

Salomon

Salomon, #1

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When Salomon Pico was still running barefoot among the hide traders in the dusty streets of Monterey, his cousin, Pío Pico, had already served as a city councilman in Pueblo de Los Angeles, and was now serving in the desputación, the senate of Alta California. Pío was a man of growing political stature, but he

was also an insightful businessman, and it was Pío who taught Salomon his first lesson in money.

Salomon remembered Pío, twenty years his senior but still a young man himself, as a slim man with a bulging face, massive in a way he did not see on other men, and thick, dark skin that did not lighten near his hairline. Pío lived in a humble adobe hacienda with a palm-thatch roof on a rancho near San Diego then, and he did not carry a gold pocketwatch with a chain dangling across his chest, but he did dine with the political influences who signed over enormous land grants to their friends and family. Under this influence, he dressed like them.

Kneeling next to Salomon among the drifting movement of Monterey, Pío held a gold coin between his finger and thumb, one of only a few the boy had seen in his lifetime. Pío's voice came from some deep chamber within, and rattled ironlike from the back of his throat so it seemed his voice did not belong to him. That it was not he who possessed his voice, but rather it was his voice that possessed him.

"Do you want this coin, Sal?"

"Yes, I do. Want that coin."

"Then convince me to give it to you."

Salomon stood before him and after a silent moment, he lifted his ankle and swatted at something live and legged that crawled upon it.

"How?"

"Tell me what I may receive in return."

The boy looked around. "I will clean and shine your boots."

"I had them cleaned yesterday."

He pointed to Pío's horse at the rail. "I will polish your saddle."

"There is already a boy who does that for me."

Salomon squatted with his hands on his cheeks, then stood again. "Let me see the coin."

Pío held it closer, still pinched the way a diamond cutter holds his product to the sunlight to look for impurities. Salomon mimed an inspection.

"It isn't real gold."

"But it is, Sal. It is."

The sunlight caught the coin for a brief moment, and Salomon swiped at it. Pío pulled it back, the coin disappearing into his fist as he laughed, a hollow echo of itself. He waved the coin and rubbed his hands together and held them out, fingers splayed to show the coin had vanished. He reached for Salomon's hand and yanked it forth, and with monstrous expression, he pressed his thumb to his young cousin's palm. Salomon looked and found the coin had reappeared there. Pío held the boy by the shoulders, squeezing him as he spoke.

"Now," he said. "Hold it out for me."

Salomon did as he was told, holding his palm face-up with the coin shivering in the center. Pío reached for it, and Salomon pulled it away. Pío tried again, and the same thing happened. The coin now sat perfectly still, and Salomon held a grin.

"Good," Pío said. "Don't let anyone take what is yours."

Pío leaned close and looked left and right before he spoke. "Sal. If you let me have that coin, that coin that you hold in your hand right now, then in one month I will repay you with three coins just like it."

Salomon shook his head.

“Sal. If you let me have that coin, in two months I will repay you with five coins of its equal.”

Salomon looked at the coin. Again he shook his head.

Pío inched his face closer, his large, inconsistent features, and looked into his cousin’s eyes, unflinching. The boy’s grin disappeared. Pío stared, his forehead dotted in sweat, until the salt forced him to blink. He lifted one hand to the air and kept it rising above his shoulder, taking his time and allowing it to quiver, as if it was attached to a man who could no longer control its tremors. He began to whistle, his round, dark lips coming together and his breath coming so lightly you could hardly tell if it was a whistle or some mystical whisper. While the boy’s eyes were still on the trembling hand, his mouth slightly parted, Pío was sly with his other hand.

Salomon closed his mouth and swallowed. His eyes were wet. He needed to blink.

“And now you have no coin at all.”

Salomon looked down and the coin was gone.

“Be smart with your money, Sal. For if you are not careful, someone will take it from you without your knowing.”

Pío stood and mounted his horse, swinging the reins to turn the animal about and kick up dust.

“Wait,” Salomon said. “What about my coin?”

“It was my coin to begin with,” he said. He spoke once more from the saddle before he kicked his horse and rode away in a flurry of dust and shouts. “If you want something in this lifetime, you must find a way to get it. You find a way, and you take it.”

Salomon’s father worked for the Rancho del Rey, supplying horses and cattle, hides and tallow, and many other supplies to the Mexican Army at the Presidio of Monterey. As a retired commander, José Dolores Pico knew many of the officers and their needs before they knew them themselves. It was here that Salomon learned to work hard, standing elbow to elbow with his brothers, unloading horse blankets, leather, uniforms, boots, buckles, and rifles. He watched a fat military commander negotiate prices with his father. He watched his father receive less and less in pay.

It was a habit for Salomon and his older brothers to run in the streets and get lost when they visited Monterey. Small as it was, there were people in the city. In the city, there was talk. There were politicians, there were soldiers, there were pretty women in dresses, and men in fine suits. Other children ran the same streets, and he chased them around corners, not knowing their names but knowing the game. It was there at the Presidio of Monterey that Salomon saw his first dead man.

Juan Carmen Flores was the leader of an outlaw gang. He had robbed the bank in Pueblo de Los Angeles a week after it had opened, pistol-whipping the bank manager to a point where he would have died a day later had Juan Carmen Flores not shot him on the bank floor. The manager’s arms and legs lurched and held stiff off the ground, slowly lowering to the floor. Witnesses had to point to his headless body and identify him to authorities. Flores had held up a wagon train of

migrating mexicans as it crossed the San Joaquin River. He held the pointman in the river and watched through the clear water flow, like looking through thick glass, as the man called out in silent screams. He held him there until his thrashing subsided. Then he let him go for his people to watch float among the rocks. He once cut a man's horse open and watched it collapse and struggle in the street, entrails bubbling forth, until the dust rushed black beneath it. The horse owner ran, cutting back and forth to make for a difficult target. The outlaw allowed him a sporting distance before he mounted his own horse and clubbed the man down.

From behind a barrel, Salomon watched the outlaw spit insults and grin at the officers who read aloud his sentence of hanging. He heard him shouting into the black hood, above the small crowd, and continue murmuring even with the rope taut and jerking until he swung motionless moments later. Salomon's father found the boy staring, alone in front of the hangman's platform as people walked by with turned heads, a small child stock-still among the movement.

When he finally did speak it was in the dim light of the study that night, where his father had collapsed from the day's exhaustion in the chair by the window. Other men would have used this time of day to drink, however, he never did. He was content to drink water. Salomon approached and held out a coin he had taken from his father's pouch, the one marked with the emblem of the Mexican Army. His father's face was cranial without light, eyeless in the shadow.

"Where did you get that coin?"

"I took it."

"Took it from where? Who does it belong to?"

"It was yours."

"You mean it is mine."

Salomon stepped closer. "Convince me it belongs to you."

His father leaned forward, his legs wide at the knees, his arms lifeless and hanging between his thighs. Salomon held firm.

"It is mine because a ranking official, a man more important than you or I, gave it to me as payment. I worked hard for that coin."

"I worked too."

"You did. Yes. You moved supplies from one place to another. But where did those supplies come from? How did they get there? Did you know the people who bought them? Where did they come from? Answer me."

"I don't know."

"I did that. When you can do all that, I'll give you a payment. Until then, I'll give you your supper and a place to sleep."

His father sat back with a sigh, disappearing back into the shadows. He rubbed his face. "What you saw today. That man. How do you feel about it?"

"I am not scared. They had him wear a hood."

"You are not frightened by it?"

"No."

"You must understand he was not a good man. He was a murderer of his own people. He was an abuser of women and animals. He took money that did not belong to him. Now, tell me. Did he deserve to die?"

"Yes. I believe so. Don't you?"

“It is not up to me. It is not up to man. If a man behaves like an animal, it is up to God whether or not he wants to punish him like an animal.”

His father did not move. He sat deep in shadow, his elbows on the rests, his fingers touching in front of him. Salomon looked down, and, after a brief pause, stepped forward with the coin held out. His father leaned forward and put his hand on the child’s head.

“Keep it, my son. It is yours,” he said, and he fell into a racking cough.

His father died that same year, sitting among his nothings at the Rancho del Rey in the ragged chair by the window. A lifetime of service in the military, and decades spent building coastal missions in Alta California, and he died with little possessions. Salomon’s mother, Maria Ysabel, moved to Monterey, the capital, the city they visited so often, and took Salomon with her. His brothers were older, and stayed to work at the ranch. While they were sweating among the cowhides and butchered meat, the cold bladders and intestines stuffed with tallow, waving their arms at the cattle in the fields, Salomon sat among other students or read aloud from his textbooks at the front of a classroom.

When class let out, he and Arturo Leyva ran across town to sit with their legs and arms dangling through the presidio fence slats, and watch the army drills. They watched the field taken in a bitter smelling roll of smoke at the crack of a dozen rifle shots, and the targets rip apart downrange. They watched the lancers ride in formation, wheeling about in the field, one after another, in a precise display of horsemanship.

“I’d be a swordsman,” Arturo said. “If I was in the army.”

Salomon’s eyes blinked once as he turned back to the field. “I’d be a marksman.”

The boys fell from the fence as one and wrestled in the dirt. Halfway through town they split their separate ways. Salomon entered his home through the secret door he had cut in the floor of the raised storage room. He crawled under the house stilts, slithering at one point with his arms at his sides, and came up beneath the storage room to find his panel had been replaced. He pressed on it but it had been secured from inside. He stepped across the porch on his toes and eased the screen door open.

“Salomon.”

He swallowed and went into the next room where his mother’s voice had come from. She was standing over a basin, washing clothes. He stepped in, playing with his hands.

“Yes?”

“Our house has a front door on it,” she said softly, her eyes never leaving her work. “Built specifically for people going in and out.” She looked up and touched her sleeve to her lips. “Just use the door, son.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He stood there, unmoving. The clock on the mantle clicked away. His mother said, “Wash up.”

As a widow, Maria Ysabel had gained new wrinkles. What was once an ageless face had become tired in a year. Her black hair now divided with strands of gray

that shown white. She draped her head in a shawl, tied beneath her chin. She spoke in whispers. Yet men pursued her. They came to her door on Sundays wearing uncomfortable suits and bearing flowers, which she accepted with a smile to avoid being rude. Salomon observed one day a man with dark moustaches swept to the side of his face, wearing boots with medallions on the toes, sweep his hat off his head and bow so low his head dipped below his waist, his arm lifted to the side in gentle dramatics.

"Your father was the kindest, gentlest man on earth," she told Salomon with her back against the door. "He had no need for romantic fusses. And I didn't either."

"Then how does a man get the attention of a woman?"

She looked at him. "Just be who you are. She will see the passion in your eyes. A woman can see through any disguise anyway."

With this new advice, Salomon went to school the next day and sat beside the girl he liked. She always wore her hair pulled behind her neck or tied up on hot days, never in a braid over her shoulder as the Indian children did. On this day, she wore her hair twisted in a bun at the back of her head. Salomon did not understand how the twist worked, where it began and where it ended, and he had spent much time looking at it from the other side of the room with his head cocked. Now, sitting next to her, he did not look at her or even ask a simple question of her. He was himself. When this did not work, he fixed his eyes on her and did not blink so she could see into them. She raised her hand and told the teacher that his stares made her uncomfortable. The next day he wore an old hat of his father's, and brought one of the many gifts of flowers that Maria Ysabel had placed in a pile on the corner desk. He tried to duplicate the flourish he had seen the man with the moustaches perform. This time Juana Vasquez laughed. He looked up, and she was smiling.

While her mother thought she was playing with her friends, Juana followed Salomon to the presidio to see the military drills and the horses. He looked on with wide eyes, but Juana yawned. And when the soldiers knelt in the field and fired their rifles, she blinked and covered her ears. He led her by the hand to the pond he had found behind the schoolyard, where he and Arturo waded in up to their waists and scooped at tadpoles. Juana sat in the grass, and when Salomon finally turned, smiling, with his fist raised and dripping, she had her head back and had been looking at the clouds.

"She will never marry you," Arturo told him later in the field. They marched together in the tall grass, chopping down thistles with carefully chosen sticks.

"Why? Does she not like me?"

"Because she has older brothers."

"So do I."

"But yours will not choose your wife for you when you are older. That is what my brothers did for my sister. They did not like the first man who asked my father if he could marry her. My father did not like him either, and told him so. But the man continued to ask. He came to the house late and talked to my sister through the window. My other sisters share a room with her and they told. My father was afraid the man would run off with my sister, and my sister continued to beg him to bless the marriage, so he finally told her yes. But the next day my brothers chased the man away with clubs. The man came back, and my brothers broke his arms.

He came back again months later, and they cut his face. He did not come back again, and my sister married another man who owns land and cattle. She does not like him, but my father does.”

Arturo looked back. Salomon had stopped.

“Do her brothers like you?”

Salomon looked up. “I don’t know.”

Ismael Vasquez was a soldier at the presidio. He would know how to fight, he may carry a knife, and he would not be afraid of the sound a gun made when you pulled the trigger. Salomon had seen Ismael at church many times. The Vasquez family took up an entire pew and stood from tallest to shortest, Juana on one end and Ismael on the other. He never smiled, not even when greeting those around him. His face was always serious, as if angry.

But he was not as ugly as Raul Vasquez, the second from the end on the tall side, who worked as a hog butcher on the Ranchito del Playa Negro, a ranch that spread all the way to the coast. It was said the sands ran black with the blood of the pigs. These were pigs that Raul Vasquez tore open with a hooked knife and an unflinching face, a mouth that pulled his face down so the lines from his nose to the corners of his frown were so deep they were shadowed even on bright days.

It did not matter because Salomon did not sit next to Juana any longer. Manuel Santiago had taken his seat. When Salomon stood in front of her that first day, hoping she would have the answer for how they would sit together again, Manuel stood and looked down at him until he left.

The next day Salomon left his house while the streets were still moonlit, and sat hidden around the corner, shivering against the school wall, until he heard the teacher arrive and unlock the door. He walked in before the teacher could even set her things down, and took his seat next to Juana’s. He sat with a smile as the sun rose in the window and the other students trickled in. Manuel Santiago stared from the door but Salomon sat, head held high. Manuel told him to get out of the chair but he did not. Manuel stood over him and told him he had better get out of that chair before Juana arrives or he would beat him so badly he would never want to show his face in front of her again. Salomon did not move or speak, and the bigger boy eventually moved away but kept his eyes on him. When the teacher left the room, Manuel stood and hit Salomon across the face with the hard edge of his book, and broke a ruler against his forehead. When Juana arrived, Manuel was in the seat next to hers, and Salomon sat in the back of the room with his head buried in his arms.

“You want to sit next to Juana?” Arturo asked him.

“Yes,” Salomon said.

“Then sit next to her.”

“But Manuel is bigger than I am and would be difficult to lift. Also, he is dumb, so he is not afraid to hit me.”

“You are smart and quick. And you have me.” Arturo smiled, “I am not so smart.”

While the other schoolchildren hopped down the steps to scatter in the streets, Manuel waited at the bottom with his arms crossed. Salomon sat against the wall in the plaza, watching. When Juana appeared at the door, he stood, and Manuel

straightened up. Together they walked with her along the dusty pathway, and Arturo crept beside them in the bushes.

“My mother says I must run home,” Juana said. “She told me to run and not stop until I reach our door.”

“I will protect you,” Manuel said. “She will be happy to see that you are with me.”

“She doesn’t want to see me with anybody. She will know if I don’t run. She waits at the door and counts. You cannot let her see you.”

“You can run as she tells you,” Salomon said. “I will stop before she sees me, and I will watch you to safety.”

Manuel swung behind Juana’s back and hit Salomon’s arm. He gave him a stare and mouthed incomprehensible words. They continued walking. Salomon touched Juana’s knuckle and gave her a look. He told her to run, and as he shouted it, he swung on Manuel, doubling him over so he could no longer see his own arm. As quickly as a shouted word, Manuel was alone, coughing over the dust, Juana was running her way home, and Salomon was leaping through the bushes off the path. Manuel had attempted to grab at him, but Salomon was quick and out of reach before Manuel could figure out if he was going to fall over or give chase. He went after him, jumping among the swaying ragweed and rolled salt thistles, following a jagged trail of fresh footprints in the sand.

Salomon rounded out his run and ran ahead, and he came upon the path again in time to stand flatfooted with his hands in his pockets as Juana approached. She stopped her run for a brief moment, looked about, and sprinted to him. They ran hand in hand, not comprehending what they had just locked between them, and he watched from behind a wall as she made her final approach to her mother at the door. Before she closed the door, Juana looked back one last time, put her hand quickly to her mouth, and threw her palm in his direction, unable to see him, but knowing he was out there and would receive her kiss.

