

D. J. Phinney
24 Firebird
Irvine, CA92604
949 929-2760
Dennis@dennisphinney.com

40,000 words

Historical fiction
Setting: Santa Ana, California 1938-1942

The Cigarette Girl on the *Tango*

By D. J. Phinney

For Sharon, Nate, Kelly, Jonas, Anders, and Sunny.

You make me happy when skies are gray.

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CHAPTER ONE

SANTA ANA: THURSDAY, MARCH 3, 1938

For the first time in eight days, sunlight stabbed between the thunderheads, and Willie's instincts told him that Elena was in trouble.

The rains had calmed. Willie stood atop the porch steps facing Tenth Street. Murky waters smothered tree-lined lanes of uptown Santa Ana. Pouring through Floral Park, the floods had toppled Mr. Hager's Chevrolet Deluxe, had washed out all of Mrs. Pike's new picket fences. Willie paced, hands in his pockets. He had to check up on Elena.

He'd never sleep until he knew she had survived.

No one was sure how bad these floods were. There'd been no signals on the radio for forty-seven hours. KVOE had gone off-air. The local trolleys had stopped running. There were no newspapers. No milk deliveries. No trucks or even cars on roads a full foot underwater. Even the cot in the garage where Willie lived was drenched from flooding. Still, Mildred ordered him to wring his rain-soaked bedroll out and sleep there.

Sprinkles spattered Willie's arms. Another interlude of rain. He wiped his shoes on her

porch welcome mat, pushed open the front door. He made his way into the parlor. Smelled something burning in the kitchen, Mildred sacrificing something. *Hardly mattered*, Willie thought. She'd never seat him at her table. She said she *knew* something about him, and whatever it was set that woman off.

He had no status. One thing Mildred cared a lot about was status. She wanted movie stars for stepchildren. Claimed Willie looked Neanderthal. Behind his back she called him Tarzan. There was nothing he could do, except move out, which was probably what Mildred had in mind, even though he paid her cash each month to sleep in her garage.

"Where were you going, Willie?" Mildred's voice came squawking from her kitchen.

He didn't answer. He didn't care to answer Mildred anymore. He was nineteen. She didn't love his father. Mildred only *used* the man, used Willie as her errand boy when Pop wasn't around.

Fearing Elena was in danger, Willie stepped outside again. He couldn't stand it any longer. He nudged the front door shut behind him. He rolled his trousers up an inch below his knees. He had to find her. *Nuts to Mildred*. Elena lived up by the Santa Ana River. If Santa Ana's streets were flooded, Elena's home was *underwater*. She'd be terrified. He needed to be with her, hold her, calm her, feel the warmth she always brought him when she shook out her dark hair, smiled wide, and made him feel like a man somebody cared about.

Dark clouds pinched against the sunrays. No time to dawdle any longer. Another storm was coming. Willie waded outward from the porch, leaving Mildred's shrieks behind, a welcome change in his opinion. His pop lived with that harpy he had picked up at the Santa Ana Country Club last autumn when he'd had too much to drink. After Thanksgiving, the old man had moved into Mildred's house, charged Willie rent, and made him sleep in her garage.

Now it was flooded.

Mildred was plain but made it crystal clear the bungalow was *hers*. Pop was a welder at Pacific Electric's trolley barns, downtown. He had no means to buy a house in the Depression. He worked hard to pay the bills for Mildred, plus he payed her mortgage and expenses. That plus Willie's cash kept Mildred in the latest styles from Buffums. Pop and Mildred shared a bedroom. Mildred called it their "arrangement". Willie called it what it was. Pop had no stones, and he was pussy-whipped, except when he got drunk, and took his troubles out on Willie.

Worse, Mildred didn't like Elena. She said it bothered her that Willie dated Mexicans. Or Catholics. Or anything that wasn't Presbyterian. Or British. Mildred Kent would strut around with her nose so high in the air Willie had struggled not to tell her someone ought to mount a cross onto the tip of it with bolts just like those church steeples downtown. That way they'd see her from all over Santa Ana.

He hoped the deluge was receding. A lake of mud covered the neighborhood. It squooshed through Willie's Goodrich P.F. Flyers as he walked. The musty air outside her house smelled like a septic tank gone rancid. He wished he hadn't worn Elena's watch. He feared the floods might ruin it, but knowing how she cared for him, he felt obliged to wear it.

Hurrying north, Willie staggered up the flooded walks of Flower Street in shock. Cars at the curbs had water covering their hubcaps. If Santa Ana looked this bad, what might have happened to his girlfriend and her grandfather in Atwood? Willie's heart rose in his throat.

A roar thundered from the bridge a block away.

Willie didn't like the sound of this.

At all.

Ahead, the surging Santiago Creek descended through the balusters of concrete and had

scoured half the asphalt out from Flower Street. Silt swirled off the bridge deck and cascaded through a gully where the rains worked extra hard to undermine concrete abutments. The storms had settled to a drizzle, but several feet of showers in one week had bloated creeks draining the Santa Ana Mountains. The swollen-crazy torrent sent vibrations through his sneakers. He faced the bridge then glanced upstream, fearing his nerves might hold him back.

The banks of Santiago Creek were littered with green citrus branches, lumber ripped from farm buildings, mangled logs from fallen oaks and manzanitas. Muddy runoff topped the bridge deck. Eucalyptus logs were packed against the bridge rail, forcing flow toward an abutment where a Model T had somehow jammed its way into the opening.

Thank heaven. Willie saw no one inside it.

It appeared the bridge would fail before nightfall.

