



M I A

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Tom Sweeney had no business in Vietnam. He figured if he went there, he'd end up killed or he'd kill someone. He could even come back in pieces, like Aaron Kozlowsky. He had his leg sent home to be given a proper burial two months before the rest of him could return. He developed an infection after the amputation and wasn't released from the hospital in time to attend his leg's service. The horrors of war. Whatever the situation, it wasn't like the odds were in Tom's favor. So he packed up whatever clothes could fit into one suitcase, his guitar, sleeping bag, a towel and his album collection and drove down to the border. When he reached San Diego, a week later, he called his mother to say good-bye. "Tell the draft people I was abducted by aliens."

She understood this as "We might never see each other again," but had no words to dissuade her son. As the orphan daughter of a World War II officer, she had warned Tom countless times, ever since he was a toddler, "Over my dead body you're going to

war.” She’d even gone to the extent of saying, “I’d rather see you blind than gone to war.” Tom knew his mother would do anything to spare him from the experience, even pull his eyes out of their sockets.

As for his father, maybe his disappearance wouldn’t be as hard on him. He wasn’t really much of a family man. He wasn’t really much of a father. It would take him a while before he noticed his son was gone, being so busy, as he was all the time in the shop. And that was the other thing. Tom wasn’t meant to work with his father in the repair shop. He had had nightmares involving springs, tiny motors and electrical cords attacking him in the middle of the night. The old man insisted. Tom gave him excuses.

“I’m allergic to small appliances, dad. See this welt here? I touched a blender.”

Tom’s destiny was elsewhere, in a distant place, an exotic land where he didn’t have to work for his father, where there was no war to go to, where small appliances did not exist.

Crossing over to Tijuana was easy. Coming back, he thought, would be the hard part, if he ever did come back. He would have to create a new identity for himself, become another person. Technically, Tom Sweeney was dead and gone. Was he dead, or gone, or both? It didn’t really matter. His mother knew he was still around some place and that was comforting. He couldn’t tell even her that he was going to Mexico, although she would have been pleased. She had once told him that Mexicans were the ultimate example of pacifism. They had given up half of their territory to the United States without putting up much of a fight. So, from now on, he’d be Carlos Santana. A real Mexican name for a new Mexican man. But then he changed his mind. As much as he liked to be named Carlos Santana, he understood that he’d draw people’s attention and that was the last thing he needed. Instead, he would pick a generic name, a Mexican John Doe, like Pedro García. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw the reflection of a true Pedro García, long brown hair, brown eyes, moustache and beard. So what if he spoke no Spanish? He’d have time, much of it, to learn it down in Baja.

He stopped at a tiny convenience store and bought for the road a couple of apples, a few bags of Fritos, two Coke bottles and enough beer to drink before it got warm. His boyish look didn’t seem to bother the man behind the counter. Pedro was of legal age to buy alcohol, but back home he’d get carded every time, even with the moustache and the beard.

“Don’t you want to see my ID?”

“Dollars OK.”

“Oh, I get it, no English?”

“Dollars OK.”

“Dollars OK.”

Pedro paid and left it at that. He’d have to learn a whole new set of rules, absorb the culture, feel at home, adapt. On the way out, he was lucky to be approached by a dealer who sold him three joints. How did the guy know he was a potential customer, he couldn’t figure out. He really thought he’d blend in with his new name.

Since Pedro wasn't much into planning ahead, getting those provisions at the store was about as much as he could plan for now. He vaguely suspected what he'd do and where he'd go, but mostly he'd leave his future to chance. He did know he'd have to make a living somehow. His savings were already running low and he'd just left home. He reviewed his abilities. Having been on the hockey team in High School would not be useful in Baja, unless he'd get in a fistfight at a bar. But that was unlikely. He was a pacifist. Wasn't that the very reason he was avoiding the war?