The next day Manuel did not show at school. The following day he was absent as well. When Manuel was not present when the teacher called his name on the third day, Salomon asked Arturo about it.

“He is not so injured that he could not show up for class,” he said. “He is faking. For sympathy.”

But when he did return Manuel was limping, and although his face was no longer swollen, it was lumped and different. The purple around his eyes was beginning to yellow. He winced every time he moved. There were small dots on his cheeks.

“I cannot help it if there are cactuses everywhere you step out there,” Arturo said. “He gave himself those dots. He did not pull them out correctly.” And he held up his own arm to show that he had brushed against cacti as well, however, he had the sense to soften his skin with warm water so the barbs slid out easily.

Manuel did not reveal what had happened to him or who had done it, offering his parents and his teacher the excuse that he had been playing in the cattle chutes and was trapped in with a mule. He sat at the back of the classroom and made very little noise.

In the following years, Salomon and Arturo outgrew the fence slats at the presidio. They outgrew the rope swing they had tied to dangle from a tree on the cliffs of Monterey Bay. They passed much of their time running off the cliff with the rope seat across their chest and under their arms. Juana did not participate, but she watched the tree flex and creak from branch to roots as the boys swung over the bright water, and she held her breath until they returned. Salomon and Juana had gone from pushing each other in a wheelbarrow in plain sight as children, to timing their walks to spend flashes of unchaperoned time with each other, stealing moments together, smiling side by side.

Nights were spent in anticipation of the lights going out, so they could sneak around in the moonlight like thieves and lay in the whispers of the tall grass to name new constellations. To wonder about their place among the stars. The day's dust had settled and died and the only sounds were those of restless animals and the breeze in the grass blades, and the hush of their own breathing. They lost themselves among the orbits of faraway light and cosmic stones, until they lay together, breathing as one in the predawn light, awakening with the first rise of the insects and the revived smells of an earth given back to pre-discovery, if only for a night.

Young though they were, now reaching the prime of lovers, they realized their lasting and mature need for each other. They held each other there in that awakening world unseen and secret. It was not the forbidden act Juana's mother had warned vaguely against, meant only to be shared under God's blessings, but there they lay upon the parted grass in clandestine embrace, unable to speak what they felt, but confident in each other's arms that it was reciprocated.

New mornings rose with a renewed promise between them. Salomon worked at the presidio stables, raising ropes against the horses. Juana stitched and tanned cueros daily for the mercado. Each night she washed the smell of skins from her body, and each week she put away as much of her pay as she could in a box in a hole in her family's mud hut. She and Salomon both shared dreams of each other as they worked, and when shadows lengthened and overtook the day, they found each other again in silence beneath the flickering sky.

Maria Ysabel had matured further in her beauty, her eyes still smiling about like those of a child, but around those eyes she was gray and tired. The table in the corner had fewer flowers upon it, although a fresh bouquet lay atop the old roses, wilted and stiff. She spent her days washing jackets and polishing boots for the soldiers. In the evenings she sat on a stool in the darkness, massaging her feet, or she knelt and prayed to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

It was mid-afternoon and clear when Salomon watched Arturo Leyva ride out of Monterey, shouting and laughing, his face a horrible twist of madness. His eyes were white. His hands were red and gleaming. His soaked shirt stuck to his chest. Behind him two uniformed men gave chase, pistols drawn.

Arturo had busied himself these years in metalwork. He swung a heavy hammer and made unusual blades. He made shoes for horses. He swung a small hammer and made medallions for boots and saddles, for pistola grips. He held his face close to his work. A one-legged customer had him mold a prosthetic. Another man requested metal teeth, a piece he could slip in and out. Arturo made these for them.

An American came to his shop that morning and asked him how small he could make a spring.

“I cannot make a spring.”

“I think a spring is just what I need. But it has to be small.” The American held his fingers up.

“I have never made a spring before. Get out of my place.”

The American looked at him. “I will pay you first if that is your concern.”

“Look at me. Look how much that concerns me. I don’t care. Get out of my place, I cannot help you.”

The American stepped out into the street and looked around. He looked up and squinted about. The metal tapping resumed in Arturo’s shop. A moment later the tapping stopped and Arturo answered a knocking at the back. He opened the door to see the American with his pistol drawn. Arturo grabbed at the outstretched weapon and stepped forward. In one motion he swung the American around and they had reversed places. He pulled a handmade dagger from his waistband, the blade was as long and thick as a forearm, and stuck the American to the wall. The first scream made people hold still in the street, the second made them run for safety. Arturo stuck him again and again so quickly the man did not have time to fall. He sank against the wall between stabs with horrible eyes, leaving a red smear. By the time he sat he had been stuck so many times his shirt was cut to rags and pulsed with heavy amounts of blood, and visceral bulged from behind the fabric shreds at his belly. He made a weak attempt to raise his pistol, and Arturo chopped down with his blade. The pistol fell in the dust, grasped still by the man’s hand.

When the policia turned the corner behind the shop, Arturo ran from the front with what he needed and mounted the first horse he saw. One officer turned immediately and vomited, the other fumbled for his pistola. Hours later, six officers made a search for the stolen horse. A reward was posted for the horse-thief, no mention made of the murder.

Salomon was questioned about the whereabouts of his friend. He told the truth, that he did not know. He was questioned about the horse. Did he know where the horse-thief would hide it? He did not know. He was told if the horse-thief returned, that he would report it immediately. Salomon lied and said he would.

Alta California had become a state of unrest. New discovery and struggles of possession plagued their politics. American settlers dusted themselves and looked around in the streets of Monterey and Pueblo de Los Angeles in new numbers. At this time Pio Pico had been elected for his second term as Governor. He was now a respected businessman, owned endless miles of land, and was one of the wealthiest men in the country. On a political visit to the Presidio of Monterey, he saw his cousin running in the dust of the horses, swinging a rope above his head and leaping the corral barriers.

“What are you doing here, Sal? A man of your talents should not be wading through the stable filth.”

His voice remained buried as it had been. A shout from underground. Pio had grown fat. His brows stuck over his sockets so that his eyes were in constant

shade. His cheekbones had rounded, his lips hung and displaced when he turned his head quickly. His chin had become dimpled in its growth and appeared it might fall to his chest in his sleep. His hands had swollen to circus proportions. Yet he carried himself with a straight back and wore a decorated coat with luxurious tails. A chinaman followed him around.

“What am I to do?” Salomon said. “I don’t have any other skills.”

Pío checked the time. Placing his watch in his coat pocket, he squinted against the sun and dust. “But you are educated. Your mother tells me of your schooling. It is wasted here. Look around. Look at that man there, with the horses. Look how he stumbles after. Tell me you are not his equal in intelligence.”

“Maybe not.”

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“Old enough. Follow me.”

A commander at the presidio tottered behind Pío, reading from a list of supplies. Pío checked off the items with a yes or no, and he turned and corrected numbers on the items as he saw fit. The commander repeated the corrections to a young lieutenant in tow, who appeared tortured by the changes he kept in his head and on his fingers. Salomon followed this to the gates, where Pío mounted his horse with the agility of a slim man. He steadied his horse while he lit a cigar, and spoke through the smoke.

“Never become a commander, Sal. They think they know everything.”

“Yes, cousin.”

“I should know. My brother is a commander. But even the highest rank would not overstep that which comes in brotherhood. Even if I were dressed in the rags of poverty.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Authority is decided in the first moment you shake hands with another man, even between a king and a beggar. Always assume it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pío looked at him, then studied the sky. “We will be gone for a week. At least. Tell your mother. I will meet you at the Puertas Blancas in ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

He was able to tell his mother he would be with Pío for the week, bending there in the kitchen to kiss her on the cheek before running back out. He could not tell her where they would be. He did not know. She held his face in her hands and looked into his eyes as if seeing him for the first time as a man. Anxious to not leave a man of Pío’s importance waiting, he kissed her again on the forehead and left, swinging his leg over his horse. He had only a minute to tell Juana, and, sprinting through the streets with handfuls of the horse’s coarse mane, shouting encouragement, he caught looks from any townspeople who happened to be out. He leapt down and continued on his own feet through the tannery door, blinded in the darkness inside. Juana was not there among the other dark-eyed women who looked up blinking from stitched hides in the humid, bitter air. Other women turned from buckets against the wall, their raised arms thick with soap and yellow dye. Juana was not one of them.

Low on horseback, Salomon again came back through the streets to where Pio Pico waited beneath the white gates of Monterey. He was leaning forward in his saddle with his forearms crossed over the pommel when Salomon pulled up. Pio smiled and untied a string from the pommel and leaned to fit a wicker sombrero upon his cousin's head. He looked him over.

"You ride that thing without a saddle like that?"

"Yes, sir. She is a good horse."

"I have no doubt. Many a good horse find themselves riderless."

"I don't own a saddle."

Pio nodded. "If you did, you'd be sitting on it I think."

"I have ridden her this way since I've had her."

"How long is that?"

Salomon looked at the ground and moved his lips, then looked back up. "Eight months."

"You buy her?"

"No, sir."

"No need to sir me. You are my cousin. Which makes you my brother."

"Yes, sir."

"My brothers do not call me sir."

"Yes-ss. Yes, my cousin. Pio. My brother. Sir."

Pio raised an eyebrow. "You say it like that you're likely to draw some looks. People will think you're touched."

Salomon steadied his horse. He looked up. Pio was again studying his horse.

"You didn't buy it. You find it? Wild?"

"She was wild nine months ago. The presidio was going to turn her loose, back to the plains where they found her, along with several others. She's better when she runs."

"I don't think we can run the entire way. Can you settle her? Weren't you their horse wrangler?"

"I just ran them from pen to pen, and pitched hay. I didn't ride much."

"Will they give you a saddle?"

Salomon pointed to the chinaman, sitting his mule as if it was a stone. "He does not have a saddle."

Pio turned in his mount. He turned back to Salomon. "Lee does not need a saddle."

Salomon looked down the street in the direction of the presidio. His horse circled beneath him. He forced it to steady and walked it back in front of Pio. "They have already given me this horse."

"Well." Pio leaned and spat, and looked out to the plains. "Let's get a move on it, before that horse of yours starts without us."

The chinaman followed them out on his mule. Pio led the way, the three of them. He rode with a stiff back, and though he held the reins with both hands, his arms bounced like the wings of a large mounted buzzard. Monterey shrank behind them, appearing smaller than it was, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Salomon looked several times. They did not follow the worn road. Pio had chosen to walk among the weeds where there was no trail to be found. The

weeds and mesquite soon gave way to shards of cracked stone littered among the sands.

Ahead the blue sky was halved by the onset of charcoal clouds, boiling and sublit in white flares like the deep coals of an old fire, cavernous flashes that bore the blackness naked and cut from paper. The rain appeared shortly after, curved from cloud to prairie, turning stones bleached as bone the color of skin before clouding over and blackening. Pio did not change his course, and when the first wind gusts sent their horses in a hesitating sidestep, Salomon raised his head but found the world now dark as night about him, and he saw in the lightning flashes that Pio was stooped and leaning into it, leading onward with his hand on his hat. When he looked back, Salomon saw the chinaman was wearing some sort of rain shelter made of canvas which hovered over him and turned with his head.

Salomon spoke to his horse and rubbed its neck. He looked about and saw the cliffs light up, menacing and evil, the shadows black. Small weeds lurched huge with shadow this way and that about the sandscape. Each skyward flash Salomon gripped the horse's mane harder, and each thunder that seemed to come from the earth he squeezed his legs against the horse, but it did not frighten. The sands ran with water and the horse's hooves slid back with each step. The rain stung their ears and cheeks. Salomon swore against the rain. He could scream and he could not hear himself.

Then the rain stopped and the clouds cleared away, and Salomon looked about to see the water shining off rock surfaces, the black clouds fleeing. The sun was overhead and suddenly baking hot. Pio Pico pulled his arms out of his coat and draped it sopping over his horse's neck. He rode with one fist on his hip. The chinaman dismantled his rain shelter and stowed it in a small pouch no bigger than a coin purse.

"I am glad you are still with us, Sal."

Salomon rode forward. "Yes, sir, I am glad too."

"Did she have much trouble?"

"None. She did well."

Pio looked at him. "None?"

"No, sir. She did not try to run."

After a pause he said, "What was all that cursing for then? Nevermind. A good storm deserves a good swearing."

In all directions Salomon could see nothing that resembled settlement. The sand soon became hairy with sparse grass, and as they cleared a shallow hill the floor lay green ahead. The clouds were still falling away to the east. Pio pulled his coat on again, bone dry after what seemed only a few minutes. He did not wear a pistola nor carry a rifle on his saddle.

"You do not ride with a guard, my cousin?"

"A guard? A guard for what? This is my land."

"You are the governor. I thought they would require you to travel with protection."

"Who would require it? I do not need a guard on my own property. As far as you can see, it is mine. The Comanche have not made it this far. Nor the Kiowa. They stay near the cattle herds. Out here there are no dangers. And Lee would surprise you with how agile he is."

Salomon looked back, but the chinaman held the same expression.

“Does he speak?”

“Only when he disagrees or is insulted. Did you tell your mother you would be gone?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She just looked at me.”

“Ah. The ways of a mother. Their faces tell everything. She is proud of you, Salomon.”

“I know.”

“Then why do you sulk?”

“Just riding.”

“You are sulking. Look at that. Did your mother ask you to stay?”

“No.”

“Are you sad to leave her?”

“No.”

Pio stopped. “Do you have a girl? Back there.”

Salomon did not say. Pio sat looking. His horse adjusted a step beneath him. After a moment he clicked and the horse continued. “Are you a father?”

“No.”

“Could you be?”

“No.”

There was silence between them. Salomon broke it. “I did not see her. I did not say goodbye. She will wonder about me.”

“Is your mother friendly with her?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t lie. Mothers are not friendly to young women who take their sons away.”

“They are friendly.”

“She must see that you love her. Don’t worry, Sal. She will be fine. She will ask your mother about you and your mother will tell her. She may be mad just the same, but she will not wonder about you. I am happy for you. That makes this trip all the more important. She will be very pleased when you return as a man of property. Don’t give me that look. Don’t pretend you did not think about it. If there is one thing in this world that I am in a place to give out, it is land. People envy me for my land. And my handsome looks.”

They rode and did not stop to eat. Salomon squirmed in his saddle and watched the earth fade to blackness, the mica winking with starlight, until all he could do was feel the horse move beneath him, and see the outline of Pio move against the night skyline ahead. The ground rose and dropped beneath them like waves and they bobbed accordingly.

Around him the night crept back and forth, his eyes played tricks and his ears heard what was not there. A pair of eyes glowed to his left. There were many flat surfaces about and small pools of water that could take the starlight, but the eyes blinked. His horse lurched away and he rolled off the back. The hoof beats did not stop and faded fast in the darkness. Pio stopped.

“Something spooked her,” Salomon said, standing and refitting his sombrero.

“She was born out here. Among the eyes of night and the storms. She was not spooked. She was waiting for you to be spooked.”

He rode double, behind Pío. The rest of the night Pío told stories. Salomon could feel him raise an arm and point to various places in the night. It seemed they would ride forever into darkness, to a part of the earth that was too distant for daylight. It was the same the next night and day and night again, until there was no count to remember. And swaying on the back of the saddle, unsure if the midnight pitch and ghostshapes left and right were dreamed or not, he saw the black outline of a small mesa climb into the night ahead, and Pío did not adjust his course. It was large enough that it would require several hours to ride around and continue on their way on the other side, but it would take riding a mountain goat to get over it. The horses picked up their pace, and with the mesa black and leaning over them, Salomon saw themselves surrounded by many pairs of shifting eyes. Pío pulled the reins in and dismounted. Lee had run ahead at some point. He stood in a doorway with a lantern held above his head. Salomon followed inside, looking back at the eyes they left in the night. Pío was still talking, disrobing as he spoke, and Lee slipped in and out of rooms, spreading light. He showed Salomon to a room with a large bed and a sofa. He pulled the blanket back and patted the bed sheets. He helped Salomon remove his clothing.

“Thank you, chinaman.”

The chinaman stood before him, dusty clothes draped over his arm. His forehead creased. “You call me Lee.”

In the morning Salomon stepped into the hallway pulling his shirt on. He peeked in various rooms and found Pío leaning over a desk, answering his own questions aloud. When Salomon stepped in, he saw Lee standing on the other side of the desk, tapping places on the paper but staying silent. Pío looked up.

“Come here, Sal. We need your approval.”

