-fanged smile. “The restaurant is closed.” Across, at the old station, a small gang of street vaqueros had moved from under the pump’s canopy. “See you’re runnin’ with the town’s finest.”

“Oh, that isn’t me, man. You know I’m a good worker.”

“When’s the last time you saw Tensia?”

“She still driving the Taurus I gave her before I left?”

“Far as I know.” Mendoza shuffled his feet, adjusted his ball cap. “Haven’t you seen her?”

“Yes.” Alex waited for him to settle. “She runs off, Ramon, where is she runnin’?”

“She’ll be back, man,” Mendoza said. “Tensia is always here.”

“Sign on the front door, Ramon, says closed.” He took a final drag on his smoke, field-stripped it, ground the ash and paper into the asphalt. “After tomorrow you and your boys can bust open the padlock, come in and start prepping for breakfast.”

“Smells like you found the beer.” She opened the walk-in, returned with two more beers, opened them and sat across from him. “You see Mama yet?”

“No yet.” Eyeing each other, they tapped bottles and drank. He reached behind him, peeked through the blinds. “It’s getting dark.”

“I hear you took care of my tab with Troy.”

“Tab’s a few bucks,” he said. “What you owed is called a shit pot of money.”

That seemed to break her. “Don’t look at me.” She drank from the bottle. Though near convulsions, she spilled little.

He drank with her, his own hand trembling. “When did you last eat?”

“I don’t know.” Her teeth chattered and she clasped a hand on the back of her slender neck. “You?”

“I don’t know either.”

Up again, she made a trip to the reach-in, came back with two burritos. “Cold and stale,” she said. “You want I can zap ‘em.”

“Don’t bother.”

He ate with no real hunger. She finally swallowed a couple of bites. The restaurant was in quiet half-darkness. When she began crying, her raking sobs had nothing to muffle them. No dishes being bussed, no customers finding a laugh or a remark about how good the food was, no kids chattering, no music from the CD player that defied a law Mama ignored. When Tensia raised her eyes, he rocked with anger, not only at her, but at himself. At what had happened to them both. At the madness.

“Something in your brain, soldier, which we don’t have all the answers to yet.”

Rising, he made his way behind Tensia, causing her to cower. “Get up,” he said. “If there is anybody in our house, you better call ‘em now.”

Behind the restaurant he saw the Taurus. “Looks like you got your car out of hock.”

Without responding she began walking toward it.

“No,” he said, afraid she might try to ditch him. The air had thickened with the nightfall. He smelled rain in the low, loaded sky. A block away on Central Avenue, the rumble of vehicles sounded hollow, as if the street were barricaded. “You’re coming with me.”

The drive was short to the modest stucco-fronted house they’d grown up in. While Tensia wordlessly made her way into the bathroom, he visited her
room. Finding it in disarray, he thought of how she’d always been the neat one.
Mama’s bedroom smelled musty, but appeared basically as he remembered it.
He expected his room to be violated, but it was as if time had quarantined it.
His bed was covered by the Aztec patterned coverlet, his team jacket at the
ready on top. There stood his tall chest of drawers, with his framed pictures
and trophies on top. On the walls: Los Lonely Boys poster. Raiders poster.
A framed watercolor of roses Tensia had painted for his sixteenth birthday.
And there was his scrapbook on the bed table, every photo, certificate, article
about his biggest and smallest athletic achievements pasted onto its pages by
his sister.

He listened to the sounds of her bathing, the faint stir of water. When he
peeked in to see her, she appeared ghostly in the soft light of a candle she’d
set on the toilet lid. He cleared his throat to warn her of his presence.

“Don’t look at me,” she demanded, as if this expression had become her
mantra.

A small memory nudged him, something that might please her.
“Remember that patch of roses out past the Peak place?”

And in the glowing mist above the water her born shyness became
exposed. “You mean how we took off our clothes and ran around until we
turned chicken and covered up?”

“Remember the last time, when you stopped running and looked at me,
what you said?”

She covered her face with a washcloth, but he could tell she was smiling.
“I said we were getting too big to wear our birthday suits in front of each
another.”

Time passed for a moment. Like when pretty music stops but its effect
lingers. She removed the wet veil of cloth to expose her eyes. As he gently
closed the door, he wondered if she’d seen in him the same haunted look
that she wore.

In the hall closet he found an old beach towel he liked, then in his room
he began to strip for a shower. Momentarily lost in scrambled thoughts, he
flinched in alarm at Tensia’s gasp. She’d made it down the hall soundlessly,
and had evidently caught sight of his naked backside. He managed to pull up
his boxers and pants just in time to leap into the hall and catch her.