He hopped in his VW bus and for three hours tried to get out of Tijuana. In his attempt, he drove twice past the same corner. It was either that or the same dog had changed corners to continue his nap. When he finally was able to leave the maze of crooked, filthy streets and confusing boulevards behind, he headed towards Ensenada. Once on the open road, he rolled down the windows to let the fresh air cool off the bus, but it didn't help much. He took off his T-shirt. He tied his hair in a ponytail. It didn't help much either. So he opened a beer and drank it in one big swig.

"I could sing at bars," he thought. He was good, very good. And he had his guitar with him. He did Dylan like no other. He remembered the standing ovation with "Like a Rolling Stone" at the Senior Talent Show. The gym was packed beyond the Fire Department limit. It was his night. After the show, Cindy had finally given in to having sex with him, in his bus.

"Thanks Bob," he muttered before he came.

"It's Cindy," she said.

He was grateful in many ways. It was, after all, Dylan —unknowingly— who had gotten him into music. And The Beatles and Donovan and James Brown and Motherlode and Steppenwolf and the Stones, of course. But Dylan, Dylan definitely knew where the answer was blowing. Music. Performing. That would be his livelihood. He took a deep breath.

Now that the big question was out of the way, he pulled out a joint and smoked slowly, enjoying every drag as if it were the last one. He thought of all the guys his age over in Vietnam at that very moment getting stoned and not knowing if they would be doing it again at all, and felt a sudden, inexplicable sadness. It was the painful kind and had a certain sense of guilt. Was he betraying someone? Should he have chosen to go to war and defend his friends? Defend what? Was his country really fighting for peace or were there all sorts of other factors involved that had nothing to do with justice and world harmony? Wasn't fighting for peace a contradiction in itself? He was sure of one thing; if he didn't get over that last bit of doubt, he would not be able to continue on. So he tossed the feeling out the window and lit up another joint. "This one's for my buddies in Vietnam," he said aloud, and then got to humming "Suspicious Minds."

After passing a few curves, the asphalt became a straight line along the coast for a good hour. He inhaled the last whiff of his joint and held it in for as long as he could stand. Then he rolled up the window, let the smoke out and took deep breaths to recycle whatever smoke was circulating around in the VW bus. The sky met the ocean far in the

distance, and other than that, there wasn't much going on outside. As a way to beat boredom, Pedro turned on the wipers and watched them caress the windshield. They made a little squeaking sound as the rubber dragged back and forth on the dusty glass. The noise reminded him of a mouse's final squeal before being crushed by his dad's foot. It happened in the storage room behind the shop years back. He'd seen it all. He still remembered. He was a pacifist. He meant no harm to any living creature. Not even mice, or spiders. He tried to focus on the road, but the gadgets on the dashboard were so much more attractive. They appeared to be harmless, unlike his dad's appliances. The speedometer, the gas gauge, the idiot light (for oil pressure, as his friend Ronnie explained to him once.) He suddenly wondered if it should be lit.

He reached Ensenada too quickly. It didn't seem large enough. He estimated that the place could probably have a couple of bars, no more than three. There had to be a larger city down the road, for sure. He decided to keep driving. He stopped to get gas and headed south, towards the Baja desert. "Happiness is having a full tank," he'd said to Cindy at the drive-in once and it had made her giggle. He knew that giggle from Jill and Janice and Joan. It was the same funny, goofy giggle. It clearly meant, "You can have me." They always giggled at the drive-in, so it made things easier. It didn't matter which girl it was, the VW bus rocked and shook in the same way until the movie was over and the lights came up. Then he'd take the girl home and that would be the end of it until the next time. But there was more to Cindy than the giggling. She was a pacifist, like him. They shared profound ideas, political issues. They discussed their views of the future. He liked her company. He had even asked her to disappear with him, but she had chosen to go to Berkeley instead. He wondered what she thought of him, escaping the draft in such an abrupt way. Was he a coward? Was he brave? Was he taking matters into his own hands? Was he an idealist true to his beliefs? Was it all of the above? It was hard to say. He didn't give her much of a chance to express herself. He notified her about his decision, gave her a little bundle of weed that he had in his pocket, one long kiss, and left. He had been afraid that saying good-bye to his girlfriend would hurt more, but in all honesty, he felt worse when he said good-bye to his mother.