He leaned in next to Pío. It was a map. Pío put his fingers on the map, keeping one still while the other traced a rough border back to the original spot. Salomon nodded and smiled, and after breakfast Lee had new horses saddled and stepping in place in front of the hacienda.

The daylight proved it was a large adobe hacienda at the base of the mesa, as large on the outside as it was on the inside. Dogs roamed skulking and watching like wolves. Children played in the stables and hid from each other around corners with dirt clods in their hands. Women went in and out of doors of a low building, a separate quarters for servants, and vaqueros drifted by in the distance.

They started out in another direction. Pío spoke without a trace of the previous day’s exhaustion.

“It is a good piece of land. Good for cattle. You will make some money.”

They rode all day, picking their way through the broken rocks and unending grassland, and camped for the night under a slab of broken granite against a hill. The campfire put Pío’s features inside out and his shadow on the rock behind him. He sat over the flames with his elbows on his knees.

“You will be living in safe country.”

Salomon’s eyes moved. He was motionless beneath his blanket, peaked where his hands were clasped and his feet were crossed.

“Comanche are raiding every ranch in Alta California. The military is in an endless effort to rid the country of indians, but it takes more than an army. You can see we are alone for miles out here. My land. I have lost over a hundred men and hundreds of livestock to indian raids. But that is in another part of California. I will provide you your first herd. You will be safe, and you will make a living. And you will be a man of property, with a wife and many children who share the same name that we share. I would not give you this land, Sal, if I had any doubt as to the safety of you and your wife. You will make her your wife?”

Salomon moved his eyes again. “Yes.”

“You will be a ranchero. You will sell to the Mexican Army. I will take an appropriate percentage. You will make a proud living for both of us.”

Pío searched his saddlebags and pulled a cigar, biting the end. He put a burning stick from the fire to the end of his cigar and soon set to drawing deep. Coyotes yipped in the distance. Salomon remained motionless. With the cigar nearing its end, Pío spoke up.

“A man once tried to stop the Comanche. His name is Angel Reyes. He is still around, although he cannot speak. He cannot see or do much of anything anymore. He lives near the Nueces River where Texans think they are still in Texas when they cross over. He does not travel far now, but he was an able man at one time. A large man, strong as I’ve ever encountered. It was his work to run cattle to the Texas military. He crossed the Nueces every day in plain sight. He was a stupid man. Unafraid of what watched him every minute of every day from every hill around him. The Comanche want horses. They want cattle. And here this man moved both under their eyes as if taunting them. He may well have built bonfires and waved to them. They took his horses and cattle and killed his vaqueros. Cut them at the throats and took their heads with eyes wide open to post as cautions. As a warning to the Texas military to stay on their side of the Nueces.”

Pío shook his head and looked at his cigar. “Texans will always think they are bigger than they are. Angel Reyes can be called a Texan as much as he can be called a mexican. More so. He sold his stock to the Texas military. He even gave them a fair price. There is a warrior of the Comanche. Tsunipu. Or Bone. He is said to be angular, skeletal in his movements. From another world entirely. He is taller than any man and covers ground quickly. Before you can even sit up he can be across this fire and at your throat with a blade. Tsunipu does not answer to any chief. He is a rogue, and although the Comanche claim him, it is believed that he will kill one of his own as quickly as he will a mexican or white man. Angel Reyes went after the Comanche. Alone. I said he was stupid. He rode for days tracking them. They made no attempt to hide their trail. He may have been seeking death after the slaughter of his men. It may have been that revenge drove him mad and irrational. He found them. Or rather, Tsunipu found him. It was a mistake. A Comanche will not kill you. At least not before he tortures you. You would wish you were in hell, to ease the pain. Angel Reyes woke one morning with Tsunipu standing over him. Angel wrote the story down. He woke because he smelled his own campfire beside him and heard the crackle. He woke with his arms and legs tied, that Tsunipu must have moved about him in the night as a spirit. Angel has been known to exaggerate. But what the Comanche did to him is not embellished. You need only to see Angel today to know that. He says Tsunipu

may have been impatient to get started, for he did not wait. As soon as Angel opened his eyes, Tsunipu began to cut him at mid-thigh, delicately, he writes, the way one takes care to skin a hen. He cut down to the ankle and peeled his skin open as Angel screamed like an animal. Angel recalls the Comanche had no expression. His face was empty of emotions, and his heart was that of satan himself. He had no conscience. A Comanche with no conscience and no rush is a bad thing. Tsunipu filled Angel's legs with small rocks from the fire, handling them with his bare hands and not a wince. He sewed him back up. Not the careful stitching of a seamstress, but the wide gaps of a sailor in a storm. Then Tsunipu went to work. While Angel's legs were cooking, Tsunipu peeled away Angel's eyelids, so he had to see the rest. So he could not blink away the sunrise, and soon his eyeballs began to shrivel in their sockets. Angel wrote that his world did not fade to black as his eyes began to wilt. Instead it was a brightness that blinded him and stayed with him as his vision went, and it is a constant light he sees now, not a blackness that blots out his world. I say the light is burned into his memory, for how can a blind man see light? It is a memory he cannot rid himself of. Tsunipu cut Angel's lips away, so he could operate on his teeth. He extracted them one by one with his knife. He was good too. Angel did not faint. Not once. He left his tongue in place until the very end, for his screams gave him pleasure. By this time the meat in Angel's legs was cooked, the way you see beef on your plate, Angel writes, and Tsunipu cut away the crude stitches and emptied the rocks. He sewed him up, quickly, closely. This time he was a surgeon, taking his time to get it right and make sure this man would not bleed to death. He bent his fingers back and bit them off, leaving only three on each hand. It is with these three fingers that he operates today. He removed his testicles with a blade so hot it melted the wound closed behind it. He chewed his ears away, leaving small holes on the sides of his head. He burned his nose to the bone. His nostrils are just two holes in the middle of his face, and they bleed at all times. It'll scare you just to look at him. When the time came, he cut away his tongue, held it in the air, and lowered it into his own mouth. He did not chew, but swallowed it whole."

There was silence. The fire had died to coals and Pio was a mere shape moving to his story in the dark.

"When Angel Reyes woke from a long sleep, Tsunipu was once again standing over him. He had stayed with him and healed him, serving him stock by the spoonful. They stayed out there night after night with wolves circling, hungry for the dying flesh but afraid to approach the demon who tendered it. Tsunipu took as much time as it needed and spoke to him. Eating Angel's tongue, he stole his words and spoke to him in as calm a voice as Angel's mother had when he was a child. But the words were not motherly. You are the warning to those who look to cross into Comanche territory. Instead of skulls and bones, I place you at the crossing, a living warning, a grotesque creature to turn people away. If you leave your post, I will find you and continue what I have begun. If you hire a bullet to the skull, if you starve yourself, I will hunt you down through the darkest parts of your hell and continue where I left off. Your satan does not scare me. It is I who frightens him. When Angel was strong enough to survive, Tsunipu rode him back to his spread on the Nueces River. There he moves around on legs that may as well be stumps. Below the knee is useless. A boneless weight he must drag with

him wherever he goes. Which is nowhere. For where can a blind man with no teeth, no legs, and a horrifying appearance be welcome? He would frighten people. Which is what Tsunipu meant for. He sits at his post on the Nueces and stares unseeing over the crossing. But he listens. He listens for Tsunipu's return."

A coyote yipped, closer now. The horses whinnied. The night was black and silent once again. The fire shifted.

"Well." Pio Pico rolled his legs over and put his head against his saddle. "We had better get some sleep."

In the morning they ate in the dark, square hunks of meat and biscuits that Lee had packed, and they drank coffee. Salomon sat perched on his haunches at the fire's edge, both hands on the cup. He took a sip and coughed with his mouth full. He concentrated on swallowing.

Pio looked over the fire at him. He looked at his own cup and spoke over the rim. "I like it strong."

They rode hard. Salomon had to kick his horse over and over to keep up. They did not wear spurs but Pio rode as fast and hard as any Texan whose ankles clanked when he walked. They rode to midday, where they stopped and rested at an outcropping of monolith stones that Pio called, Roca Tanques. In the center of the stones a pool mirrored with clouds like a portal to another world.

"This is a good watering hole for your cattle," Pio said. "Remember its place."

Salomon turned in his saddle and looked about. There were no landmarks of any kind save for these stones in the center of nowhere. In the distance he saw a grove of trees, so far away it looked as if they grew in a haze. A painting on a canvas. When the horses began to roll in the dust, they saddled and moved on.

He dozed in the saddle while Pio carried on. When he woke they were walking on thick grass. The horses' steps made no sound. It was this absence of sound that woke him, like the clock that stops ticking in the night. In the distance he saw a short column of dust moving across the plain. It skipped and reappeared, and made its way closer. He kept his eyes on it, and soon his head was turned to watch it. It could be a rider. Pio had said Tsunipu was a rogue. Would he ride so visibly? Perhaps his horse possessed such speed that he did not worry about fleeing trespassers.

"It is a dust devil," Pio said. "Just the wind chasing itself."

"I've seen dust devils before."

Pio nodded. "They are alive out here."

They rode on under the sun. Salomon stood in the stirrups. He adjusted himself time and again in the saddle.

"That is a good saddle," Pio said. "I have them made for me."

"I am just not used to it."

They climbed a small rise and a lush earth unfolded on the other side, disappearing unto itself in the far distance. A creek glittered jagged through the rolling hills, scatterings of trees shook, long grass and wheat waved in the wind. He sat looking.

"It is yours, cousin," Pio told him. "We are in the middle of your land. We have been in your land for miles now, and still you cannot see the end of it."

Together they rode into it. Salomon knelt at the creek with his sombrero hanging on his back, and he wet his face and hair with cool, clear water as he had

not seen before. Pio nudged him with a foot and he did not try for his balance. Pio jumped in after. He floated on his back.

“I had Lee send orders after we left. Your cattle are on the way. A small herd to start. And I have a builder coming here. The same builder who built my hacienda. He will build you a humble hacienda to start, with quarters for your vaqueros, but he can return in the future, when you have made some money and have children.”

Pio stepped out of the water, his clothing clinging to all parts of him. He transferred a saddlebag to Salomon’s horse. Then he mounted his own. A busier man Salomon may never see again.

“And the horse is yours. Now go to Monterey and marry your wife. Bring your mother.”

Maria Ysabel did not go. She was waiting with weary soles and a smile for his return. Juana sat beside her with her arms crossed and face in a scowl.

“I am too old to start again,” his mother told him. “I belong where I can feel your father’s presence around me.”

She had moved to Monterey for Salomon’s education. Now he was grown and had acquired land and a woman willing to be his wife. It was not a mother’s place to be under the roof with newlyweds. Salomon’s older brother, José de Jesus, had become an important man at the Rancho del Rey, the land their father once lived and died upon and was buried in. Now he owned the land and renamed it the Rancho de Maria Ysabel, and he welcomed their mother home.

Juana’s contempt for Salomon leaving without a word gave way to joy and excitement when he told her what had happened. She would be a wife, with a home and children. She brought out a pouch of stowed coins she had saved, and held them out to Salomon.

“We can start with this.”

They married at the Mission Santa Cruz on their way out of Monterey. Salomon stood with one fist ready while Juana’s eldest brothers, Ismael and Raul, shook his hand. Neither of them smiled. The newlyweds left riding double with everything they owned, her arms around him, and they crossed day and night in that stargazed desert to where their land rolled green between creek banks.

A small adobe hut was built in a matter of weeks, at his cousin’s command, under the shade of the tallest oak. It was the largest home Juana had ever been inside, with a separate room for their bed. They christened it day and night and spoke of children. Salomon rode his land for hours, beginning and ending in the dark. He dismounted at various times and walked ahead on foot and tipped back his sombrero as he crouched to study the earth, the curve of the horizon and the soil at his feet. Then he rode further and did it again, and made notes about his land, so at night he could map out his property by candlelight and make marks to indicate features of the earth. Each time he crested the rise and saw the little light burning under the oak, he kicked and shouted to his horse, riding with his hat at his back, until he was warm and glistening beside his breathless wife. In a matter of months their lives had changed. Their lives together had started.

The livestock came shortly after, a charging, ragged group tufted and glazed with sweat and dust, along with a carousel of Pío Pico’s trusted rancheros that

seemed to rotate by the week, bringing in new livestock and taking out old. They were rough but friendly with each other and became loud when they drank. They lived and ate in the bunkhouse, and drank there, but the lamps went out early every night, and in the morning the men were awake and stretching in the yard, yawning skyward with their hands behind their hips, and swinging into saddles early without fail. Juana never saw them afoot during the day, unless with one foot in a stirrup, sometimes riding in from a distance and dismounting only to remount a new horse.

Salomon soon took to riding among the herd and watching the vaqueros. He watched them cut and cull and position a herd with the upcoming landscape in mind. He came upon a cloud of dust in the cattlefield, and saw through the dust like smoke from the ground that the men had pinned a bull, its nostrils flared and its eyes white, its hide erupting in dusty spasms. The lead ranchero stirred a fire yards away and shoved a hot iron in Salomon's hands. He stepped forward, put a foot to the bull's hindquarters, and burned it deep, becoming as much a part of the bull as the bull became a part of him. Day and night he rode with the men, and he laughed with them as they sat their horses on ridges overlooking the herd. He stood over a felled and trampled cow with his pistola drawn and fired. He pulled cows from the mud and birthed calves. With reins in hand he watched the cattlebacks lope upon his land and pock it with marks of their traveling. When the sun was at its peak he knelt with his hand in front of him and pointed out the various shades. The men looked over his shoulder and nodded. On Sundays he stood with them in the yard and threw knives at a post, taking a large step backward after each throw. Sometimes in the heat and hills he stared off at great distances, and the men elbowed each other and smiled, for their wives had been new to them once too. At night he held Juana close and closed his eyes as her hair fell over him.

Rains set in each night and he watched his wife look long into the fireplace, the flames in her eyes. She paced through the house with her hands clasped at her belly, her chin high. One night he caught her glance and saw her smile.

"Is it true, then?"

She nodded.

The men in the bunkhouse rolled from their beds to wild yells in the yard. They ran out in the rain with guns drawn. Salomon ran across the mud and jumped atop the stables fence. On the top rung, with his hand on the post, he howled and thanked skyward. Smiling, the men put their guns away and clapped, whistling and calling.

The mornings after, Juana found gifts of flowers at her door. She asked the men about them but they just smiled and carried on.

The lead ranchero, a man named Marquez, caught up to Salomon in the cattlefields. He rode beside him.

"You must be very excited."

Salomon looked at him. "You don't think I'm too young?"

"Too young?" Marquez looked ahead for a moment. "How can a man and wife be too young?"

"I don't know. My father was old. Older than I am, anyway."

"Well, fathers get old. Just as mothers do."

"My mother is not old. Or she didn't seem old."

Marquez nodded. "My father was also an old man when I was a boy. It wasn't until I was older and saw other boys with their fathers that I realized he was old. People looked at him and thought him to be my grandfather. I asked him one day why he was older than the other fathers. You know what he said?"

Salomon looked over.

"He said, my son, I tried to have you early in life, but you would not stay. You decided many times to leave this world before you even saw it. So I waited until you were older and smarter to have you." Marquez reached out to Salomon and laughed. Salomon swayed in the saddle.

"People might look at me and think me to be his brother."

"No," Marquez said. "You have brothers?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"There are thirteen of us. Nine of us are brothers."

Marquez stopped. "This is why your father was old." They kept on. "You are the youngest then?"

"Yes."

"When your father brought his first child into the world, he was as old as you are now. You too will grow old, Salomon. Let your last child think you to be old. Be young until then."

A herd of antelope grazed to the east, raising their heads periodically and watching back with dull eyes. When the riders stopped to watch, the antelope hurried away, bounding across the short grass in a jagged pattern.

Juana opened the door one morning and caught Marquez with a handful of wildflowers. He bowed and held the flowers forth.

"It is your child we joyously await, señora Pico." He glanced around, then at the floor, and he bent his knees and lowered the flowers before Juana stepped forward and took them with a smile. Marquez stepped back, holding his hat with both hands. "I am sorry to approach the house this way. It is not appropriate. But the news of a child moves me so."

"Come inside, Marquez."

He stood in the doorway. "Is Salomon inside?"

Juana nodded. Marquez stepped inside. The three of them spoke over coffee mugs.

"Are you married, Marquez?"

"No, señora. And not for lack of trying. There is only so much time one can put into finding a wife and finding a living. When you choose the life of a ranchero for Pío Pico, that time becomes nonexistent. But I have always wished for a child."

"How old are you?"

"I am forty, señora. A long time to wish. You may think it odd of me, my happiness for you. But when a man has a child, it is a chance to live life again. A chance to correct any mistakes. To correct the ways you have harmed others under the watch of our Lord."

