

PAY DAY

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She loves the way he looks, his golden hair pulled back in a ponytail under his cowboy hat, eyes like the sky. He wears blue jeans, a blue and white plaid shirt rolled up to the elbows, a small flag with a star in it pinned to his lapel. He's so masculine, and handsome enough to be in a telenovela, except he speaks Spanish worse than the Americanos who run the maquila where she works.

"I'm from Dallas," he says. "Do you know where Dallas is?"

She has heard the joke before. She isn't that ignorant. She knows that when a man says 'Dallas' he is really saying 'dar las,' which means he is trying to find out if she is going to give her nalgas to him. Her cousin Sergio has taught her these things.

"No," she says, offended. "I don't know anything about Dallas."

"Really?" he says, "Too bad. It's a beautiful city."

"Do you work here, now?" she asks.

"Not tonight," he says, smiling down at her. "I'm on vacation tonight."

Her floor supervisor, Ariel, introduced them at La Fiesta. They had a couple of drinks, spoke in low voices in their dark booth, and when Ariel left, he made no attempt to touch her. She feels lucky. Maybe he doesn't want to take her to Dallas, after all. From La Fiesta, they came to Tuna Country, and now he asks

her if she likes to dance. She nods, even though she has not danced with men very much. He tells her Joe's Place just down the street has a bigger dance floor with disco lights. This is what she loves about living in a real city. Discos and dancing and freedom to do what she wants without permission.

It is early still, but in the year she has lived on this frontera, she has come to learn that on Fridays in Juárez, when everyone gets paid, the action begins in the early afternoon, so that by nightfall, music is blaring out of all the discos and the streets are filled with drunks and prostitutes hopping from bar to bar. The prostitutes scare her a little, she does not want to become one of them. Ariel tells her there are clients who want young girls like her with no experience and that they pay in dollars, more dollars than she can make in a week at the maquila. But she's not interested.

"Some of them don't want to have sex with you," Ariel said. "They're married men, but they're lonely, they're on a business trip and they just want your company. They don't pay as well, but it's still better than what you make. Let me introduce you to el Güero. He's very nice. He'll treat you with respect."

The doorman at Joe's Place seems to know him real well. The waitresses all smile seductively at him, give her the evil eye. He's not a good dancer, he says, but he likes to watch women move, so if she doesn't mind, he'll just watch as she dances. She feels awkward moving on the dance floor with him just watching, but he's so polite. She feels lucky. She wonders if Ariel told him the truth about her, that she is only fourteen years old and a virgin.

Now he is warming up to her on the dance floor, and he pulls her against him and squeezes her backside. She can feel something hard poking against her belly. Her heart is pounding now because she isn't sure if he knows the truth about her

and she is afraid of him getting too close, so she pulls away from him and goes back to their table, acting offended so he doesn't think she's that kind of girl.

"What are you doing?" he says, following her to the table, "What is the problem?" He frowns at her and she can tell he is displeased. He slips into the booth beside her, sitting much closer than he did at the other two places. The waitress walks by, winks at him, hands him a folded napkin. Someone is sending him a note, probably a little love note from one of the other women he's charmed, but he doesn't read it right away. He sits right against her and places a hand on her thigh. He tells the waitress to bring them a round. He drinks J&B scotch on the rocks. She hates alcohol, it reminds her of her stepfather, so she orders another Shirley Temple.

He laughs at her order. "Tell me your name again," he says.

"Mireya," she says, then remembers she should have given him a false name.

His hand moves down to her knee, fingers skimming the nylon of her pantyhose. Her leg twitches. She doesn't know what to say. He pulls his arm back.

"Are you in school, Mireya?" he asks, moving in to smell her hair.

She shivers. She can smell his cologne. She can tell he wants to kiss her. "I work at the Philips plant," she says, hoping the conversation will take his mind off touching her so much. "And you?"

"They call me the Lone Ranger," he says, "el Llanero Solitario."

She creases her eyes at him. "You're not the real Lone Ranger."

He laughs and she sees gold in the back of his mouth. "So you know who he is," he says, trailing his arm over the back of the seat. She can feel the hair on his arm brushing against her bare shoulder. "Good, very good. No, I'm not the real Llanero, but I do make movies. I'm a film producer. Do you know what that is? A film producer? I make películas."

She shakes her head, but she is remembering how she did not finish the sixth grade because her math teacher back in Durango wanted her to do things with him, how afraid she was that her father was going to beat her again when she failed his class, and how she had stolen money from his wallet and climbed the first bus to Juárez to escape the beating. Her cousin, Sergio, took her in.

"Do you like going to the movies?"

She smiles again, and nods. "I don't go very much," she says. "It's expensive."

"Would you like to go with me? There is a good movie at Los Gemelos. I invite you." His eyes feel like blue flames on her skin. A quiver runs down her spine.

"Not tonight," she says. "I have to meet my friend Ariel here at nine."

He reaches over and strokes her cheek. "I'll buy you popcorn and candy and anything else you want. I have some crystal meth."