“Sorry.” He placed a hand on her damp shoulder. “It looks worse than it
is.” He gathered her trembling body into her towel, like he would something
in pieces, flesh and bones that had separated. “Venito,” he said, in his father’s

On the edge of his bed he gave her two of his pills.

She rested her head against his bare chest. “You e-mailed me that you,
took one in the butt, like it was a joke,” she said. “Was that I saw from an
IED?”

“Grenade.”

He felt her become rigid, then began to quake. “I’ll die if I don’t use
tonight.”

“That was Percodan,” he said, massaging her forehead, seeing her facial
features began to go slack. “Give it time to work, and tomorrow we’ll figure
everything out.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she whispered. “No way am I going to make it till
tomorrow.”

“You’ll make it,” he said. “You have to make it for Mama.”

“Mama is gone, Alex,” she said in that voice so lost. “She hasn’t been
here since you left for your second tour.”

Sometime after midnight Tensia had awakened and escaped, her careful
shutting of the eighty-year-old bungalow’s front door shaming him from a
tormented dream. His car was there on the dark street. She’d fled on foot, or
had called someone. In pursuit, he drove by the nearby restaurant. Finding the
Taurus gone, he headed straight for the Drop Inn Tavern. Her car was there.
She was not. And among the few staunch citizens still working on their last-
call drinks, not one had bothered to notice who she’d left with. Back in his
pickup, he opened the dash box and withdrew his holstered weapon. Leather
and metal, the weight and smell of this combination historically correct, he
thought. And lethal.

He came out of what he and Kavanaugh called “blank brain,” where pain and
memory crashed, leaving you staring at a blind spot. One of the ceiling fans
came into focus, telling him he’d fallen. Rising slowly, he discovered he’d put
on the old black-and-white-striped chef’s outfit, before going into the walk-in.
Mama once said the getup made him look like a jailbird or railroad man, not
a cook. When he went out behind the restaurant, the air was still. Daybreak
behind cloud strata broke like a neon advertisement for horror. Must be an
hour now since he’d found her, and still the shock hung to him. And the guilt.
And now the fear, strong enough that he went to the pickup. Finally a breath.
His piece was still there, still holstered and unfired. The Taurus, her car, when
he turned to look at its forlorn and abandoned image, sank his heart.

Where was the Albóndigas soup? The menudo? The ever-living enchilada
sauce Mama had taught them to make? Right then he almost went down
again.
“What?” he screamed.

Kavanaugh screams back, “I’ll shoot you myself, Villarreal, if you don’t put her fucking down.” Now they are running. Shoulder to shoulder. Breath to breath. Kavanaugh’s voice is a siren. “The girl was fucking dead, Alex. No way could you’ve helped her.”

He reached for the handle of a pot on the rack, holding it for balance momentarily before swinging it onto the burner nearest the cutting board. Setting the heat, he began like it was yesterday, starting what Mama always termed a binder, sifting a light amount of flour into some melted butter. Then the crushed garlic, cominos, Mexican oregano, and generous pinches of chili powder, salt and pepper. Next a chopped chipotle-style jalapeño and two quartered Spanish onions. When the mix turned to a golden paste, he strained his waiting stock into this new vessel. Allowing the contents to catch a low boil, he used a chef knife on the readied carrots, potatoes, corn and celery, angling his blade because Mama always claimed it helped the taste. All went into the boil, while he got ready the zucchini and cabbage, to be added later.

The toil of cooking comforted him. Mama always said the function was close to charity if done well. He flipped the hood switches, not that his task would require the lights and ventilation. It was the sound he wanted, the familiarity of it, something from before, like a consolation. Staving off a lurking sense of terror, he retrieved the shanks from the dregs of his stock and separated the meat from the bone, so tender now it fell into its own measured portions as he lowered it into the stew.

With the pot of cocido secured in the bed of his pickup, Alex drove by the North Side strip mall. Lights behind only two sign panels told him the Veterinarian Clinic was still in business, and the Christian Light Chapel was open if you’d been tempted into sin, or wanted to celebrate the lie you hadn’t. Turning at that corner, he passed a series of large homes, some sporting signage. After the old gypsy house advertising psychic readings, he pulled into the circular drive of Bessie Thompson’s Hope and Faith Manor.

Using the kitchen entrance, he toted in his stew and set it on Bessie’s ancient range. When he turned, there she stood, the space dim, cool, smelling of her breakfast cooking. “Hi, Bessie.” He’d been plugged in the arm too many times to address her more formally.