He closed his eyes momentarily and crossed himself.

"What harm could a man like you have done, Marquez? I see only kindness in your eyes."

“They are the eyes of a pig. You see what you choose to see. The mind of a good person is a gullible one. But I cannot rid myself of the part of me that I fear most. For me there is no redemption but by that of a child. A new being that sin has not struck. A new heart that satan has not stained with his evil and smiles at in dreams. Forgive me for saying such a thing.”

“Did you steal?”

“Please, don’t ask me to tell.”

“Marquez, I must know.”

“You will regret it.”

Salomon spoke. “You are like a brother to us, Marquez. We could hold nothing against you. The past is another life entirely. But if you are to be here, with our child, I need to know.”

Marquez looked from Salomon to Juana and back.

“I murdered.” At this, Marquez dropped his eyes and his brow creased. His lips trembled, but he caught them and settled. He continued. “You must understand it was not me. I do not know how it happened, but I know I am to blame. I was a young man. A boy with a mind too young to make sense of this world. There is violence I still do not understand.”

Juana put her hand on his. “You don’t have to say.”

“I do, señora. You will think the worst of me otherwise.” He took a deep breath and wet his lips. “My father and mother and sister were murdered in front of me by indians in our yard without a flinch on their part. One of them walked about and lined us up in front of the stones at our well as others rode around, behind us, near us, all about on painted horses. They scattered our chickens and chased them through the yard with pikes, tossing them dead, one by one at our feet. The one indian pointed to the well and had me pull up a bucket of water. He then pulled a blade as big as I had ever seen, one that shone white with the sun. He washed the knife, then slit the throats of my family and washed his blade again. He dumped my father’s body in the well, then my mother and my sister. He leaned in close to me and spoke words that I can still hear but words that I cannot translate. They sound like babble but it was a curse he placed on me. He controlled me after that. I was his puppet to walk against my own people with strings on my hands. He put his blade in my hands and took me by my shoulders and turned me and sent me walking. I don’t know how long I walked, or how I did not die of thirst and hunger. I don’t know how I came upon a home without changing my course. This home was dark in the night. I found the breathing bodies inside and in the darkness I did what I still do not believe. It could not have been me unless directed by the strings of the indian. Three people in all, and I stayed until the sun showed me what I had done, and when I ran from the steps, my feet left their blood in the sands. I told this story to those who would hear it. I told this story long ago so that I may be hanged for my crimes, so my mind can cut off the curse that plagues it like a fever still. But when I told the story then it was unbelievable. I led the way to the site, only to find that it did not exist. I searched the sand for the blood, only to find the sand had been undisturbed by any prints at all. I said you saw my hands, you saw my clothes when I came to you. They were red with blood. They said it was the blood of my own family and that I had been changed because of the massacre. That my mind was not working

correctly. They found my family's home and they found their bodies, one atop the other in the well water, and they saw the pony tracks all around and the slaughtered chickens. They said the indians had done it. But now, years later, I ask myself, was it me? Was it my hands that killed my own family? Was my memory erased and built again for me?"

He shook his head. "I am still cursed. By memory if not by strings. For me there is only salvation by that of a child, even if it is not my own. Even if I do not raise it. But to see that there are pure hearts in the world, it gives me great joy."

Marquez put his coffee cup down. "I can see that my story has disturbed you. It is not my wish to alarm you at such a time, or at any time. You did not ask to hear such horrible things. My wrists are still bound in strings. I cannot help but to tell it, against my will. Excuse me."

He pushed back his chair, but Juana reached out and held his hand. He looked at her and she saw his eyes like that of a doe begin to weep.

It was months later when Juana woke screaming three nights in succession, holding her belly each time.

Days later Marquez dug a small grave in the yard, and the men stood around with hats at their chests as Salomon held his tearful wife. As they tossed dirt over the tiny box, Marquez collapsed to his knees and rose again, wiping his eyes and looking to each face.

Believing it was his fault, Marquez rode out before Salomon and Juana left the graveside. Salomon reached out and took the reins as the other men looked on.

"Only a fool would tell a woman such a story," Marquez said. He put his hat on. "I am headed that way. You will not run into me over there. I can do no harm over there."

Juana approached and put her hands on the ranchero's leg. Her face filled with sadness and tears and she looked again to see Marquez had only kindness in his eyes. She turned to go inside, allowing her hands to linger and fall last. Marquez nudged his horse forward and Salomon watched until the sound of hooves deadened and died away. He turned to the men and raised his hands slightly at his sides and the men scattered with heads down.

They lost themselves in work. The rancheros spoke very little around Salomon, and Salomon did not speak at all. They heard him only in cattle shouts and calls. He dismounted and threw roped cattle to the ground. He branded them without a wince. At day's end he wore dust like a color. He rode fast to his door each night, but he did not find Juana moving through the house in the dreamlike state as before, nor did she let a secret smile slip. Her hands stayed busy with chores, with a garden, with the stables. Whenever the men saw this they set down their things and rushed to her, taking her tools from her hands and continuing her work for her.

The herd moved across the land and back again, from grassland to grassland, and lingered in the creekbeds. Salomon watched the bulls shift back and forth and stir dust between them. He rode in the moonlight and shot a pale stalking wolf on the run. He searched for his pack and found none, but found their tracks. He rode close to the hogbacks on the windward side and put his ear to the rocks, swept of features, and he crawled where only wind and roots had been, a thousand years between split granite and shale, and he found water bubbling in the cracks cool

and clear, setting the stone cave to glittering. A thin wire glowed within the rock. He touched the damp rock walls and looked at his fingers. He looked at the rock again. He cut the ocotillo and ate of its fruit, and he chewed the spongy roots of the torreyana. He watched the wild horses cut the night in the distance, hooves pounding the earth to rumble in the prairie and quiver small stones at his feet.

Salomon sat his horse in the dusk silence to find his herd strolled before him at a slower pace. They shouldered each other, tossed their heads and moved about, directed not of their own minds but of the movements of the herd. They were so thick and plentiful that Salomon could not see the ground between them, but only their backs, and they moved in the half-light and faded to distant shapes.

One morning a rider came fast and dismounted in the yard. He stood by his horse with reins in hand, pacing the yard and gathering looks from the men at the bunkhouse who assembled one at time halfdressed in the dawn, until Salomon stepped out, tucking in his shirt. Word came from Pío Pico to move the herd. The Mexican Army was buying horses and cattle alike.

“Good. We will go to Mission San Gabriel.”

The rider removed his sombrero. “Pío wishes for you to take them to Mission San Fernando.”

“San Fernando? What for? San Gabriel is closer.”

The rider shrugged.

They packed light. The Mission San Fernando was a short cattle drive. As the rancheros took their points and moved the herd out, Salomon stood hand in hand with Juana, looking up at her from the hacienda steps. He waved his hat and slapped his horse’s flanks and rode into the dust to join his herd. He would come back to her a man with money.

In the night they rode by the stars and slept little. The rancheros told stories by firelight, their legged and high-crotched shadows acting in the night behind them. Salomon sat and listened as he held a plate under his chin and ate. In the daylight they lumbered along with the cattle and squinted in the sun.

A lone rider appeared on a ridgeline to the east, too far and too hot to distinguish the heat-shimmered features. Just a distorted shape that paced them for miles. The men became aware, as the shape did not trouble to hide itself, and they looked across the steaming cattlebacks to each other for explanations. One rider pulled his rifle from his scabbard and rode with it pointed upward, the butt on his hip, but he soon put it away. When Salomon looked again the rider was not there, gone in an instant as if finally evaporated to travel the air and appear again under closer circumstances.

The next day the rider appeared again, this time to the west. He rode beside them all hours of the day before riding away, growing smaller in the waves of heat. The cattle were not disturbed by the rider, and during the night, they were not restless.

They came upon a figure squatting in a creekbed. He had tied his mule to a cottonwood, where it paced and tossed against its load in momentary fits. The man stood from his squat, ankle deep in water and still stooped. His head hung forward in the manner of a vulture at rest. Salomon sat his horse as the cattle

crossed behind him and his men whistled and hollered among them. He spoke as much to himself as to the man.

“What is this man doing?”

The man looked down at the water and back up. Water dripped from his red beard. His tattered clothes were too tight, like he'd worn them in a hot rain.

“Looking for gold.”

Salomon sat up. “You speak spanish.”

“I do when I speak to mexicans.”

He regarded the creek. “You look for gold in a creek?”

“Well, I don't look for it where I won't find it.”

“You find any?”

“No.”

“Is it just lying in the sand for you to pick it up?”

“No,” the man said. “You have to find the right spot. And finding the right spot is about as easy as finding a tick on a fine lady.”

“A what?”

The man looked out at nothing. “Not quite as enjoyable, though.”

The man had bad teeth. Salomon looked far up the creek. It would be odd in this whole tumble of water for this man to be standing in the right spot. “Well, good luck to you.”

“Isn't luck that's involved. Not when every man is wished luck upon. Then we all have the same chances and luck isn't nothing but a word. Might just say good day to me and be on your way.”

He sat wordless, the babble of the creek beneath them, a language for all ears. He turned his horse. “Well, good luck just the same.”

Salomon moved along. When he looked back, the man was squatting once more, looking closely into his pan and poking his finger at his findings.

He took point and rode ahead. He climbed an outcropping, a rise in the prairie where internal rock had stretched and torn through the earth's fabric. Atop the rock, where the wind was free to blow as it wished, where it seemed not to blow at all but rather to pull at his clothing in a hundred tiny grasps, he watched his herd move below.

His horse picked its way along the fold, and there at the point where rock came back to hide beneath the earth again was erected a miniature monument. Salomon dismounted and crouched with reins in hand. It was a stack of stones knee-high, some flat, some round, looking delicately balanced, masterfully positioned to withstand wind and rain. He stood and regarded this puzzle. This moment of play in a passing traveler, a man who could be dead and dried to dust, or could have been here and gone just hours before. A man who could be hidden beside him now, grinning from the sage in delight at his puzzlement.

On the horizon rose a great cloud from the earth, pulled by that grasping wind. Salomon watched it, then mounted and rejoined his men. By the time he reached them, the cattle were trotting and bawling, rolling their eyes and pitching their heads. The vaqueros had pulled their handkerchiefs over their faces and pulled their hat brims low. The dust cloud rolled in.

The cattle pushed through, needing little encouragement and responding less to it. They lowered their heads and hurried along, trusting their way to the steps that

went before them, and the riders did the same with heads lowered and eyes put to a squint. One rider looked around in goggles, but soon lowered his head against the stinging dust just the same. The cloud brushed over them one and all and erased any color of the cattle. It came in waves, allowing brief pockets of extended visibility, just enough to assure each rider that they were still among the right crowd before lowering their head into another wave. They rode that way until the winds gave up and dropped the dirt and sands for another day. The cattle did not stop their trot, spurred on now by the smell of water. Salomon rode up beside one of his riders.

“Where did you get those?”

“These?” The man held up his goggles. They were crudely made. Discs of glass in a sling of leather. “These I made.”

The man’s lips were cracked and sand-peppered, and his clothing dusted over, releasing small wisps into the remaining breezes when he moved. The only untouched parts on this man were his teeth, which Salomon looked at when he spoke, and the bare strip across his eyes.

“Made them for what?”

“Made them for this purpose.”

“Let me see them. You made these for dust storms?”

“Be careful with the stitching. The glass pops out.”

“What are you, an inventor?”

The man shook his head. “I’ve seen a picture of these before.”

Salomon handed them back. “Do they work?”

The man shrugged. “The glass is dark and hard to see through. It’s too thick.”

“And you carry those around just for dust clouds? How many times have you used them?”

“Not many. I wear them some days just to give them some use. At night, sometimes.”

“You sleep with those on?”

“When it is late and someone will not put a light out.”

Soon the white walls of the Mission San Fernando were in sight, as if rising unearthed like the bleached skull of some colossus. About the outside, mounted soldiers danced left and right in idle games and bets between each other, tossing rings as each took turns riding by with a lance. The games stopped and they gathered side by side and watched as the cattle herd came close and grew in width, then they rode out to wave the vaqueros in, hollering with hats in hand. They led the way to an immense perimeter of crude fencing that stretched for acres, large enough to handle a herd twice the size that hurried through the gates now. Indian orphans in blankets stood about the fence with their feet on the low rung, sticking their dark arms through the slats at passing cattle.

Inside, Salomon was shown to a small room and sat in front of a cleared desk. Dust powdered off his clothing with every step, and he beat his hand against his shirt until the true color showed through. Two footprints showed where he had been standing on the tile, and he sat with folded papers in hand while his vaqueros led the cattle moaning through the mission gates. One voice carried high over it all. A soldier at the mission. Salomon watched from the window, then sat and bounced his heel, then stood and watched from the window again. He wiped

his brow and tried the window but it would not open. He unbuttoned his shirt and flapped the opening, then held it open and blew into his shirt folds.

The commanding officer came through the door with medals clicking on his uniform and made for the seat behind the desk, watching Salomon as he crossed the room. He was a man without gray, and his eyes worked as quickly as his feet. Salomon placed the papers in his lips and went to buttoning and tucking his shirt.

“What are you doing?” the officer asked.

“You surprised me.”

“What?”

Salomon took the papers from his lips. “I said you surprised me.”

The commanding officer touched the desktop and thumbed his fingers. He blew across the desk before he sat, blew across it from left to right like a windstorm alive, and he opened and closed the desk drawers until he found a jar of ink and a pen. He placed them atop the desk, smoothed his sideburns, and folded his hands.

“You are Salomon Pico?”

“Yes, sir.” He held out his papers. The officer looked at the papers. He creased and closed his eyes and shook his head, raising a hand.

“Pío Pico has sent you here.”

Salomon nodded.

“I apologize for being late. A man sent by Pío is a man not to be ignored, would you agree?”

Again Salomon nodded. The officer smiled and sat back. He put his feet on the desk, crossed at his ankles. He mopped his neck with a handkerchief and sighed. He raised a finger.

“Except by me, cousin. Except by me. I am Capitán Andrés Pico. Pío is my brother.”

Salomon did not speak.

“There are many ways to serve one’s country. Pío does what he is best at, and I do what I am best at. And you?”

Salomon shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t know I was supposed to be serving my country.”

“Nobody knows that. The Californios have been beaten into sad shape. Between the Americans and the indian tribes, I don’t know which to blame more. Men have had the patriotism cut from their hearts, but men should always do what they can for their country. Isn’t this true?”

“Yes.”

“You are a good rancho?”

“I am a rancho.”

“You know much about the cattle market? You know about breeding, and diseases, and fattening a cow for the best meat? So one cow will feed a hundred healthy men?”

Salomon looked down. He brought his head back up and nodded. Andrés smiled. “What do you know?”

“I know the earth.”

“You know the earth? The way the earth rolls and sways, and where water may be found, and how a hoof print looks in the dry dust and cracked clay, and what

path an animal will take when being followed, and how a man will ride when he is not?"

"I know all that. I had to learn."

Andrés put his feet down and spread his elbows on the desk. "Your father was José Dolores Pico."

"Yes."

"He was a fine soldier. I see his name among the founding military explorers of California. He served New Spain in a uniform for a long time."

Salomon leaned forward. "I know that. He was a good man. He died without a coin in his pocket."

Andrés tilted his head and gave a short wave. "He had a lot of children. It happens. He is remembered as a loyal soldier. A good soldier. And you?"

"I didn't know I was supposed to be a soldier."

"You're not supposed to. But you are expected to."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is on one hand men are shoved into uniform, and on the other hand men would run into battle with a bare back."

"Well, what does the military do when there is no war to fight anyway?"

Andrés looked at him. "Mexico has been at war for three months. With the United States. They want what is not theirs. They want Mexican land. That is why we have made soldiers of hundreds of new men. That is why you have brought my brother's cattle to market."

"My cattle."

"My brother's. Your land. I am aware of the situation. You have done well. Pio has been generous. You have earned the land now. You can be proud of that."

"I didn't know we were at war."

"You have been spending too much time under the sun and too little time reading the papers. That is okay. You have brought heavy cattle to the mission, and horses that are strong and eager. You should go back to your ranch. It is what you are best at, no doubt. It is what God has given you talents for. Of this you must be positive."

There was a silent pause in which Andrés kept his eyes on his cousin. Salomon looked up. "I am not a soldier. I have no experience."

"You catch on quick. I am not looking for a soldier, Sal. I am looking for a man who knows the country even better than I do. I was a ranchero myself. I spent days tracking lost calves just as you have. I went so deep into the country alone I thought I was the last man on earth. Under my supervision you would be a scout. You would not fire a weapon unless you found yourself in a quandary."