"I don't think so," she says again. She doesn't know what crystal meth is.

"That's a pretty dress you're wearing," he says, and she's relieved he's changed the subject. "Ariel says you like to make your own clothes."

"I'm going to make a new dress for my quin—" she catches herself just in time. She

can't tell him she's going to have a quinceañera, that would give it all away, and she could even lose her job if they find out her true age. "My neighbor's quinceañera," she corrects herself quickly. "It has to be lilac, and yellow for the sash."

"It sounds pretty," he says, but she can tell he's suddenly distracted by someone at the bar. That hand of his is getting awfully close to her private area, and she's not prepared for that. She just wants to be friends for now. She shifts her leg, moving away just slightly so he understands he's getting too close. He acts a little flustered when she pulls away, then spots the napkin on the table and picks it up.

"It's between a butter yellow or a marigold yellow," she tells him. "I haven't decided."

"It sounds pretty," he says again, but his eyes are focused on his note. He folds the napkin and slips it into his pocket. The waitress brings their drinks and he tells her, "Tell them not now." Then he pays for the drinks with a ten-dollar bill that he peels off a huge wad of U.S. dollars, no pesos anywhere.

"Does somebody want to talk to you?" she says.

"Just friends want to know if they can join us," he says, picking up his drink and swirling the ice around in the glass before knocking it back in one smooth swallow. She watches the bone in his neck ripple. He has clumps of blonde hair sprouting out from his open collar and on the backs of his fingers. If she weren't so afraid she'd like to kiss him. She's never kissed a gringo before. She sips her sweet cool drink from a straw and plays one of her favorite fantasies in her head: it is her quinceañera Mass and she is walking down the aisle in a lilac satin dress, on the arm of her real father.

“Why do they call you the Lone Ranger?” she says.

He winks at her. “Para mi saber, señorita, para tu descubrir.”

She frowns at his words. Sometimes it’s hard to understand his Spanish. For him to know and for her to discover? What does that mean?

“You will need make-up to go with your pretty dress,” he tells her, directing his gaze at her again. She loves it when he pays attention to her like that with those blue eyes. “Do you have good make-up?”

She shakes her head. All she has is the stuff she buys at the 49-cents store in El Paso, which runs down her face in the heat.

“I have a friend who sells make-up,” he says. “Good quality, very popular with the El Paso girls. Would you like for me to call her so she can bring you some samples?”

Her eyes open wide, she feels like a beggar in a bakery. “Free samples?”

“Of course, she’s my friend. Let me call her.”

He pulls a flat little telephone out of the inside pocket of his jacket and punches some numbers. She can’t hear what he says because the music gets loud all of a sudden, but he ends the call quickly and puts his phone away.

“She wants us to meet her at her house,” he shouts into her ear. “She’s busy right now with her kids.”

Little warning bells start ringing in her head, but she’s excited about the free samples, and, it’s a woman with kids. Besides, she knows that Ariel wouldn’t

introduce her to a bad man. And he's so good-looking.

"Is it far? I have to meet Ariel back at La Fiesta at ten."

"I thought you said you were meeting Ariel here at nine," he says. She is afraid he will hit her for lying, but all he does is laugh. One of his front teeth is chipped.

He shows her his watch, which has three dials and glows in the dark. She has no idea what time it is with all those dials. "Don't worry," he says, "I will get you back in time. Besides, Ariel knows where my friend lives."

"She does?"

"Of course. Ariel buys make-up from her all the time."

"Well, okay," she says, "but I don't want to go to Dallas."

"Dallas?" he says, "You mean El Paso? My friend doesn't live in El Paso. She lives close by, near the stadium." She slides out after him. He drapes her jacket over her shoulders, and holds her elbow as they leave. Somebody hands him something as they pass the bar. "Don't forget the meter's running, Güero!" the bartender calls out.

His car parked in the Estacionamiento on the same street is disappointing. She's expecting a sports car, something shiny and red like the kind she's seen on the telenovelas, but instead it's an old white boat of a car with a crack in the windshield. She notices a box of plastic trash bags and a coil of rope on the back seat. There's no radio, just an empty slot in the dashboard where the radio would've gone.

He tells her to put on her seat belt, but something's hanging off the rearview mirror

that catches her eye: handcuffs. She feels her stomach jump. The door closes on her side and she can hear him locking it from the outside with his key. She reaches for the door handle, but all she finds is a screw. Now her head starts to pound. She opens her mouth to yell for help, but her throat has closed and no sound comes out. She hears him talking to the parking attendant who's been watching his car.

She pounds on the window to get the attendant's attention. "Señor, help me," she says, but her voice is no louder than a whimper.

He slips into the driver's side and frowns at her. "What are you doing?"

"Let me out," she says. "I don't want to go with you."

"I thought you wanted that make-up."

"No," she shrieks. "Let me out! Let me out!"

He reaches over and punches her in the face.

"Do not make any more noise or I will kill you," he says.