“Cocido.”

“Your mama is gonna like that.” She turned him with a sharp finger against one shoulder, and pinched his rear. “That the one?”

“That’s just a simple pad,” he said, ignoring her rough manner, “so I can have equal booty on both sides.”

They’re pinned down. Kavanaugh is the first to sprint for the striker vehicle, there on the street. Offering cover now, Kav is firing directly over their heads from the I-don’t-give-a-fuck standing position. He’s in a sprinter’s position. Private McCall is getting up behind him. One split second later McCall saves his legs from the grenade’s blast.

She lifted his T-shirt and made a scolding sound with her tongue.

“My legs are okay,” he said, as if that made up for his mutilated backside.

He hears an attendant say, “Jesus Christ, all this mess isn’t his.” He knows this has to do with pieces of Private McCall, a black guy he barely knows. Bessie lifted his hair. “They went in here, Alex,” she said, like an accusation.

“Small shrapnel.”

The sound with her tongue again. “Motherfuckers.”

“You’re a registered nurse,” he reminded her, using a falsetto to make it funny.

“Was once,” she said, “and it ain’t the doctors I’m talking about.”

“Al Qaeda?”

“Them and Bush both.” She hugged him once more. “How about the stuff after your discharge?” When he didn’t answer, she went on. “Did you know that Tensia and I drove to Palo Alto to pick you up, but you’d left the day before?”

He was in trouble. Christ, here came the misfiring inside him, all the neurons escaping their hidden places. “All I want is to see my mother.” He spread his stance to balance himself. “I’m sorry about all that stuff, I really am…”

“You know how long ago that was?”

“Quite a while.”

“Six months ago,” she said in a low, calm voice. “And we’d been waiting for you for a year before that.” She took his arm. “Let’s go in and see your mama.” As she guided him into a hallway, she added, “She ain’t what she used to be, honey. She got the diabetes and the Alzheimer’s.”

“She’s not much older than you, Bessie.”

“That ain’t saying much.” She squeezed his upper arm. “Your sister hasn’t been coming to see her much. On Easter she come, but ran off the minute I turned my back.”
“I’ll want to talk to you about her,” he said, his thoughts fighting for a passage around that blind spot in his mind. Thoughts of the horror he must deal with, make less hurtful, maybe more peaceful, closer to something heavenly.

“El limpiador de la cocina…”

His mother, looking straight into his eyes, had mistaken him for his father, complaining about the overspray of a cleaner Papa had used on the restaurant’s hood years ago. “Don’t worry about it, Mama,” he said, “and remember about speaking English with Tensia and me.” It was her rule, and he hoped for a smile.

Nothing for what seemed like five minutes. Just her face, her gray hair spread on the pillow, the rest of her lumped on one of Bessie’s beds, the entire house quiet. Where, he wondered, were Ms. Thompson’s other patients?

“Hortensia came to see me, m’ijo.”

There. A piece of her had awakened. He took her hand, squeezed it gently. “That’s nice, Mama.”

“Easter Sunday, before we went to Mass.”

He remembered the time they’d driven to a church in Bakersfield, the one where she and his father had gotten married. It must have been shortly before Papa’s accident. He and Tensia, new to driving, had argued for Mama’s choice of who’d drive the old Ford back, their father too drunk on hidden sips of Sauza.

“Mama, I’m back from Iraq.”

“You were hurt.” She worked to scoot higher in the bed, succeeded and began to move her legs. “Help me get up,” she said. “We’ll take a little walk. There is a garden outside.” The effort became too great for her, and she collapsed back on her pillow, legs out from under the sheet and thin cover, her nightgown in disarray. “Hortensia called.” She sighed, shook her head and closed her eyes. “She is coming on Easter.”

He felt as if he were breaking into pieces. His mother was dying. She’d soon be gone forever, maybe today, surely soon. He was exploding, reaching for his body parts, separating them from Private McCall’s. Christ, he could feel the blood and bone spilling between his fingers. He was falling.

When he felt Bessie’s hands on him, he drew back. “Get your hands off me.”

Bessie, he could see, had spread her palms like they’d been burned on a stove pipe. After his breathing had settled some, she smiled. “Give your mama a kiss, honey. I bet she’d like that very much.”

His mother’s lips were dry and cool. He pressed his cheek to hers, smelling some of the old smells, the ones he’d ran blocks for after school, before he’d grown too big for such behavior. “I made you some cocido, Mama,” he said. “I hope you like it.”