Salomon moved his feet beneath his chair and back again. "What sort of quandary?"

Andrés nodded his chin toward Salomon. "Where there are weapons ready to fire at you. But this will not happen if you are good with the land. If you know where to go. If you think ahead of the Americans."

"I can do that."

Andrés wet his lips and drummed his fingers. "You have a wife."

"Yes."

"Then you will want to stay away from war. Children?"

“No.”

“Then you will surely want to stay away. I do not want to rob your wife of children before she has had any. I would have a bigger enemy on my hands than anything the United States government sends my way. But you have land.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you should do what you think a man should do.”

Salomon sat looking at the floor. Andrés snapped his fingers and Salomon raised his head. He handed Andrés the cattle papers.

Pío Pico paid the vaqueros at the mission, making the short trip from Pueblo de Los Angeles to oversee the deal himself. With payment in hand, each man turned and yipped in the yard, shouting their riches.

“And for you, cousin, an extra gift for you and your wife.”

Salomon held the paper money. “We are grateful, Pío. It is too much.”

“Nonsense. Take it.” He leaned over a matchflame and lit his cigar. “It is a pleasure for me. You met my brother here, yes?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did he convince you to join the army?”

Salomon looked at Pío. He was smiling with the cigar in his teeth, as if he knew the story already.

“It is okay, cousin. My brother has a convincing way about him. It is hard to say no to him. I have that way myself, but I will spare you the confusion. Join the war, Sal. A man can be among cattle anytime, but he can only be among the patriots of his country in times of war. The ranch will be there when you return.”

“I don’t want to leave my duties.”

“Ah. Duties. Let them fall, for you have other duties. Let them fall for other men to pick up. I will move livestock where it is needed.”

“I don’t want to leave my wife.”

Pío took the cigar from his mouth and stood in the swirl of smoke. He thumbed his eyebrow with his cigar hand. “It is understandable. No man does. Every man puts his life on hold. There is no man alive who is a soldier and nothing else. But it is when man is most vulnerable that he is poised best for greatness.”

Salomon was buckling his saddle when Andrés stepped outside and stood beside him, pulling gloves on. He looked out at the indian children throwing rocks at a hat caught in tree branches.

“When men are picking up weapons against each other, you must ask yourself if you are doing enough at home to give them reason to fight for you.”

Salomon looked at him over the saddleback. “Yes, sir. I thought I was until you told me otherwise. I wasn’t concerned one way or the other until you spoke up.”

“I did not mean to stir your mind. It is the way of a commander to see another man and wonder if he is a soldier inside or not. I can decide with one look.”

“I wish you would drop the subject.”

Andrés turned to face him, his hands behind his back. His medals glinted.

Salomon swallowed and added, “Sir.”

“Go home to your wife, Sal.”

“Well.” He stepped into the stirrup and swung his leg over. The leather creaked beneath him and the horse stepped in place. “Now you’ve got me to thinking.”

The men were saddled and waiting, and Salomon joined them at a run. In Juana's arms Salomon told her he would join the Mexican Army.

"You have a place here."

"I am not a ranchero, Juana. I am just pretending to be."

"You are not a soldier, either. But you are a husband, and you are not pretending that. Why go to war for land when other men are willing to fight for you?"

After a moment, he said, "I think that is why."

He spent a full week mending fence and hinge, and he rode in sunrise and sunset across his land, studying ground and horizon for sign of rider. There was none. He skirted the creekbanks and found the remains of an old fire, kicked and scattered, the coal powdered white and papered under the huge prairie moon. He squatted over the water and looked through to the sand below, swept clean and bare. Flecks of white peered back at him from the blackness. The view from the top of the nearest hogback showed a land without visitors on all sides.

He shoved his pistola in his waistband, and left Juana with his rifle and the promise of a quick return. In men's thoughts wars are uncomplicated. And women believe them. There are no screens, or none that work, that a man can hide behind. He told her he would return shortly and she could see in his eyes it was true. In women's minds men are the decent or vile pictures that men set before them.

Juana watched her husband grow small in the saddle. Several times Salomon looked back, and each time Juana was there with hands clasped at her chin, until he looked one last time and he could see only the outline of the little hacienda low to the ground, sinking beneath the rising curve of his land.

Day and night he rode, retracing the cattle drive to the Mission San Fernando. When he arrived, the cattle had been halved and driven elsewhere, but the remaining herd idled about the wallshade or dragged their hooves toward it. Indian children still stood with their arms dangling through the fence. The mission was empty of soldiers apart from posted guards who picked at the mission walls in boredom or tossed their legs in front of them in slow, aimless steps. A priest stood in the yard, reading to a small group of neophytes. They sat expressionless under colored quilts and serapes, some of them looking with black eyes across the yard to Salomon.

One of the guards asked him, "You are his brother?"

"Cousin."

"I remember you here." The guard set his rifle butt on the ground, lifted his hat and ran a hand over his head, then set his hat back. He touched it around the edges, fitting it just so. "He led his regiment south. The Lancers Los Galgos. Are you a horseman?"

Salomon looked at him. "I ride a horse."

"The capitán's lancers are some of the finest horsemen in the country. In the world. He has made them so." He looked Salomon down and up. He sucked his teeth.

"I am not joining his lancers. I am to be his scout."

The guard smiled.

“He wants me to scout ahead for him,” Salomon said. “When the war comes.”

“The war is already here,” the guard said.

Salomon looked at the guard, then looked out into the dust and sun. “I know.”

“You are not a soldier. You are not a soldier, and you are not a lancer.”

“I told you, I’m a scout. I have land, so I’m joining. What about you, have you ever shot at a man?”

The guard smiled again and shook his head. “No. No, I am not even really a guard.” He stepped back and pulled his rifle up and leveled it at Salomon, cocked the hammer back, and pulled the trigger. Salomon blinked and flinched at the click. The guard smiled. Salomon did not.

“What do you do if someone tries to come in those doors?”

“Nobody comes here. They know there are guards here. We stand on the walls in plain sight. What business would a man who does not belong here have here? And there is no reason for the United States military to take this mission. Maybe, but we are too far.”

“What would you do if they did?”

The guard rubbed his jaw. “We would speak out and warn them. Myself and the other guards.”

“And then what?” Salomon mounted his horse. “And then throw your guns at them?”

The guard shouldered his rifle. “He went south.” And he walked away, toward no place in particular.

Wearing a serape he bought from one of the mission indians, Salomon set off south, following the deep tracks the Lancers Los Galgos had made, which had sunk in the earth, dried, and now crumbled at the edges. They had ridden single file from the mission gates, into untouched lands. He rode among sage and weed and twisted joshua trees, lush grassland cut wide by creeks, and through rock ribs that hallowed red, until the light died away and with it all hint of a trail to follow. He led off the trail and backtracked to a short ridge of weeds, a lump in the flat prairie, and he staked his horse and built a fire against creosote so it gave only a glow of existence before dissipating into the reaching hands of shrubs and became a secret. A burrowing owl repeated his question to the night, seemingly from different spots in the blackness, and field mice scampered between holes. Salomon spread himself beneath the chaparral to watch the night sky and listen to the dark. He soon found himself among the stars, levitated to where he could touch each one brightly burning, and there he found Juana.

In the morning he woke to frost on his saddle, and above him drifted frozen clouds that looked as distant as the sky until his horse nickered over him and the clouds filtered. He was riding before the sunrise, picking up the trail, and when the sun appeared he rode with his face turned to watch it, a silhouette against the amber, riding on that cold, emerging land.

At midday he came upon their first camp, several small fires kicked to death days ago and spread so thin they were almost unnoticeable. They were moving fast. Salomon put his horse to a trot. In the evening the wind drove so hard all he could hear was the roar and whistle of it past his ears. He crested a ridge and saw a homestead built among joshua trees. Horses circled in a corral. The trail kept

going, Pico's lancers had gone on, but Salomon turned off. He descended the ridge, into the wind, and circled the homestead, pausing to watch from almost two hundred yards out, but putting the few horses in the corral on nerves. A dozen hens darted around the sage. He shouted a greeting but nobody answered. He circled again, gaining ground.

When he was a hundred yards out he shouted again, still circling in a trot. The wind seemed to take his voice from him before it even made it out of his mouth. The house was built like a fort, with defense in mind. The adobe was as thick as any mission walls he'd seen, and the windows were shuttered with heavy planks, a small rifle notch in each one. He could feel someone inside looking out at him. He circled again to where the wind would carry his voice to the house. A man emerged from a joshua to take his bridle, already holding it in hand by the time Salomon saw him and could react. His horse resisted but did not raise or run.

"What are you shouting for?"

The man held a rifle in the crook of his arm, in an easy manner. He was dressed in clothing made of burlap and he wore riding boots. His old eyes were yellowing around dark edges.

"I just wanted to make myself known. I didn't want to be thought of as a threat."

The man looked at him. "I might have shot you just to quiet you."

"Alright then. I'm done with it."

The man looked Salomon's outfit over. He leaned and spat. "No need to make yourself known. I can see everything that comes over the ridge."

"Yes, sir."

A boy came toward them, seemingly from the plains, a rifle in his arms much the way the old man carried his. He stopped and stood off to the side and did not speak. The man looked at the boy and the boy lowered his eyes. He spoke to him in a language Salomon did not understand. The boy just nodded, his head still low.

"We've been trained on you for the last three hundred yards," the man said to Salomon. "You're the first person we've seen to circle the place the way you did."

Salomon nodded.

"Riding light," the man said.

"Yes, I am."

Inside they ate beans and rice and tortillas stuffed with beef. The wind howled through the house as the man told a woman to hurry with more food. The woman, whom Salomon guessed to be the man's wife or daughter, brought a steaming plate piled high with tortillas to the table before sitting herself. The boy sat by the man at the head of the table with his head down, eating quickly. The man ate with both hands over his plate. He reached out and chopped the boy's elbows off the table, and the boy sat motionless for a spell. The man spoke to Salomon between bites.

"If you want to stay on after tonight, I will pay you what you earned at your last outfit."

"I am going on."

The man looked up. "To where?"

Salomon shrugged. "I don't know. I'm joining the army."

"Mexico is at war."

"I know that."

They ate for a moment in silence, apart from the wind. The man finished and the woman was quick to refill his plate. She sat eating quietly.

"To join the army, one should go where the army is.

"I am."

The old man looked up. He spoke with a smile and shook his head. "There is no army out here."

"I am following a specific regiment. Capitán Andrés Pico."

The man raised an eye. "Pico?"

"Yes."

"And where are they going?"

Salomon shrugged. The old man reached for another tortilla and began mopping his plate. "Pío Pico owns all the land you have been riding on for a hundred miles." He raised his tortilla. "Except this land. This land is mine. He wants to buy it from me. What does he want with so much land?"

"I don't know. And I'm not following Pio. I'm following his brother."

"And this land is crawling with Comanche. We could use an extra hand. This house is a good defense, but we could use an extra man to fight. They come in waves and not often. Once last year. They stay away from us, but we have learned to smell them. They come for the cattle. What would a man do with land like this?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know much. You know that you want to join the army." He ate the last bite of tortilla and clapped his hands together. The boy had finished his plate already and sat silently. The woman sat as if waiting for a sign from the man. The man spoke with a mouthful of tortilla for the boy to get up and get back in the yard. The boy did so, pushing his chair back and moving quickly from the table. The man hit the boy's ear with a cupped hand as he went by, making him yelp as he ran out the door, but not complaining otherwise. The man looked after him, then turned back. He sat with his hands on the table, chewing. He moved just his eyes to the woman and said something to her. She stood and gathered her plate and the boy's, but when she reached for the man's plate, he grabbed her wrist and twisted it so she dropped it. She hurried away with the other dishes. Salomon watched her kneel at a low sink and pour a pitcher over the dishes. When he looked back, the man was looking at him.

"The regiment you are following passed here two days ago. If you follow them, they may be headed to Mission San Jacinto."

The man stood, pulling suspenders over his shoulders. "You are welcome to stay here. If you do, let's start now."

The woman packed the tortillas for Salomon in a tight wrap. She brought them to him as he was saddling his horse in the yard. He looked down at her and took the outheld wrap.

"Thank you."

She smiled. Silent.

"Is he holding you here?"

She did not answer him. Salomon looked to the house and back again. He spoke low.

"Is he watching? Just give me a nod. Do you want to be here?"

The woman was still for a moment, then she gave him a slight nod. Salomon's horse stepped about, anxious. He looked again to the house and back to her. "Alright then."

It was dark when he left, and he rode half the night against the wind to reach the regiment's second camp. He made his fire under a Joshua and set out again before sunrise. The wind had blown itself out. He rode hard through Yucca Valley, along the rock outcroppings and red land. The ground swelled and rolled where the rock broke through and created cliffs along the valley. He skylined himself at the height of one cliff and found the faintest coils of dust, miles in the distance. He picked his way down the cliff talus, the broken slabs of rock like axe blades piled high. At the base he set into a run. The trail broke off at the base of a mesa, and he followed it to a pool in the sandstone. There he stripped his horse of its saddle and rubbed it down with dry grass. He watered and fed it grain from his pack. He climbed the red slabs to higher ground and found he had gained time but the regiment was again on the move.

He picked up the trail and rode through the night, passing their last camp. He reined in and stomped around in the old firesites, wheeling his horse before picking up the trail and riding through several hours. It would be midday that he caught up to them. The hills rose up and rolled higher here, and he built his fire between the folds, guarded from sight. In the night, he woke to his horse stomping and blowing nerves beside him. The night was silent but he lay listening. His horse startled a step and blew again, and Salomon rolled from his blanket with pistol in hand. He crouched in his socked feet, pressing himself against the thorns of a dying soapweed. After several minutes of silence a ground owl spoke up in the darkness. Salomon gathered his things in snatches and saddled his horse and rode on, through the crags in the hills and scruboak that shook in the night breeze and made him look each time at the sudden movement. Climbing a small rise, he turned in the saddle and saw them behind him, stalking close.

Three Comanche, painted black from face to torso with red handprints and few white hash marks. Black as night, stalking on white blotched ponies and carrying lances tied with withered scalps. They carried crude axes at the ready, their ponies' manes and tails were tied. They moved about like haunting ghosts behind him, and when Salomon turned in his saddle they came on quickly, screaming a war cry that spooked Salomon's horse beneath him and nearly dropped him. Running all out with white eyes and bared teeth, the horse gave Salomon little chance of turning to fire. He went low in the saddle and gave the horse free rein. The horse stayed on the trail, finding safety in the path of other horses. The Comanche continued to holler, evil cries, menacing and hoarse, of death incarnate, and Salomon stayed low. He glanced left and right to see one Indian was riding fast beside him at five paces, his axe raised at shoulder level, shown in the moonlight. Salomon pointed his pistol but the Indian slid from the back to ride sidelong on his horse, disappearing in an instant. The Comanche pony closed the gap, hurling forward, and Salomon could see the Indian's leg gripped over the back. Salomon put his gun barrel to the pony's head and fired, putting the weeds in sudden light and flashing shadow and filling the moonlight with a black froth seemingly shot forth from its far ear, dropping horse and rider in midstride. He glanced back to see the Indian had fallen headlong in a surge of sand and lay

twisted and unmoving, half buried, the pony broken and dead on its legs before it fell.

Before he turned to locate the other riders his horse went out beneath him and he rolled in the sage, pulling up sand as a wheel does. He rose with his knife in hand, blade up, the Comanche already past him, riding fast into the pitch. His own horse lay kicking in the sand behind him, a lance sticking from its shoulder. The other Comanche rider came at him, the unshod pony hooves muted in the sand, and he spun himself out of foot of the passing movement, a breathing, riding nightmare, going out into the black to join the other. Salomon crouched in the soapweed. A pony stood riderless, shapeless in the near distance, shaking its head and trotting a few paces. All became still. He put himself low to the ground to try to put the indians in shape, their figures to blot the stars, but he saw nothing. Mice had burrowed and bird had flown off. There was nothing moving, and nothing to move apart from the shrubs fastened to the earth and joshuas growing from it. To his right he heard hoof beats and he raised his pistola as the other pony emerged in shape and trotted to a stop. He looked closer, a wandering animal, drifting without rider. When he took his eyes away, the Comanche were already near him, running at him from the darkness with black eyes. Silent they came on foot, just steps away with axes raised when Salomon rose from the weeds with his knife hand outstretched, taking the Comanche under the ribcage before he could swing. A yelp in the dark weeds, a wicked cry, half evil, half something else. He tore his knife hand away bloody and let the warrior fall at his feet, spraying his face red before he fell away breathless. He blinked away the sting and rich odor of blood straight from a beating heart. The other warrior stood before him. Salomon crouched, one hand out. The Comanche looked to the fallen warrior, and past Salomon to the night beyond his shoulder. Salomon wiped his eyes. He heard himself grunt through grit teeth. The indian spoke low and hollow like some soothsayer's prediction, then turned his back. He swung onto his pony and rode away without looking back.

