

Politoburg

By Jedidiah Ayres

Maria is upset. Her chubby fingers, trembling, can't cover her mouth sufficiently to smother the sobs. Wakes you up. Judging by the light coming through the gaps in the tin roof, it's near nine. The atmosphere is like an amniotic sac.

"What is it, for fuck's sake?"

Her reply is lost on you. She sounds like a Pentecostal Rosie Perez, frothing and speaking a hundred miles an hour. Four months here and you haven't grasped the language. Haven't even tried. You aren't planning on sticking around.

"English. Speak English *por favor*."

Hysterical shrieks.

"No, forget I said anything. I need a smoke." You fish through your clothes beside the bed mat, till you see the cigarettes on her table. Clothed only in sweat, you stand and strike a match. She still sounds like a maniac, running in circles around the room. You grab her by the shoulders to slow her down, and speak very deliberately.

"What...is...your...problem?" She slaps you hard across the face and chest and you slap her back. She grabs your clothes, tosses them outside the hut and pushes you after them. Fine with you. You haven't paid yet.

The dust clings to your damp parts. In this heat, that's pretty much an entire outfit. You collect your clothes and carry them under your arm as you start toward the cantina.

You've been to Mexico once before, but this time had fuck all to do with Sammy Hagar and margaritas. This was all dust and rocks and heat stroke, skin turning to leather and sunshine so intense, your balls disappear when you squint. The Sierra Madres hemming you in sounds good for a movie, but actually makes you feel like a fish in a bowl.

You make your way barefoot toward the only road around, trying like hell to extract some nutrients from your cigarette. The dog carcass from the day before has disappeared from the roadside and you make a mental note not to chance Ramon's stew today.

A debris cloud still hangs in the air, which means an automobile instead of a mule cart has come by recently. That could mean a couple of things: extra shipment this week or trouble in paradise.

A half-dozen tin shacks like Maria's pock the desert in no particular pattern. Thrown up without a thought to symmetry or community. A crowd gathers outside the furthest, next to the cantina. The cloud settles behind a black Cadillac, which means the answer is in fact B. Polito sent some of his muscle to settle something.

The crowd is comprised entirely of women, the whores who live here at the whim of Harlan Polito - who is decreeing judgment from on high back in the States. Also here by his will is a small group of gringos; roughnecks, punks and psychos who do dirty deeds for money and pleasure. You belong to this group. You stay here till the man sends for you to return to the bosom of society and contribute again.

No one seems to notice your nakedness as you approach, not even Metcalf, who comes out to meet you.

“Dude.” Metcalf, the near retard you’re reduced to socializing with these days, is trying to relay gravity with his tone.

“S’up?” you offer in his native tongue.

“Dude.”

“Yeah, I got that part, what’s...”

“No, Dude. Dick...”

Dirty Dick, the oldest, most senior of the gringos. A stone cold killer. You all look up to him. He’s a legend back home. Killed five men, bad motherfuckers all, in one hit. Disappeared after that one, years ago. No one knew if he was dead or relocated. No one but you. Nearly plotzed when you’d met him here. Retired. Kicking back in old Mexico, getting stoned, getting pussy, getting fat.

“Where’s Dick?”

As you speak, the crowd parts and two beefy guys in black suits - the uniform of a Politico dipshit henchman - haul a dead man by his arms, his heels dragging in the dust, from the cantina to the back of the car. As they drop him into the trunk, you recognize the corpse as Conrad, one of the other gringos living here. His front is blackened with blood. His own, judging by the color of his face and the gash in his throat.

“Fuck me,” you whisper.

“Dude,” agrees Metcalf.

“Where’s Dick?” you repeat. Metcalf is rooted there; breathing through his open mouth, glad to have another civilized white man to stand next to. He doesn’t answer.

You start to pull your pants on. The sight of your dead friend, scumbag that he was, seems to require a gesture of dignity, even one as feeble as this. The two men had disappeared back inside the cantina and reappear now dragging another body, this one female and local. It’s a Maria, one of the prostitutes. All the women here were prostitutes the gringos call Maria, but this is Dick’s Maria, plain as day.

Dick is the third body hauled out. Though beaten and bloody, he’s definitely breathing as they drop him on top of the other two and slam the trunk. The henchmen get in either side of the Cadillac’s front seat.

Ramon, the barkeep, catches your eye as the car backs up and drives away. The crowd turns to watch it go, but you study Ramon grinning after the hearse. It’s always bad news when Ramon is happy. He wipes his face with his right hand and you notice his knuckles. Broken. Swollen. Bloody.

