

Hart Schulz

The Purple Distance

At noon the guards go through the door and behind the wall. It is when the sun is hottest and when El Paso in the distance is reduced to a murmur in the dry air. The man watched anxiously as the last American disappeared through the little door. The green shirt with its emblem, its official star, made an imprint on the man's mind. He did not fear it exactly, but it had an effect. What he did fear was the wall itself. Forty feet high or more, it makes up one side of the quadrangle—the internment lot. That day the Mexicans played soccer in their boots, better for river mud, and in their dark, plaid flannel shirts and cheap American jeans. The other three sides of the lot are bound by chain link fencing, also forty feet high, with round steel-rod supports at ten foot intervals parallel to the hard ground. All around at the top of the fence and running flush against the brick wall are coils of barbed wire. It is not a high security lot; in fact, that very night the green vans would come through the swinging gate at the opposite end of the wall to take the men back. A younger man perhaps would have little trouble scaling the chain links, at least until he reached the coils at the top. But this man was not so young. He was at the age where he would do better to simply enjoy the view southward through a small rise of dust, to watch the stubborn, stiff sage cut the wind there. He would do better to wait at his destiny.

Instead the man had made a mental note of the missing bricks high up on the wall just where it joined the fence, just at the level

of the barbed wire. When at noon the last officer left for lunch, the man began up the fence using the small diamond links for footholds and handholds. The man had no emotion since something like this was what he had expected he would have to do. When he reached the third support bar he rested his feet there, kept one hand clawed on the chain link and let the other support him against the wall. Just over his head were the missing bricks that would allow him to sidestep the coils. These look like notches for guns in a tall fort. Younger men had finally noticed him from below and laughed. He was a ridiculous spider where the wall met the fence thirty feet above their soccer game. He rested for what could have been ten minutes, then noticed in the purple distance the lazy Rio Grande, shallow, motionless and in-between America and Mexico.

From the top he could see behind the wall the corrugated aluminum buildings in the desert and the green trucks, and, on the side from which he had come, the game and its small plumes of dust lifting from heels. He thought for a moment that he had never seen any collection of ants that were not moving. Was it possible for living ants not to move? But having already rested on a lower rung, he would not allow himself further luxury of revelation. A star of reflected sunshine blazed from the officers' building and another from the silvery hub of a wheel. Having put a foot in each of two holes in the wall there, he was able to pull himself to the top of the wall, despite a moment when his belly stalled him precariously on the edge of the wall. He was no young man. He could crawl at best on the narrow walkway, the width only of a hearth-sized brick! Thus he avoided the spiral of barbs. He had anticipated all this, so he was consumed less by fear than by the ache in his shoulders supporting his weight on the way down. Then again as he staggered across the looser sand outside the perimeter he became aware of his fatigue. His heels stuck in the sand and pulled back against his calves. Behind him was no cheering, and though the players had witnessed his demonstration, he had become no hero, and their game continued.

Between the town and the internment are several junkyards, entanglements of dusty old cars. The man, wearied from his escape,

made his way from one to another. He reached through their driver's-side windows and down under their dash boards into webs of frayed wires. This he knew was a game of chance, but he had calculated the odds of finding a car he could start. He expected his own fatigue too.

It was dusk, and behind him flood lights had been turned on in the internment. Once as a child in Mexico, he had walked through the desert at night to a circus, its lighted cages a beacon in the blackening horizon. Its exotic possibilities were protected from small, barefoot boys by the hiss of rattlesnakes. There are few times when boys are braver than men, but that had been one of them. The man climbed up onto a pile of scrap metal and bound down into a plot of loose sand. A surprised rattler whirled for cover to an old refrigerator there. Its colorless door hung doubled over on one rusted hinge, and inside the remnants of wire-grate shelving guarded the snake. The snake must have seen all the world outside as framed by the opening of the refrigerator and obstructed by the doubled-over door. And the sifted light of stars must have flooded the junkyard scene—with its heavy, awkward man in the deep sand. For a moment the man noticed the snake, but he had no notion of avoiding it, nor of confronting it. Instead he twisted together the ignition wires of old cars into the night. Finally he came upon a big, black Plymouth, its outline faded into the darkness. The Plymouth jumped when he hot-wired it, and its treadless tires jerked the big car from a sandy bed. A cooler, moister wind came up from the south with the smell of Mexico and the promise of rain.

The road felt flatter and smoother than he had expected. He drove north and west and slept in the back seat in Las Cruces in the parking lot behind a 7-11 store. The clerk gave the tired man some Hostess cup cakes. The next day he drove all the way to Sacramento.