Salomon backed away, stumbling into yucca spears and ragweed, his legs working backward like some vile vaudeville act. He scrambled and ran, leaving the bodies where they fell, sand bursting beneath his feet with each step, his legs carrying him out of sight into the darkness where he could find some veiled outcropping where he could hide and clutch himself.

The next morning, Salomon staggered cold from the talus to find it. He had run farther than he remembered, and with the dead blot of his horse in the sand he could see a figure crouching. It hunkered muttering over the horse carcass, shoulders working, and when Salomon came near, it looked up and stood. He was a bearded white man stitched in buffalo hides, his hat low on his brow so he had to tilt his head back to see. He held a large knife in one hand and a hunk of horsemeat in the other. Behind him stood his horse and a pack mule, a string of dark scalps, including three fresh ones, dangling from its back. A rifle stuck from the saddle scabbard. The one indian pony stood back of them, tied. The man did not move for his gun. He pointed with his knife at the dead horse.

"This here yours?"

Salomon nodded, understanding the question by gesture.

Any expression the man wore under beard and hat. After a moment, he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "I buried them. I'm taking the scalps. That's fair."

A fresh mound of dirt lay yards away where the man had buried the Indian bodies together. It was a hasty job done, with limbs bared, like wind had blown dirt over them.

"I cut your saddle," the man said, pointing. Salomon looked and saw his saddle bare and discarded in the dirt. The straps had been stripped and the buckles salvaged.

"But I found a pistol yonder. Yours? What do you have by way of money?" the man asked. "I have a pony to sell."

Salomon looked at the man but did not speak.

The man hung his head for a moment. He nodded. "I suppose I owe you for the saddle. And for saving me the killing of these scalps. That's fair. I will not leave a man on foot."

Wind had all but blurred the regiment trail. Salomon followed what was left of it on the Comanche pony. He sat bareback, a crude stirrup system made from cut and tied rope that the scalphunter had given up. He had managed to talk the scalphunter by way of gesture into letting him keep his pistola, saddlebags, and halter, however the pony did not take to the bit in his mouth. He rode without it, grasping the mane and fighting the pony in the right direction. It ran well, a graceful, fluid effort. He was nearly bucked twice, but hung on.

A day later he caught the regiment camped at midday among boulders in a hillside. He called out and announced his name, and he came into camp with his hands in the air as guns trained on him partway. A soldier stepped forward and reached for reins but found none, and the horse shied and bit the soldier's hand. He lost his glove but kept his fingers.

"I was expecting you earlier," Andrés Pico told him, fireside.

"I was held up some."

"Did you trade for that pony?"

"Somewhat. Three of them came at me night before last. They killed my horse."

"We may see more." He put a hand on Salomon's shoulder. "I am glad you're here. War is an ugly thing, and it has been ugly since the beginning of time. But it is beautiful too. It is a thing that will never go away. Men will never be able to settle peacefully. Those who try will be cut down. Men are built for war inside and out, and there is something beautiful that happens to a man when he fights in uniform. When he fights for his country."

Salomon stared at the ground, unblinking. "I killed the three. Comanche."

Andrés Pico leaned in. "It was you or them. It is a strange thing to kill a man in war."

"I'm not at war with them."

Andrés looked at him. "They are damn well at war with you. It is different, an American and a Comanche. Soldiers have faces and voices like any man you've seen. But there is something a Comanche doesn't possess. I don't know what it is. It is not dignity, for they possess that in great amounts. There is no pride in watching another man die, doing the same thing for his side that you are doing for yours. But there is a necessity in it, and that necessity that you filled is the

beautiful thing. In its strange way. So the men, women, and children can live behind you and not be afraid.” He shook his head. “I cannot explain it.”

Then he added, “The Comanche don’t give any hints. Their faces and eyes are secrets. I don’t think they fight the way we do. They don’t fight so they can live in peace. Maybe they do.”

Andrés Pico had Salomon outfitted properly. He had no extra saddle or horse, as a lancer regiment must move quickly and under stealth. A supply wagon would slow the force considerably. But he packed his saddlebags with grain and food, paper cartridges, a spyglass, a knife, and a rifle, which he fashioned a sling for and tied alongside his horse. As the nights were getting cold, he gave him a blue army coat to wear beneath his serape.

They rode side by side, Salomon at the front alongside the capitán. He kept his eyes on the landscape, a task made easier by the silence that Capitán Pico shared with him. Unlike his brother, Andrés did not tell stories on horseback. He rode with his hands in front of him at all times, not like some of the soldiers he’d turned in the saddle to see with their hands in their pockets, lances strapped alongside the horses. And his eyes stayed on the outline of the land, aware of any figure to rise on that outline. Here his brother Pío would glance about occasionally while talking, seeming to ride unconcerned with who they might share the skyline.

At first he sent him on day long expeditions, scouting a ridgeline to the east or a valley floor for water, hills for antelope. Then he sent him ahead of the regiment, into the barren California deserts and high forests to track United States military movements.

Weeks passed and Salomon rode with US forces in sight, racing back to his regiment with their positions. Capitán Pico was an expert of military positioning, always finding and taking advantage of the land and forcing the US Army of the West to retreat or realign their movements with little engagement between forces but disrupting patterns and advances just as effectively. They could gain no foothold to advance upon as Pico continued to menace in canyons and plains alike, and the US Army of the West had to seek advancement elsewhere, where the Mexican Army was weak and unorganized.

Salomon became comfortable in these hills of southern California. Here he would sleep among the many names of cactus and stare at the stars until the earth fell away beneath him. He dreamed of Juana and the beds of grass they used to share beneath the heavens. Always she came from afar in his dreams, starting as a speck on the horizon and coming closer each night, crossing the distance between them on foot with windtossed hair. Each time he could see her face come more into focus, and it looked like she had something to say, but she could never get it out before he woke. He would see her as he rode, floating through the forest, glowing from tree to tree, making him stop and look twice, and he would push his face away from the desert pools and turn when he saw her reflection. He spoke her name often, aloud as often as he could, for just her name could bring him peace and break the loneliness of the silent sunbaked land.

Several times he came across US scouting parties, surprising each other with their sudden presence. They gave chase, looking to cut off any reports Salomon

could give mexican commanders, but he had been riding the hills and deserts for months and vanished before their eyes like a rode upon mirage.

He found other things as he toed among the cacti and dropped a shoulder passing under the joshua and piñon. Wagon tracks followed by weighted mules. He traced it to find three white men in a rickety chuckwagon, following the creeks and stepping out often to wade and stoop the waters. They seemed to have no mind to their whereabouts, just a direction to go in each day, and Salomon watched from a distance as they fumbled in their hunting efforts and had to settle for pancooked bread. When he approached them, they stood with faces drained of color and said one thing.

“Gold.”

Comanche war parties also left their tracks, moving quickly across the land, burning any homesteads they came across. Salomon slept one night in blackened adobe ruins until he tricked himself into hearing movements on the floors he slept upon, chains dragging, boards creaking, and feet resting the weight they carried, suddenly silent when he lifted his head. He picked up in the middle of the night and moved as far away from the haunt as he could and slept among the dead fingers of greasewood shrubs.

One night he came to a burning homestead, a single beacon in the desert, alight as if it would never go out. As if the flame came from the ground itself, a release of pressure from the earth where a valve could not be shut off. He stood his horse a ways off in the treeline of the hills with his rifle drawn, and watched as figures rushed howling across the flamelight, their shadows longlegged on the ground before fading and becoming a part of the night. Several times he sighted a figure along his gun barrel but he did not fire. Hours later he went to the coals, his presence scattering the wolves, and he found the smoldering skeletal remains of a family of five, charred and shattered about the forearms and skulls.

He rode south through the Santa Rosa Hills, staying in the valleys between the mounds, and stepping along the broken shale that skirted the peaks, careful not to skyline himself. He came to a valley below the hills, with a clear creek running like a thin wire between the joshuas. He sat in the forest edge, watching the valley until satisfied before nudging his horse forward. The horse was skittish on the descent, moving quickly at times, and drawing to a complete stop at others. Salomon dismounted and waited until the horse's ears relaxed and the animal put its head down for a drink. Then he dropped to his knees and hands beside it.

The horse shied then, and Salomon squatted at the creekbank. On the far side of the valley, too far to distinguish a man's face, a single rider stepped from the trees. He sat his horse, looking directly at Salomon's position. He wore a fur hide over his head and shoulders, buffalo or bear, and he wore the blue slacks with red piping of the United States cavalry. He wore stitched hide moccasins. The horse he sat bareback was a wild roan. They watched each other across the sweet smelling valley, the creek babbling at Salomon's feet, and then the rider turned and rode over the hill, staying out of the trees as if to show he was heading away.

Salomon crossed the hills and descended into the sandstone arroyos where vegetation was scarce again. He was making good time through the canyons when he came out of a gulch on top of an old campsite between the giant stone slabs. The fire was dead and long out, for a mouse darted between the fire rocks. He

counted a dozen spots where men had slept in the dirt, and he counted as many horses.

It began to rain and they were easy to follow, but they crossed open land, dulled by overcast, and Salomon had to trace the hidden canyons parallel to any travel they made, unwilling to expose himself if they decided to doubleback. He found their tracks again on the other side of a misted valley. They had come up to the sandstones in search of pools. They had stayed a while, resting, and Salomon found the horse droppings still warm. He bellied up a crest and found them passing below him, idle talk and cursing. They were United States cavalry, although he counted fifteen riders in all. Three of them must have slept atop sandstone and made no mark. Or three of them stayed up on watch and gave no sleep marks for the sand to hold. One soldier pressed his throat with air, then leaned to the side and spat what he got.

Salomon followed them along the Santa Rosas, cutting through an easy path, the path that flowing rains were taking, following the little rivulets that beaded off the hills. They broke from the range and trotted with fog at their feet along an empty plain, straight to the Mission San Jacinto, a mission operated by one priest serving a dozen neophytes. They took the mission without a shot fired.

“What do they want with the Mission San Jacinto?” Andrés Pico said when Salomon returned. The regiment had moved coastward and south toward San Diego. Andrés was sitting with the blade of his lance between his knees. With a leather strop he whet each side in long motions. His lieutenant stood by, holding a map. Andrés shook his head and went back to his blade.

“There’s nothing there but a crazy priest. He makes his indians run laps. The Americans could stay there a hundred years and it wouldn’t make a difference.” He looked up again. “They’re holed up, waiting for another group. We should get there before they do.”

“We cannot attack them in the mission,” the lieutenant said.

“No.” Pico stood and hefted his lance upward in one arm, inspecting the point. “But we can intercept the group they’re waiting for before they join forces. They will try for San Diego together.”

They moved out in the rain. The Lancers Los Galgos rode through the Santa Rosas, seventy-strong riders leaning forward in the saddles as their horses made the climb. Andrés Pico skirted the steep climb, finding the soft spots in the forest for quick progress. At the top he paused and called Salomon to the front. Salomon rode forward, spyglass in hand as the lancers watched him pass.

Andrés Pico pointed to the valley opening. “See that cut in the valley? Tell me what that is.”

Salomon pulled the spyglass, telescoping it, and held it to his eye, scanning until he found what he was supposed to. He lowered the spyglass and looked at Andrés, who nodded to him. Salomon looked again.

“American forces, capitán. Mounted dragoons, mostly. I count a hundred—a hundred twenty—a hundred fifty, sir. And they have pack mules but no horses at the rear, sir, and they’ve been riding a long time.”

“Good,” Andrés said. Then he straightened in his saddle and looked at Salomon. “Jesus. A hundred fifty.”

"That's what I count, sir." Salomon lowered the spyglass and handed it to Andrés.

After viewing the advancing American dragoons, Andrés handed the glass back and sat his horse, studying the valley below.

"Well, hell we've done more than a hundred fifty before."

He made time on the descent, wave after wave of his lancers dropped down the embankment, lying back in the saddle with grit teeth as their horses ran downhill, the way a bronc rider looks at the peak of a buck. A resistant horse would have stumbled and spooked, eventually trapping itself and rider on the sheer drop, unwilling to move forward and unable to climb back. But the lancers' horses kept up with gravity, their hooves finding the solid holds in the wet ground, trusting the ground, charging without effort or thought to the valley floor like a stampede.

Salomon watched as they dropped off the edge one by one, a short stepping about to gauge the hillside, then a trusting leap out of view and into the sheer forest that grew at a severe angle. He stood clutching his pony bareback at the edge, looking down. The lancers were soon gone, a small lifting of mist to show their passing. Alone he stepped his horse back and forth at the top, before his horse took the lead and went off the side. He found himself clutching the tied mane with both hands and leaning back, feeling his shoulders on the pony's back. He could not see the direction they were going, nor could he see the ground for any trail to follow. Even if he could, he would not be able to influence his pony's direction. It was all he could do just to hang on, a looselegged passenger coming down the hillside, looking to the treetops in the gray sky.

The hill leveled out and he caught glimpses of the lancers already moving forward into the valley fog, into the smell of wet lavender. One lancer held back and stood his horse at the base of the hill. He was smiling and shaking his head as Salomon approached.

"Fancy bit of circus riding."

"Is that what you call it?"

The soldier laughed. "The rest of us rode down. I don't know what I'd call what you did."

"The hell with you."

"We'll need a wrench to pry your hands off that mane."

Andrés Pico came back through the mist. He called to Salomon and jerked his head to the valley. Salomon rode into the drizzling rain, sticking to the hillside, just inside treeline. He rode an hour, picking his way through the forest and stopping for brief periods. He found the Americans had made camp not far from where he had seen them in the spyglass. He left his pony and crept up a rockface and studied their outfit. They were heavily armed dragoons, rubbing down their horses and building fires. Some of the soldiers were already under tarps or tree limbs, sleeping. One tent had a line forming at the front, and soldiers came out the back of it one at a time with a steaming plate in hand. The smell of food made his stomach growl.

He came back along the treeline and into the wet grass and valley fog waist high. He followed the creek that flowed wide from one end to the other. His horse whickered and sidestepped. On the other side of the creek a single rider emerged from the fog. They looked up at the same time and found each other. The rider was

young and wore the oversized coat of the US Army of the West, shared by the dragoons camped at the other end of the valley. Salomon drew his pistola but the only move the young scout made was to touch the brim of his hat. They moved past each other until the fog set thick between them, and both set off in a trampling of hoof beats.

“They’re set up at the valley opening, sir. They know we’re here.”

The lancers had set up a quick camp where the valley funneled between the hills around a narrow opening of boulders. The riders were handling their lances, preparing their horses. Some were stooped over small fires, eating. Andrés Pico was crouched over the creek with a tin cup at his mouth. He looked up at Salomon.

“Same numbers?”

“We counted correctly, sir. They are travel worn.”

“I don’t care if they are asleep in the saddle.” Andrés put the cup to his mouth again.

Salomon grimaced. “They are camped upstream, sir.”

Andrés looked at him.

“They are pissing in the water, sir.”

Andrés looked at his cup and at the creek. He tossed the water from his cup and leaned and spat. He looked at Salomon and spoke, his mouth carefully forming the words.

“Viva la California.”

When the clanking of American sabers and the occasional horse sneeze and hoof on the earth were heard, the Lancers Los Galgos were mounted and waiting side by side in tens with lances held under arm and fires smothered behind them. A daylong drizzle had wet and muted the valley, and sound carried. A suppressed cough at three hundred yards sounded as if it was just beyond the fog.

“You stay back, Sal.”

Capitán Pico was trotting his ranks when the silence broke to yells and hoof pounding. The lancers gripped their weapons and their horses stepped in place as blue riders materialized like ghosts before them, horses breathing like smoke. Pico wheeled and charged with his lance held level, his pistola remaining holstered, his face frozen in yells as his horse broke the portrait stillness of his lancers. They followed behind him in echo of howl and countenance. The Army of the West commander ordered the first volley fired, yet the air broke with few gunshots. American guns clicked on wet rounds, rain soaked and river crossed, and what few shots did fire went droning into the gray. Some dropped their weapons and reached for more, while others threw their weapons as rocks as spear points impaled their bodies and cleared their saddles.