No wonder he’s smiling.

You get good and drunk. Pass out late in the afternoon. In the meantime, you gather a loose narrative from Metcalf: Dick and Maria had a spat about the new Maria he’d been spending time with, (the Maria’s outnumber the gringos about five to one). She’d taken Conrad back to her place to piss Dick off.

Got his attention.

Got them all killed.

Ramon is replacing the lock on his door, which looks kicked in. The safe he keeps behind the bar is compromised. There’s no reason for more security. The only times anyone steals or kills here; there are immediate and permanent repercussions. You

guess that after slicing their throats, Dick's idea was to grab the money and run over the mountains.

A hasty, ill-conceived plan fueled by jealousy, tequila and boredom. Simple in concept, the killing and theft was no big thing. He'd murdered them as they slept, and Ramon's safe could be violated with a can opener, but escape?

Escape is a bitch. A man alone and on foot would have to be crazy to try.

Apparently, he was.

You wake up an hour or so past dusk. In a heap. In the gutter. Smelling like piss. You just hope it's your own. Ramon's little ghetto blaster is on eleven, in the back of your consciousness, broadcasting some station that plays mariachi music. All those greaser tunes sound the same, so it's hard to know how long you lay there drifting in and out. But you wake up long after midnight, naked once again, while Maria washes you with a sponge.

You are in her hut, but you have no idea how you got there or why she's taken you in again. Just her nature, you suppose.

She stares at you with those spooky, mongoloid eyes of hers. She is stripped to the waist, cradling your head between her breasts, which brush against your cheeks as she wrings water out, wiping away your guilty stains.

She speaks softly to you. All is forgiven, it seems. You feel an unfamiliar sensation in your gut. Shame. Shame about the way you'd treated her that morning. She'd lost a friend too - not the first - to this place.

You fall into your usual pattern, carrying on two mutually exclusive conversations. Each language a bastion of solitude and anonymity. You have no idea how her conversation went, but yours tend to go like this:

You: What was he thinking, killing Conrad like that? And over what? Some passed around piece of beaner trim.

Her: It makes perfect sense. Stupid. But flawless logic.

You: How'd you get that scar on your thigh? Looks like someone used a knife.

Her: Somebody did.

You: Why?

Her: Only reason to. It made sense.

You: Who?

Her: Son of a bitch with a knife.

You: Why are you here?

Her: Paying for my sins, just like you.

You: Actually this is payment for my sins.

Her: What's the difference?

You: One's reward. One's punishment. One you earn. One you owe.

Her: How very middle class of you. It's all just price in the end.

You: Prize?

Her: That too.

She soaks the sponge and wets you both with giant drips that roll between her generous bosoms into your eyes and ears. As you drift off to sleep again, you think you hear her say: "It falls on the just and the unjust alike."

It's called Politoburg, this ramshackle camp in the middle of the desert. It's so remote and desolate, it may as well be on the moon. There's no agriculture or natural resource other than dust and lizard shit. The economy consists entirely of the goods sold from Ramon's cantina and the services of the Marias. Ramon's is stocked in weekly truckloads, and Ramon sends the contents of his safe back with the drivers.

Sweet fuckin' set up. Harlan Polito hires you for something. A job he needs a little distance from, doesn't wanna use his regular guys. Says, "You'll need to lay low a while. Get outta town. I've got a place in Mexico. You like Mexico? You'll love it. Get laid. Get a tan." And he pays well. There's a reason everybody wants to work for him.

So you do your job. You've already been paid half and thinking about the rest of it is driving you crazy. A truck meets you at the rendezvous and the driver tosses you a fat envelope that hefts like the first. As you get in, he says you should sleep 'cause it's going to be a long ride.

For a week or so, you actually enjoy yourself. You've never had a proper vacation before. Maybe you'll grow a beard. Maybe you'll stay in Mexico, you kinda dig the vibe. Ramon's got every kind of substance you've ever tried and a couple you're curious about, and the Marias don't care about your car or your education or whether you're hung like mule or a ferret. It's all sunshine and beans and rice.

You get bored pretty quick.

You begin to think about it, a bad idea. You realize you're just shoving Polito's money back at him as fast as you can eat it, fuck it or shoot it away. Starts to get to you. Don't think about it. It'll ruin your buzz.

But, of course you do. Worse, you get yourself a little plowed one day and say something to this effect to Ramon and wonder further, just when will you be going back to civilization, air conditioning and escort services?