When he backed away from the bed, he accepted Bessie’s help in returning to the kitchen table. She stood behind his chair rubbing his shoulders. “Why don’t you stay here for awhile,” she said, bending to whisper the suggestion. “God knows I got the beds.”

It occurred to him that she had either closed the place or was in the process. “Are you shutting down?”

“I been shut down, ’cept your Mama and a couple others got no place to go.”

“Should she be in a hospital?”

“You want her lookin’ at me, or some stranger?” She left him to open her refrigerator. “What we going to do about your sister?”

It came out, just like it had been there waiting for him to announce it. “My sister is dead,” he said. “I found her early this morning at the restaurant.”

Then it was easy, like a confession he had to get rid of. “She stole my Percodan last night, took ’em all with a bottle of beer in the walk-in.”

Whatever Bessie had reached for in her fridge hit the floor. “Oh, Jesus.”

He got out of the chair and they stood clutching each other. “It’s okay,” he said, rocking her slowly side to side, flexing his biceps to show her how strong he could be, once he put himself together. “I’m going to handle it, make it some better.”

“Oh, Jesus, Alex.” He felt her sobs against his chest. “How in God’s name, child, can you do anything to help your sister now?”

“I’m going to take care of her,” he said. “Mama has to think we are here, and that the restaurant is open. Anybody else—you tell them Tensia went away with me.”

“Lord, child.” Her face tightened as her mouth worked on a silent protest.

“I’m doing this my way,” he said, feeling the declaration close around him like a warm shield. “I’ve set what’s left of my mind to it.”

Kavenaugh is seeing him off. “If you get bored in the restaurant,” he says, “pester the Veterans Administration. Tell ’em you lost half your mind along with half your ass.”

He hugs him and sighs like an old warrior. “And tell ’em you got a buddy with perforated eardrums they ain’t paying to fix.”

After a while Bessie moaned and shook her head up and down like she understood. “Promise you’ll call me, so I’ll know you’re okay.” She found a
chair, sat with her head in her hands. “I’m alone too,” she reminded him. “My Carl’s been gone for years, our kids spread out so far from home, this Easter come and went without ‘em.”

“I’ll call every day.”

“You’re Mama won’t see a day of knowing anything bad,” she said, in a voice that sounded prayerful, “nor a day of real hurting, if that’s what you’re wanting, honey.”

“I’ll see to the money…”

“Hush.”

He thought of how he’d call Anson Peak, tell him he was taking Tensia far from here. Tell him Yolanda Medina could have the Taurus, if she wanted it. Tell him to give whatever was left in the pot to Bessie, so she could care for Mama.

“One more thing, Bessie,” he said, after a long silence. “I’m gonna need something strong for my head.”

“I ain’t giving you nothing.” She’d slipped off her shoes. Lifting herself away from the table, she appeared small and girlish in her cotton dress. “Lessen you sit down with me in your mama’s room. Be the brave young man you are. And we eat some of that damn *cocido*.”

Stopping by the house, he searched for anything Tensia might want with her. He found no rosary beads, no St. Christopher medal, no jewelry. Nothing that he felt was clearly dear to her, other than her high school yearbook, her diploma slipped under its cover, along with her senior prom dance card, Jesus, a photo of a handsome young man he didn’t recognize. A family picture of the four of them one Christmas when he was about ten. Both were in jeans and sweatshirts, their smiling faces interchangeable. In his room he picked up the Aztec blanket. That would be her shroud. Last look in a bottom drawer, he found she’d saved his old football jersey. The Bronze Star and Purple Heart he’d sent home on top of it.

These medals he took for her.

The sky over the fields looking west held a display of clouds, seductive in their false promise of rain. A breeze clung to the sweat on his naked torso. Another April valley night began to fall. His work was done. Brown hands, his father had predicted, were the hands for this land, and would be until it lay barren by great disaster. He stood and raised his face to a breath of wild roses, to the fresh scent of the dirt he’d turned. A breeze stirred his long hair and he could smell the valley going dry, a place he’d known all his life turning into stone. He detected, in the swells of time sweeping past, the sweet rot of a generation ending. His sister’s face had been his face, and once, before finishing, he’d resisted going to his pickup for the handgun. One trigger squeeze. One last fall to join her grave. But he’d looked off toward the roadway that fed I-5, seeing the movement of vehicles, many of which would be heading south. South toward Los Angeles.

South toward the border of Mexico, where fucking Kavanaugh swears the Patrol will take them, despite how wounded they are. They will take them for their training. They will take them because they are hardened as any land spread before them. They will take them for their knowledge of killing.