The lancers were among them. Salomon rode with his pistola held high. He was pulling the hammer back and pulling the trigger, clicking on a used cartridge, finding targets and pulling the trigger again and again. He was through the first wave of dragoons. They were clawing and screaming in the dirt behind him when he heard the shouts of a second wave. He spun his horse and rode back through the bloodied grounds, following the white cross straps on blue of the lancer in front of him. An American jumped at him from the ground, his hands searching for a saddle to grip but none to find. Salomon hammered his gun barrel alongside

the man's head until he dropped. There was a moment before he fell where he saw the man's eyes look to his, blood sheeting down his forehead and over his brows, staining the whites bloodshot and blinding him so that he lost direction in his look and held a stare of confusion and terror. He kept on, seeing the Los Galgos coats disappearing to where they came. He saw a downed lancer running alongside one of the horses, the rider of which reached and grabbed a belt and held on as they rode, the downed man pulling his legs up and holding them off the ground.

American soldiers turned in their saddles and circled about, pointing at fleeing figures and firing past them, until horse hooves sounded away and they found they were turning among themselves, stepping over fallen bodies groaning and reaching upward. They regrouped their strung forces and charged again into the unseen, not in an orderly column, but in a ragged bunch, a fist of dragoons striking the mist with knives and guns ready.

But there were no blue coats to fire at, no lancers charging back, only hoof beats continuing their drumming away. They kept after them on spurred horses, pointing at rocks and trees, any shapes that appeared as they came on, moving up the narrow passage where the valley emptied, around the boulders that bent the path.

They were there, side by side in the passage, so close and sudden that they could have picked their lances in the dirt and had the Army of the West run themselves through. But they charged in a sickening cry and rode through the reining soldiers, dismounting them and trampling them under. Few shots were fired, ricocheting off the rock walls in a ping of smoke and stinging powder.

Under this second loss the US Army of the West under Captain Kearny retreated further to Mule Hill and did not attack again until weeks later, when they were rested and reinforced with new soldiers, dry ammunition, and fresh livestock.

Andrés Pico walked the fading battlefield mist and turned the bodies of wounded and dead men alike, seeking out one groan that would not cease. He found him laying with his hands clutching an open gash at his chest and staring skyward with eyes that did not gather the commander's stooping figure but seemed to see into another world entirely. He was an American. Pico knelt above him and gathered the man's hands in his own, and Salomon watched on as they both prayed in their respective tongues, the victor and the dying sharing what man does not and cannot possess on earth, but what crosses the borders of different men's understandings without question. The young soldier bubbled and coughed his prayer until he held no wind to carry it. His eyes did not close, staying focused on whatever it was he saw in that new world that carried him across from life to death through his eyes in that San Pasqual Valley.

They rode out of the valley to the Mission San Jacinto where the disbanded US cavalry force of fifteen stood the walls awaiting the reinforcements that would never come. The lancers fell in alongside each other and advanced the gates at a distance, a sketching of figures in the lifting fog. A guard atop the walls knelt shielded at the wall and raised his rifle to his shoulder, only his head and shoulders exposed. A second guard on the wall knelt and sighted along his rifle.

The lieutenant spoke. "Capitán."

"I see him," Andrés Pico said.

They continued to march forward, and the unflinching guards kept their rifles trained on Pico. The lancers halted at a hundred yards with their strength of numbers in full display. Their horses nodded and shook and clicked in wait. The second guard pulled his rifle and retreated from sight. Andrés Pico pulled his pistola and aimed it at the first rifleman. They sat locked on each other, and moments later the rifleman retreated the same.

The lieutenant spoke softly from the side of his mouth, still watching the adobe walls. "Can you hit with that thing this far?"

Andrés Pico holstered the pistola. "He believed so."

The mission gates opened wide yet nothing came from them. The lancers sat watching the stillness and looked to each other. Then the cavalry came from the gates at a run that made the lancers flinch. Andrés Pico sat up in his saddle. The cavalry went around the sidewalls and the lancers watched as they showed their backsides.

Pico gave chase. They were gaining ground when the cavalrymen scattered by twos in every direction. Andrés Pico put a hand up and reined in. He watched the cavalry disband across the grassy sands and he turned to his men and shrugged and shook his head.

It was the second attack weeks later from Kearny on the Lancers Los Galgos, this time just outside San Diego. Mexican forces in Alta California had folded under US pressure. Surrounded, outnumbered, and expecting little reinforcements and seeing inconsistent unity in the Mexican Army, Capitán Andrés Pico surrendered, and, under the threat of a firing squad, sat days later with American commanders on the sunny porch of the city records building to sign the Treaty of Cahuenga, which saved his lancers and ended combat between armies.

Isolated incidents of violence continued, although they were from rebels and did not represent the Californios.

"Take one of the horses," Andrés told Salomon, looking up at him on the same Comanche pony he'd ridden all winter. Andrés looked tired and moved in as slow a manner as Salomon had seen from him, but he did not look old or beaten. He carried his head high, and he still looked a man unflinching in the eyes when he spoke. "Mine are the best horses in the army."

"Think I'll keep the one I'm on. We've gotten used to each other."

"At least take a saddle."

"I don't think she'd take to it," Salomon said. "And I've gotten used to riding this way."

Salomon rode north, alone, toward his rancho and toward his Juana. She was always running ahead of him, shimmering in the heat, but she was always beside him as he fell asleep. She came close so he could make out her features and her trembling mouth, filled with secrets. He could feel himself rise from his blankets to gain that extra inch between them so she could finally speak. On horseback he daydreamed, and he found himself leaning off the side in the same way.

One night she came close to him and her lips parted to speak, but her attention was taken before she could. In that visual third world, that portal to another place entirely, a place men could only reach in subconscious, his Juana turned her eyes as if something dangerous stood behind him. He turned his eyes to follow and awoke in the half-light of morning. A figure sat over his fire blowing dead coals to life, and a single flame like a candle came forth as he opened his eyes, giving the shadow a face. The figure sat huge on a small stone, his feet flat on the earth and legs wide with the fire between them, his knees up by his shoulders. The firepit was infinitesimal beneath him, a giant's plaything. He wore the blue pants of a US cavalryman and his ankles showed. He wore a buffalo hide fashioned as an uneven vest with holes for his arms and a hood. Under the hood he wore the tattered mexican infantryman blue army cap which he pulled tight over long, black hair. His face glowed broad and flat, and he must have sensed that Salomon opened his eyes in that split second, because he turned from the flame to look.

Salomon threw back from his bedroll and rolled away with blankets trailing, and came up with nothing to point. His pistola and knife lay shining atop a stone by the fire. The indian did not move. Did not twitch. He watched Salomon come up with hands searching, and he did not smile either. He simply turned back to the flame and coaxed it alive.

Salomon's pony stood motionless at firelight's edge, indifferent to the indian's presence or unaware entirely, as if this were a part of the dream world from which it began. Standing beyond the firelight, remaining in shadow where it could exist always between worlds, the indian's pony, massive in its way, stood untethered and seemingly untouched altogether, like a wild pony come to see.

The indian warmed his hands over the flame, or rather tested the heat it put out, for he went to warming water in a tin cup that had the same bent handle as the one Salomon carried with him and the same dent in the lip as the one Salomon drank from each morning. Salomon stretched his neck and saw his saddlebag was open and a small wrapping of coffee had been sampled from. The Comanche did not look over, but he spoke in clear and calm spanish.

"You are a scout for the Mexican Army."

Salomon did not answer. His mouth was open and his chest was heaving as he breathed, though he had done nothing but roll from his sleep. His legs numbed beneath him and his feet twitched in place, ready to turn and run. Run somewhere. But he found himself leaning toward the man, as if his next move would carry him forward instead of away. He closed his mouth and swallowed and glanced around, and his face fell openmouthed again when he looked back at the indian.

"What do you scout?"

"I'm going back home, is what I'm doing. War's over."

The indian looked at Salomon for a moment and turned back to the fire. He stirred the coffee and nodded. "To your pretty wife and child."

Salomon swallowed again. A drop of sweat fell across his eyes, surprising him, and he wiped it away. "No."

"No, what?"

"I don't have a child."

The indian's face remained flat, as though any muscle to articulate expression had been severed from control long ago and had been motionless for years. He looked again at Salomon. "You live on the San Joaquin, in the adobe house with the galleries front and back. You are a ranchero for Pio Pico."

Salomon's breathing became heavier. His skin glistened with sweat in the early light. The indian took a sip and held the cup below his chin.

"I do not understand the Californios. You move into a land and fight the people who were there before you, and then you give it to new people. Why fight for land only to give it up? You claim ownership of a thing that cannot be owned only to give up and be owned by someone new."

"I am just going home."

"To a home and land that is not yours."

Salomon wiped his hands down his shirt. He said, "We are bothering nobody. A man can live in any home he puts his mind to, so long as he leaves others alone."

The Comanche tipped back the cup and exhaled when he brought it back down. "What home do you think you have left?"

Salomon stepped forward, but the indian remained still. "My God, if you've done anything to her I will kill you."

Without previous hint the indian stood in one motion as if pulled by something unseen, and Salomon took a step backward, shrunken by the man's flickering shadow beside him.

"Good. This I like. If you fight for something, you should be willing to kill. Or die for it. Like your land. Nemenna die for their land."

The man stood still, the cup in his hand. They were both silent, and the indian's face was blackened with the fire behind it.

"Nemenna is us."

"The Comanche?"

"That's your word for us." He stretched his head to see over Salomon's blankets, at his feet in the burred sand. "Are you going to stay over there?"

"Yes, I think I will," Salomon said.

The indian stepped forward and placed the tin cup by the saddlebags. The rising dawn washed the edge of firelight so it was not an edge but a fade hardly fit to hold a shadow. The indian moved by marionette strings and mounted his horse in a way Salomon had never seen a man mount a horse before. The pony did not seem so large with rider.

"Go to your wife. Nemenna are the least of your concerns now."

And he walked his horse into the prairie as slow as one could, to disappear somehow in a growing light that revealed everything else. Salomon stepped over his bedroll and grabbed his pistola, and when he looked again to where the indian had been there was nothing there, not even the sound of horse footfalls. Where all shadows dried up, the indian had become as one.

He rode fast, stopping only when his horse began to falter beneath him or he found himself fading as a rider. He camped for a few hours at a time, always waking in a jump from his blankets, taking only enough sleep to ride again. He rode a three-day stretch before crawling into a hole at the roots of a mesquite and falling asleep as soon as he had a fire built. He slept only the hours he needed before mounting up in the dark and riding on.

He descended a ridge, a sharp gulch that opened in the earth. Two horses were idling in the sun, and he came down the ridge almost on top of them. The two riders had worked themselves well into the gulch, and their curses echoed just as often as their hammer strikes. They were both crouched, looking into the rockwall as they took turns with the hammer, one looking over the shoulder of the other. They felt the strange prickle of eyes on their back and looked around. Salomon sat horseback at the entrance of the gulch, his wrists crossed in front of him.

“What are you doing on my land?”

One of the two men pieced together what Spanish he knew, saying it in slow, Texan syllables. “Hola, señor. Miro agua.”

“There’s no gold on my land.”

The man blinked. He swallowed. He took a step forward, still stooped in a curve. “Miro agua.”

“You’re no more looking for water in that rock than you are looking for permission from the owner of the rock. You’re two miners come from Texas looking for gold.”

The man stood blinking stock-still but eventually lowered his head, nodding. “Miro oro.”

“What’s on my land belongs to me. I want you gone with the sun.”

He rode from there at a run. It was a good horse, as the Comanche rider before him had demanded much from it, and it was eager to run. Riding north he skirted the glow of a campfire thought to be hidden, and he walked alongside his horse to save its legs, and woke with his face in the dirt and his horse nudging him in darkness.

Juana had come to him again in the night. She came so close he could smell her washed skin and hair, and her dark eyes and lips. She put her finger to her lips and smiled. Her secret had already been told. He had been gone six months, dreaming of his wife every night. When he rode through his land he imagined her at the door, but when he dismounted in the yard, the house looked empty. No movement in the windows, no vaqueros in the bunkhouse, no horses in the stables. There were no idle cattle in the yard, no curious calves nosing around. In fact he had seen no cattle on his land at all, just the few random campfires of strangers. A bird had built its nest in a nook on the gallery, reachable by hand, yet ignored. A frost covered the ground nearly every morning, but the front door was open despite the cold, he could see the red tiles inside. Then she appeared. Her outline in the doorway. She did not come running, not the anxious leap of a young lover off the steps. Instead she put herself through the door with one hand on her belly and one hand on the doorframe, the careful approach of a mother-to-be. She had been holding the secret since the night he left, a revelation that became less and less a secret with each day it grew inside her. He ran to her, clearing the porch steps in one stride, and held her close. He kissed her lips and forehead, her neck and shoulders. She smelled the way he remembered, the scent he sometimes thought came to him through the burnt sage, but he found only in dreams. He dropped to a knee and kissed her rounded belly, and she held his head and softly laughed. It was the same laugh he had heard as a child when he swept his father’s hat from his head in the gesture of a gentleman. Looking up he saw her face was largely unchanged from that of the sweet child’s face years ago.

"I am home."

She touched his cheek. "I know."

The ranch may have been untouched by workmen's hands and the hacienda chipped under weather and overgrown with weeds and vine, dried and left clinging with dead hands during the winter, but inside it had been carefully taken care of. By the door, a broom leaned against the wall. She had been sweeping the tile when he rode up. Salomon swept his wife in his arms and carried her over the threshold, kicking the door closed behind him with his heel, knocking the broom to the floor where it stayed until the next day.

He asked her later. "Where are the cattle and vaqueros? Pío said the ranch would run without me."

"And it did," Juana said. She said the men had worked hard. As hard as if Salomon were still there to watch over them. But one by one they left to join the fight as he did. They sold off the cattle in pieces, to the Mexican Army, as before, until there were no more to sell. They were not restocked. Pío had left the country.

"Left the country? I thought he said he would check in on you. Make sure you were comfortable."

"He did. Several times, bringing more than he needed to for comforts. And he paid me your share from the cattle. More than your share. But he said the Mexican Army is spread too thin, with too many generals and not enough leaders. He was going to Baja California to request more troops. More unity. He is an important man, Salomon. We are but one of his many concerns. I don't know that he will return now."

They sat in silence for a time, then he took her hands in his. "We will rebuild the ranch. The army is not buying, then I will find someone who is. I will hire my own vaqueros, and we will put chickens in the yard."

"And another garden?"

"And a garden. Our son will have a ranch to run when he is older."

"Our son?" Juana smiled.

Salomon put his hands to her belly and looked at her. "Or daughter."

Juana placed her hands over his and moved them. They sat still for a moment, and then Salomon's eyes widened and Juana's eyes smiled.

"I think a son," she said.

They restocked the ranch. First with a small herd which Salomon bought and drove himself, then more, with the help of new vaqueros hired from the streets of Pueblo de Los Angeles. They picked up where Pío Pico's vaqueros left off with little difficulty, but they were quiet and did not smile and bow to Juana when she stepped outside as the previous vaqueros did.

"Can you trust them?"

"I would not bring them here if I didn't."

"I liked Pío's vaqueros. I liked Marquez."

"I did too. If you can trust Marquez, you can trust these men. They are good men. They are honest men like before."

"Maybe. But they are not family."

Salomon peeled the hacienda walls of overgrowth, and fixed and painted the shutters and replaced any rot. He fashioned a plow from an old shovel and a broken wagon axle. The men watched over his shoulder and shook their heads as he built it. They laughed and slapped his back. But Juana clapped her hands from the porch steps when he hitched the contraption to a horse and plowed the warming earth, and the vaqueros shrugged and smiled.

They had a son that spring and named him José Dolores Pico after Salomon's father. Juana wore him in a sling at her chest as she tended the garden while chickens trampled her lines and pecked at her seeds, and Salomon held him high in the sunset when he returned from the cattlefields each night.

He rode across his land and it sprawled lush beneath him as before. It was good land, with good water and good grass, and small pockets of shadow seemed to gleam with minerals. It breathed with the healthy movement of cattle. And people.

More and more people crossed his land. He waved to the men and women on buckboards passing through, little heads peeking out the canvas of wagonbacks, and he moved out the miners who set up camp to rip up his creekbeds and break his rocks. He once found a man alone with one mule at the end of a thirty-foot dig in a hillside. The hulking man was talking to himself in the darkness and moving a shovel as quick as Salomon had ever seen before, his mule beside him in the black hole. The man would dig a few feet and pack a small charge in the earth before riding his short mule out the hole at a shouting run, a cloud of dirt and rock bursting out behind him. When the smoke cleared, he'd do it again. Salomon walked into the hole with a lantern outstretched and found the man dirtsmudged and gibbering against the back wall with a worn down shovel in his hands. He told him to get moving on. The man looked at him for a while before rubbing the back of his hand under his nose.