Ramon smiles, grabs that short bat he keeps behind the bar and smashes your teeth in. He pats your kidneys while you grab your face and when you've stopped crying, he really puts you in your place.

"The fuck you think you are, pendejo? Huh? The fuck you think this is? A vacation?" Then he laughs. A cruel and practiced laugh. He's made this same speech dozens of times. It's the part of his job that he enjoys.

It begins to sink in, the horror, when you realize that you're not a tourist. You're a local. You belong here. You're fucked.

The idea has kicked around in your head since Ramon had gone all Hank Aaron on you, but it takes Conrad getting his throat slashed for you to decide. Problem is, it will take two. And now your only choice is to use Metcalf, the only gringo left.

At least he shouldn't be hard to convince. Dick had been a stabilizing presence for him. Metcalf was going downhill fast.

"So, how 'bout it, man?"

Bleary and sullen, he makes you wait.

"Hey!" You slap him to get his attention. "Are you in? I need to know that I can count on you."

He rubs his cheek and his eyes clear a little. “Yeah, I’m in. Fuck this place, dude.”

Maria sits behind you on top of the table. She plays with the hair on the back of your neck. It’s beginning to curl. She’s singing softly under her breath. The tune is familiar, but the words you can’t follow.

The three of you sit at the picnic table outside the cantina, which closed an hour ago. The wind is fierce tonight. Metcalf’s long stringy hair is whipped into impossible knots, but Maria wears hers in a loose braid. The desert is cold and you lean back into her for warmth.

“Is she coming?” asks Metcalf.

“No. She’d just slow us down. We’ll have to keep moving. Polito’s got reach.”

Maria senses you’re talking about her. She stops singing and rests her chin on your shoulder, waiting for you to repeat what you said.

Metcalf smiles dopily and says, “Yeah, but she speaks Spanish...”

Shit. He has a point.

She’s no prize. Fat and dumb and can’t be a day over nineteen. She’s seen some heavy shit in her time. How, you wonder, in her young stupid life had she arrived in this shit-hole? How long could she survive here? She was tough, you had to give her that, and maybe that explained your reluctant affection for her.

Fuck it, she’s coming.

You watch her mending a blanket with an animal grace, which you’d catch every once in a while if you paid attention. When she was immersed in a task, cleaning or cooking or fucking, she was possessed of this. But it disappeared in anything less intimate than your company. She was awkward and slow in society and that translated through any language, but she was comfortable for some reason around you.

“How did you wind up here?” She looks up from her work, her features spread across her broad face like craters on the moon. Not beautiful. Not to you. Not to a blind man.

“*Como?*” The hoods of her eyes blink slowly as she waits for you to repeat the question.

“Where is your family?” She squints, leaning in as if proximity and not language were the problem. You take her hands to hold her attention. “Do...you” (pointing), “want to leave” (your fingers walking), “with me?” (pointing again).

You repeat the whole thing a couple of times, faster.

Still no response.

“Never mind.” You let go of her hands and lay down. A few moments later she lies down beside you. Her fingers reach around from behind you and find yours. You give them a squeeze.

Metcalf is worrying you. He seems determined to kill himself. Before the heist, he’s spending all his money. His reasoning is he’s going to steal it all back in a few days anyway.

Tequila, coke and blow jobs all day, all night, all week. He’s out of control. Twice, Ramon’s had to throw him out of the cantina and beat his ass. He’s in no kind of shape, but what’re you going to do?

You know what you're going to do. It's clear you have to. Doesn't mean you like it. Doesn't mean you won't hate yourself a while. Doesn't mean you'll hesitate. At his best, he's a liability. Now, he's completely unhinged. What choice, really?

You can't sleep tonight. You're up before sunrise. You leave Maria packing a few things. If it goes bad, you don't want her implicated. That, and you want to spare her what happens to Metcalf. You find Metcalf passed out in the ditch beside the cantina. Let him have a little more sleep.

When the dust cloud appears you wake him up. Takes some slapping, but he's surprisingly sober and right-headed in less than a minute. You're the one who feels sickly and when he smiles and claps your shoulder in anticipation, you vomit. His smile turns to alarm.

"You okay, dude?"

"Yeah. Just nerves. I'm fine."