He wondered what his life in Mexico would be like. He'd definitely meet a beautiful dark haired, large breasted, older woman by the name of María. Aren't they all Marías? Or Delores. He preferred Delores. It was the name of a movie star and she'd have the body to go with it. She'd own an apartment by the beach. He could move in with her. Maybe she'd have a roommate, Juanita, and the three of them could live together. Maybe Juanita would desire him, too. He would have to correspond and Delores would agree to the idea. "Hey, it's a free world," she would say. The girls would teach him Spanish and cook homemade burritos. He'd play his guitar at bars until the war ended and then he could go back to the States under his Pedro García identity and bring Delores with him. He'd bring Juanita too. He could probably buy himself a counterfeit Mexican Birth Certificate. He'd heard anything could be bought in Mexico. Then he'd just

have to become an American citizen. It shouldn't be too hard. Millions of immigrants were doing it every year and he had a major head start.

The late afternoon sun went in through his right window heating up the last beer rolling around on the passenger seat floor. He drank it before it got any warmer and lit up the third joint. The sun began to set letting all its orange force blanket the entire desert. "If only Delores was here, riding by my side," he thought. The road was now empty except for a couple of cars that passed him. He turned on the radio and heard a distant station playing music in Spanish. The song was fragmented, upstaged by static, by sudden voices from other stations cutting in, saying words he could not understand and then vanishing. Finally, the radio made a zapping noise and went dead. "I'm too far from anywhere." The thought comforted him and scared him. Coming from the East Coast, he had always been surrounded by people. It was a cozy feeling. Everywhere he went there would be someone. He had never imagined that there could be such a desolate a place on the entire planet, except for, say, Alaska or Hawaii, where he imagined the population to be the lowest in the world.

There had to be a town further down, but no lights shimmered in the horizon. He rolled down the window and adjusted the rearview mirror. In the moonless night, he could barely make out the silhouettes of cacti, briefly lit by his headlights, gliding away by the side of the road, going as fast as they could in the opposite direction.

He felt lonely, as lonely as a runaway, as alienated as an outlaw, as isolated as a man of convictions in a self-imposed exile, a maverick in his own right. He was quickly becoming a pariah, a loner, a rolling stone. In a way, he liked the feeling, but how did it feel? He mumbled bits of lyrics, words here and there, "No direction at all... A complete unknown... Scrounging my next meal... Without a home... I'll have to get used to it... To be on my own... Never turn around... I have nothing, so I have nothing to lose." How did it really feel? For the time being it struck him that his new persona enveloped him with a certain aura of mystique that attracted everything outlandish. He now possessed a fascinating, unidentified allure. The effect of the joint seemed to dwindle and a sudden hunger pang hit the mouth of his stomach. He rummaged through the bus's floor for a bag of Fritos, tore it open and ate the whole thing in a couple of minutes.

Down the road, he imagined Delores sitting in the passenger seat next to him, her cleavage exposed just a bit under her tight blouse. Her jeans hugging her hips, allowing a hint of her waist to show. He wanted to touch her dark skin. He had the urge to slide his hand under her blouse. He thought of stopping at the next rest area to masturbate, but then decided to do it as he drove. He unzipped his pants, pulled them down a bit and wrapped his fingers around his penis. He accelerated. Now Delores had taken off her blouse, and her breasts, her Mexican breasts, large and round and warm, bounced with every little bump on the road. The road. He remembered that he had to keep his eyes on the road and looked up just in time to see the light. Bright and blue and intermittent. Blinding most of all. It came at him so fast he didn't have the chance to let go off his penis. The light came with a forceful wind that sucked him out the window, as he was,

pants down and all. Without a driver, the VW bus veered off the road and crashed against a pile of rocks. Technically, Pedro García was dead and gone. Was he dead, or gone, or both? It didn't really matter.

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