"Well," he said. "I ain't getting rich here anyway."

He rode home one night to find a wagon in the yard and the hacienda windows alight. Inside he found Juana serving a family of settlers, six of them at the table, as they passed little José Dolores from hand to hand, hefting him above their heads.

"You are too trusting of people."

"We don't have many visitors out here. And they've come such a long way."

"One day you will invite a thief in our doors to steal the tiles beneath our feet."

"They had children with them," Juana said. "And I ask if you come to our table again where our guests are eating, that you do it without a pistola in your hands."

Then gold was discovered north at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, and the prospectors few and far between filled in. San Francisco grew from two hundred settlers to ten thousand prospectors in tents in a month. To twenty thousand the next. The streets wore down underfoot and filled in with rain, and wood pallets were strewn about for footing. Pueblo de Los Angeles went from a small town of four hundred people to an overcrowded camp of thousands. With the miners came the opportunists, people selling as needed: denim, boots, axes, short shovels, hats, oil lanterns, canvas bags, leather bags, powder, and even mules. And with everybody came a new feeling of westward expansion, and the families to follow. The mexicans in California gave up their land with nothing more than a nod and a sigh, many of them fleeing to Baja California with everything they owned.

Salomon crossed new tracks daily. Wagons left ruts in the grass until trails were worn into his land east to west by miners and settlers alike with few miles between, most of them passing through, but some finding the time to pock out a small claim that he would have to ride into and shut down before they struck. He could climb a ridge at night and see their campfires dotting his dark. He could hear their hollers across the plain and their echoes in the hills.

Juana was accommodating to these travelers as before. She could not turn away a wagon full of tired, hungry people. There were several late nights when Salomon emerged from their room blinking and pulling on a shirt to find Juana answering a knock at the door with a smile and the baby on her hip. Weary travelers stood on the steps with hats in hands and broken Spanish in their mouths.

"We saw the light on. We were led to believe you were a haven for the tired. That's a mighty sweet baby."

There was not much Salomon could do but to watch wagon after wagon of settlers come through his door, sit in his chairs and eat his food. To shut Juana's consideration off would be asking her to shut her heart down and turn away God's people.

"These are Americans," Salomon told her. "People we fought in the war. Texans."

"People are all made of the same bone underneath. White skin, dark skin, they all smile at kindness."

She could not look at a hungry child without filling him with food and rocking him to sleep in the same arms she did her own, singing a song so quiet her lips moved without sound. Juana spoke with the travelers for hours into the night and worked hard on her English. She taught what she could to Salomon.

He walked outside after supper one night and found one of the travelers, a young boy, sitting slumped on the porch with his feet dangling over the dirt.

"What you have there?"

"Nothing."

"In your hands. What you do?"

The boy dropped what it was and ran off into the dark and hid beneath the wagon he had come in on. Salomon leaned over the porchside and saw the crumpled body of one of his chickens, the feathers torn out of one side and scattered in the dirt. The next morning he found Juana's garden trampled in, whole heads of lettuce kicked from their hidden shoulders in the ground.

Then their son José Dolores began to cry and could not be soothed. His eyes ran red and his nose and mouth dripped with mucus. Juana boiled roots and leaves, but still the boy kicked. One of the vaqueros had learned a trick from an Indian, to smear ocotillo pulp on the chest of a sick baby, but it just gave the baby a rash to cry more about.

Salomon rode a ridgeline one night. In the grass below him a pale mound lay sprawled in the moonlight. It was the hacked body of one of his cows, hobbled between two trees so that its head and hind legs did not rest with the body on the grass. He squatted next to it and waved the roaming flies. Whoever killed it had brained it, several times by the looks of it, the head battered to paste. The rope had burned its neck down and hidden itself in folds of hide. The backstraps had

been torn from it and the rest of the flesh lay undisturbed to bloat and burst in tomorrow's sun.

He rode another crest and found a smoldering campfire below where one man sat with his legs spread and his belly lumped beneath his slack mouth and fading eyes, and one ate squatting with both hands at his mouth like a man gone back to wild. A third man stood fireside and slowly turned a spit, his eyes wide and unblinking.

Salomon walked his horse in from the night, gathering firelight against him as the men dropped their plates and stood to look about. One of them held a fork out. Salomon stopped at camp's edge, his face given back and forth between fire and night.

"You men killed my cow."

The men glanced at each other. "Who is that? Who's out there?"

"You men killed my cow and I want you off my land."

The fat man straightened up and put his fingers in his belt. "Who's land?"

"Salomon Pico."

The fat man looked at the others and shrugged. "I don't know ya. And sneakin up on a man is a good way to get shot."

"You don't have a gun. If you did you would have used it on my cow."

"Well, go on and stay out there shoutin and you'll find out now, won't ya."

Salomon walked his horse in and trampled their bedrolls. The men backed away complaining, the one still holding a fork at the ready. Salomon leaned over and took the spit from the fire, the small amount of skewered meat now aflame in negligence. He swung it swishing overhead and the men ducked and scattered. The one man dropped his fork and ran into the night.

"They are killing my cattle," Salomon told Juana later. "They are stealing."

"A man must eat. You have thousands in the herd."

"They bashed its brain in with a rock hammer. We cannot feed every man crossing our land. They bring their sicknesses to our house. Look at our son."

A pair of miners came riding in double on a small horse, a pack mule following. The horse dragged its feet with the mule rope taut behind it, the rider's heads bouncing. They looked like they had already been digging recently and not washed, their faces all but hidden under crumpled hats crushed upon their heads without ceremony. The miner in front lifted his head. He had dust in his beard and blinked around. Salomon was there with a water bucket in his hands.

"I cannot feed you. If you want to spend the night in the stables, that'd be all right."

"Cannot feed us? Well, what then?"

"I have a few stables open and clean. You're welcome to them if you need them, but I cannot feed you."

"The hell? We rode sixty miles straight."

Salomon did not move. He looked the pair over.

"Sixty miles straight, I said."

"On the back of that horse?"

The miner looked between his legs and back up. "Well, yeah."

"Why don't one of you sit on the mule?"

The miner turned in the saddle and looked at the mule. He looked back to Salomon. "On the mule? Sit on him?"

"The stables are comfortable," Salomon said. "You can stay there if you need to and we have the fire pit here."

"I'll eat inside and not in the stables where horses shit. This is an inn of sorts."

"It is not. This is a private hacienda."

The miner pulled a pistol from his belt and held it out. Salomon put his hands out, palm up. The bucket dropped and spilled. Though it was midday, the man sitting double behind the first woke and looked around for the first time while the other shook his pistol.

"I didn't come to California to be told by no mexican that I cain't eat a night. I came to get rich, I came to get fat, so let's get with it."

"I'm not stopping you."

"Well, don't stop us more." He elbowed the man behind him, and elbowed him repeatedly until he dropped and rolled in a cloud of dust. "Get us some fixins."

The man stood, coughed once, and looked around. "What do you want me to get?"

"I don't know. Somethin from the garden there. There. Get one of them chickens yonder."

The man yawned and swung his arms left and right and arched his back, then stood on one leg and grabbed his foot with both hands.

"What are you doin?"

"I cain't run with these big boots on."

"Would you just go get a hen."

He went into a crouch and ran among the darting chickens, picking one of the many out and sticking with it wherever it went, though other chickens were less crafty. He circled it in a crablike way, his feet clopping inside his boots, until he thought he had it cornered. Salomon looked on, glancing once at the man with the pistol. The mounted man shook his head and pinched between his closed eyes with his pistol hand. At last the second miner backed out from under the porch, smiling with the squawking chicken raised high.

"I can see it. Get back up here."

"My hens aren't for sale, but if you must have one, they go in reales."

The miner put his pistol back out in front of him, between his horse's ears. "We'll take this here as we want. I ain't carryin no goddamn mexican money on American land."

"This is my land."

"This is America now, mex." He smiled and fired into the dirt at Salomon's feet. The miner's horse just flattened its ears for a second, used to blasts much larger. Salomon took a step back. Two of the vaqueros came from the bunkhouse in long underwear, with pistolas raised and hands held as visors. The miners saw them coming, and the pair kicked out of sync while the hen dangled flapping in the man's hands. The horse left the yard at a walk with the mule following behind on a taut rope.

Then José Dolores began to cough so hard he could not breathe but in the gasps of a drowning child. Sweat oozed from every pore and his sheets were

soaked with it. He developed red spots on his head that spread down his body to his feet. Then Juana became sick.

Salomon sent one of the vaqueros to Pueblo de Los Angeles for a doctor. Salomon slapped his sombrero to the horse's hindquarters and the vaquero left the ranch in a feather of dust. Salomon spent day and night at his wife's bedside with their child. The vaqueros watched as the candleflames flickered in the window, but they heard nothing. They did not see him come from the house. They did not even see a shadow rise against the curtains.

The vaquero returned with a buggy in tow, the driver of which stepped down in a hurry with a black case in his hands, a white collar on black, looking like a cleric. The men stood from their places in the yard when he approached, but they drew back when Salomon appeared on the porch with his child in his arms, the head hanging and arms fallen outward.

The doctor looked on, blue eyes and parted blond hair. "How is he?"

Salomon looked to his vaquero who dropped his eyes and pulled his sombrero down. "He was the only doctor I could find."

Salomon fell to his knees and began to weep. The doctor knelt beside him and put his fingers to the child's neck. He looked to the men in the yard and rubbed his eyes. The men dropped their heads. Juana cried out from inside and the doctor looked to the door and stood. He cleared his throat, fingercombed his hair back with a deep breath and stepped forward, and Salomon pulled his pistola from his belt, his lifeless child held close in one arm.

"I will have no more gringos step foot in my home."

The doctor turned his head. "Then she may die as well."

"You come from all over with your sickness. You are why she is sick at all."

The doctor put his weight forward but stopped when Salomon cocked the pistola. Without looking back he said he could help, and he stepped inside.

Juana was trembling with cold despite the candles and piled blankets. The doctor leaned in and touched her and gave orders over his shoulder, his face alive in candlelight. He removed his coat and rolled his sleeves. He pulled a chair close and opened his black bag.

"Are you sure you're a doctor and not a priest?" Salomon asked.

The doctor looked up, his hand in the bag still.

"I asked for medicine not last rites. You don't look like a doctor."

The doctor pulled a pair of round spectacles from the black bag and hooked them around his ears, not taking his eyes from Salomon's. Salomon nodded. Night fell and still Juana trembled and gave no sound. She breathed in hoarse spasms, and Salomon prayed on his knees at her side as the sound of a shovel carried on from the yard along with the alternating buzz of a handsaw from the stables. The sounds of the end for their child's life, each shovelful and hum of cut wood marking a deeper wound in their hearts.

Only when he buried their child beside their first did Juana cry out a final time from inside. He ran to her and stayed hand in hand with her as her pulse weakened and her eyelids failed to flutter. The life beneath them lumped around like a thing buried too soon. So when the sounds of the shovel picked up again in the yard Salomon stumbled in a run through the door to shout at the digger and throw stones. The man dropped the shovel and ran off with his hand on his hat.

They sat in the room as Juana's breathing slowed and her hands grew cold in her husband's grasp. Salomon held the doctor off the chair by his collar and shouted at him, then he fell upon his wife in the flicker of candlelight.

The men in the yard stood and assembled when the doctor stepped out on the porch, dabbing his mouth and forehead with a handkerchief. He looked to them and crossed to the porch steps, where he stood in the night breeze and said nothing. The men dropped their heads and slowly turned one by one in the yard. Then Salomon appeared at the door. The men looked from the corners of their eyes when they heard his footsteps on the boards. He approached the doctor, who turned to face him, and something caught the moon when he raised his hand. The doctor froze, and the men turned their heads to see. With one hand outheld, Salomon reached with his other for the doctor's hand and placed coins in his grip.

Salomon sat in the dark room with his wife for the night as the buggy drew away, and the following day he stared at the floor, unmoving. It was the following night that he straightened her dress and made up her hair before gathering her limp in his arms and carrying her in the starlight with sunken eyes to her coffin, readymade those past hours by his vaqueros who stood about and watched him place her inside and set her hands neatly clasped, her chin slightly raised. They helped him lower the lid and they nailed it shut while he looked on unblinking with tears overflowing his lower lids.

They lowered her in and filled the grave, taking occasional peeks at Salomon who stood over the work. Then they all dispersed with tools in hand to leave the man standing alone over three graves and his nightshadow behind him where he should lie someday. He stood there all night and the men thought he would never leave, then he knelt slowly beside his wife with his legs tucked under him, leaning forward as if to dig a place for himself there. Again he stayed, unmoving. The men checked on him as the hours wore on. One man brought him a glass of water and crouched with it in hand, but Salomon made no response. The man set it within reach on the dirt and stood for a moment before walking away.

Another hour went and one of the men looked out the window and saw only the glass of water in the dirt. Salomon and his shadow were gone, and the man spoke out so the other men gathered behind him at the windows. They heard the hoof beats and then they saw him crossing the yard, riding bareback into the night, following the buggy tracks with pistols in his hands. They ran outside and shouted, but Salomon did not look back.

The miners left an easy trail to follow in the night, and alongside them were the wheel tracks of the buggy. Salomon rode between the cuts in the well-worn trail, glinting on the edges like a railroad. His pony ran without his suggestion, staying between the cuts and running hard. He did not stop to rest, and neither did his horse, spurred by his vengeance she ran as if fueled by some intervention, hellish or otherwise. He caught up the next day. The doctor had fallen in behind the pair of miners riding double with the lagging mule on the rope. The lead miner turned in his saddle but kept on, and again as Salomon came near at a full run. The miner put his horse sidelong and put his face forward in a squint. He leaned and spat tobacco into his beard. The doctor pulled up and turned in the buggy seat.

Salomon pulled up with his hands empty, his pistols at his waist. His face was sweating and dark, his lips were windburned. His eyes were black.

“Give me back my hen.”

“Your what?” The miner chinned his beard against his shoulder. “You rode all this way for a hen?”

“Give it back.”

The miners looked at each other, then back to Salomon. “It’s back along the trail, what’s left of it. We et it.”

“Then gather the bones and give them back to me.”

“You lost your mind? What do you want with the bones for?”

“Then pay me for it.”

“Cain’t you keep that horse still?”

The second miner pointed. “Look at his eyes. Look at there. He’s sunstroke.”

The doctor slid to the edge of the buggy seat and put a hand in his black bag. “Allow me to pay for you. This man’s had a day, gentlemen.”

“You won’t pay for me. Sure as hell won’t pay no mex for me. Sure as hell.”

The miner pulled a rifle from the scabbard. As the barrel steadied he was shot from his saddle and fell dead when he hit the ground, his foot caught in the stirrup. The second miner looked between his fallen partner and Salomon twice before kicking his horse and reaching for a saddlebag. He pulled a pistol and Salomon fired again from a second pistola. Dust billowed from the man’s jacket and he threw his arms out. A red slit appeared on his chest and back, and he rolled from the saddle, as dead as the first. The doctor stood in the buggy with mouth agape and spectacles gleaming as Salomon swung his horse. He steadied both pistolas. The doctor put his hands up and sank away, crying out and falling off the buggy. He kicked his feet and scooted in the dirt on his backside, his hands moving about to catch a bullet. The guns clicked. Salomon wheeled his horse above him.

“They stole from me.”

“Please.”

“They pulled their guns.”

“Here, here.” The doctor pulled the coins Salomon had paid him. He held them jingling in a small, tied pouch. “Take it, please, take it.”

Salomon looked at him. “I didn’t ask for it back.”

The miners’ horse took a few steps with the miner dragging alongside and the mule still taut on the rope. The buggy horse stamped in place and the doctor sat up and looked on. Salomon looked both ways on the trail and dismounted. He pulled the miner’s rifle and rummaged the pack mule. A water bladder hung from the saddle, and he tore at the opening and put it up. His throat moved up and down and water poured down his neck and chest until he staggered back and sat catching his breath. He gathered himself and slung the bladder over his shoulder and stood at the mule’s flank. He found a pouch of musketballs, powder, and paper cartridges, and he found something else. A pouch with a few stones and a gold nugget that looked like a molar. He held it to the sun in his thumb and forefinger.

The prairie had returned to silence. He swung a leg over his pony and looked again at the dead miners. The doctor had crept forward on hands and knees and watched through the buggy wheel, clutching the spokes like a prisoner. Salomon kicked his horse and shouted, riding off the trail, into the ragged brush and weed

in a boil of fading dust, away from his hacienda and away from any known destination.