The truck starts honking its horn a quarter mile out and Ramon is fumbling with the locks and shaking his head clear as it comes to a stop. Ramon and the driver begin bringing in the delivery, their arms full of boxes. Canned goods, sacks of flour, rice and potatoes, hygiene products, pornography and scandal rags, a few clothing items and a first aid kit for a laugh. The bulk of the shipment is liquor. You wait 'till they're behind the truck together, lifting a crate, then you slip into the cantina and take positions at the door.

Ramon's short bat for you and a bottle of Jack for Metcalf. Ramon comes through the door first, backing up. In the split second it takes for him to register surprise, Metcalf has broken his jaw with a wicked two handed swing. Following suit, you take out the driver, stepping into the doorway. The crate of liquor crashes to the floor, just missing your feet.

Metcalf falls upon Ramon, straddling his chest and concussing him well beyond the point of necessity. You've never seen him alive like this, having his pathetic revenge. A wave of nausea washes over you and you wipe your palms on your shirt and get a good grip on the bat.

Metcalf slows down, panting and happy. Still on top of his victim, he wipes his bloody hands on Ramon's shirt then runs them over his face and through his hair.

He lets out a whoop. "Yeeaaaahhh! How you like me now?"

Laughing, he turns his face up to look at you. You lay the bat across the bridge of his nose. It smashes like a ripe plum. He's dead before he falls.

You stop in front of her hut and she scampers aboard like an excited puppy. That changes when she sees you. The hard look of violence still on your face, blood on your clothes and no Metcalf. The truck lurches forward and she's thrown back against the seat. In the rearview, you spot a couple Marias running after you and others out staring, not understanding what's happened. You mutter, "Kiss my ass, Politoburg."

The cab of the truck is awash in emotions. Maria stares at you, waiting for an account of the blood and missing Metcalf. You smile at her, annoyed that you have to remind her to be glad to be gone. Timidly, she smiles, too, but the question doesn't leave her eyes.

You feel a conversation coming on.

You: Look... he's not coming... We've got to take care of each other, now.

Her: What happened?
You: It was bloody. I told you it would be bloody. That's why I made you wait for me in the hut.
Her: What did you do?
You: What I had to. What I'd do again.
Her: Do you love me?
You: Are you serious? Let's not have this conversation. Ever.
She sits there watching you have this conversation, all by yourself this time. She senses its conclusion and sets her eyes on the horizon, where they belong.

You abandon the truck a couple miles outside the city and hike through the hills surrounding, looking for a spot to sleep. It's a few hours before midnight and the lights look delicious. It's hard not to go down and find a drink and a meal and spend some of your cash on a hotel, but you've got to play this smart.

Maria sleeps with her head in your lap. The night is cold, but the exhilaration of freedom warms you, though you don't join her in slumber. Tonight, you confess your sins to her. All of them.

When lights begin coming on again, you wake her up and the two of you make your way down the hill, toward the harbor. Maria understands what you want when you put cash in her hand.

You watch her work out passage for the two of you on a fishing boat for South America. She looks over her shoulder and smiles when she catches you staring, her tongue goes to the gap between her front teeth and you call the feeling in your gut devotion. You know it's just a byproduct of circumstance, two souls shrugging the weight of a common oppressor, but it's there.

All day you sit on the deck, watching the sea.

That night you rock to sleep in your cramped cabin that feels like a five star hotel. The ocean smell sears the dust from your lungs. Maria hums a lullaby and your dreams are filled with the future instead of the past for the first time in years.

It's past midnight when they come for you. You wake up a second before they burst into the room, suddenly aware that you're alone and it's about to go bad. Four sailors haul you from your bed naked and kicking up to the deck.

You scream her name every second, but you can't locate Maria.

On the deck the captain is waiting. She is at his side.

"If you touch her I will fucking kill every last one of you!" you yell as they drag you to the rail. The stars provide the only illumination, but it's bright enough to cause the blade to glint an instant before the pink mist and the hot rivulets rush down your chest.

The world tilts and you hit the water with a smack you can't even hear. The salt water fills your gasping mouth and when you break the surface you struggle to see the deck, wondering if she's to join you in your grave.

As your strength fails and your vision dims, she appears at boat's edge, looking for you. She's alone and unmolested. She's wrapped in a blanket against the chill. She's

not screaming. She's calm and she's free for the first time in her life. She waves to you once and watches serenely and without malice as you go under for the last time.

Good for you honey.

Jedidiah Ayres lives in St. Louis, Missouri with his wife and children. He has written two novels under a pseudonym, thank god, and is working on one he'd like to have his real name on. He is exceptionally good looking.