But right now, he had to cross it. He made a leap across the gorge by the abutment to the car roof and then lunged onto the bridge deck. He fought the current on the deck, staggered north, and clawed the rain-soaked concrete railing. Hugging the balustrade, he muscled through the flooding. A man needed to find the girl he loved. Elena needed him. She loved him.

Willie loved Elena even more.

He was muscular and nearly six feet tall. His huge hands clung to the wet rails. Twice, he almost lost his footing.

He barely made it.

On the north bank, Willie panted as he shivered to stay warm. He caught his breath, watching the carcass of a calf wash past that car he had just stepped on and continue through the gap and on downriver.

The single ray of sun had disappeared.

Willie bent over. Checked his Elgin watch. Ten minutes until three. He was surprised it was still working. It was damp after that Santiago Creek crossing. He'd received it from Elena on his birthday in December in a red box with green ribbons, *plus* her plate of fresh *tamales*, *plus* her photograph with lipstick she had bought for the occasion. Willie had never felt so special.

"It was Papi's lucky watch," Elena'd told him. "Now is yours. Papi used to wear it all the time."

Willie'd looked up. "Uh, what about the night he died?"

She'd choked up. "One night, for some reason...." He could still see Elena's eyes, wider than walnuts, "...Papi left it in the drawer beside his bed table. There are reasons I am begging you to wear it. Is *especial*."

She'd flashed Willie that smile no man could ever disagree with.

That's when she'd told him the police found Papi's corpse on Seal Beach, and she had cried again, and Willie'd held her tight until she'd smiled. He'd never held a girl quite like her. No other girl could feel the same inside his arms, a cup and saucer that fit perfectly together.

But right now, things didn't look good. North of the crossing, he turned right onto La Veta and trudged eastward toward Orange. Above the floodline, on dry ground, he could walk faster. He angled north. He jogged Glassell around the circle past the unlit Watson's Drug Store. Sunlight was prying through dark clouds again, but rain continued soaking through his hair. He covered up his forehead with his ballcap.

The bill on Willie's Hollywood Stars baseball cap was drenched but kept the rain out of his eyes. Willie sprinted north. He reached the Orange-Olive Road that paralleled the soggy ballast of the old Santa Fe roadbed, too waterlogged to carry trains.

The ground looked dry up near the tracks. He scrambled onto the embankment.

From the top, he saw the Santa Ana River.

Then his heart stopped. Half the town of Olive was submerged. Any bridges that had crossed the Santa Ana were washed out. Cars were flipped onto their sides. Floods had pushed them into piles like in junkyards. Homes knocked off concrete foundations were collapsing. One was floating down the Santa Ana River. Timbers spiraled toward the ocean in a silent sea of flotsam.

Willie shuddered. A week ago, someone had slept inside that house. And Elena hadn't lived inside a house but in a *barn*.

He panicked. If the little town of Olive wasn't here, and if Elena lived in Atwood, another mile up the river in an *outbuilding* a farmer rented out to her *abuelo*...

Willie was afraid to even think about it.

But the torrent had slowed down. He could almost *swim* the river, something he dreaded. He'd had nightmares about drowning all his life. He placed the watch into his baseball cap and crammed it onto his head. He waded out into the current. It was swimmable, but wide. And it was cold. Swirling waters splashed his workshirt and his chin. Willie could breaststroke. He dove in, holding his head above the water, keeping the watch dry.

He drifted with the current.

It was tough swimming with shoes. He kicked them off into the river. They floated south into the turbulence as Willie frog-kicked hard toward the north riverbank. His arms ached. But just thinking of Elena kept him moving. Kept him warm. The mud-caked northern shore approached.

He collapsed onto the bank beside a muddy field of oranges east of Anaheim. He took his shirt off, wrung it out and then replaced it. Mangled rails from the railroad tracks rose up from

the river where a bridge had been demolished by the floods.

The rails continued north to Atwood. Now all Willie had to do was make his way along the train tracks or the riverbank to Atwood using the Santa Ana River and the rails as his compass. Barefoot, he trudged upstream through fields of valencias, east along the river toward the Mexican encampments where Elena and the farmworkers had lived outside the orchards.

He walked two miles. There were pricklies in the groves. They hurt his feet, except the soil was so wet they weren't as nasty as they could be. After an hour, he followed train tracks and Placentia-Yorba Boulevard a mile to the Richfield Road stop sign.

Where was Atwood?

Willie looked around.

Nothing was here.

His jaw dropped, and his heart sank. Cadillacs were parked aslant up on the hillsides. But piled up Model T's were ploughed into the mudbanks where the bridges used to be. The Atwood train station was gone. All the outbuildings and barns had disappeared.

They'd washed away beneath the floods roaring through Santa Ana Canyon, powered by massive mountain watersheds upstream.

Where was Elena or her barn? Where was that military stove she used to cook on? Where were all the other buildings and her abuelo? Jesus Christmas, where was Atwood?

Half the town was underwater, and the other half was....

Willie gave a shudder.

It was gone!

He felt heartsick and too stunned to even breathe in the cold air. He knew *no one* up here, miles north of home and Santa Ana. Everyone had disappeared, driven out by all the floods.

He swallowed hard. There was the house up on the hilltop where that farmer lived, who used to own the barn Elena lived in.

Willie had no choice but visit him. He trudged up the dirt driveway walking barefoot like a pauper. He pulled the ballcap off his head and checked his watch. It had a dial Elena said looked like a compass. *Quarter-to-eight*. He was glad the watch still worked but felt the bill fall off the baseball cap and plop onto the mud.

Shaking his head, he stumbled forward. He still had to find Elena.

Willie kicked the cap into the muck.

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Willie made his way uphill, beyond a copse of tilted mailboxes to a yellow clapboard farmhouse off Placentia-Yorba Boulevard. The Santa Fe tracks that had led him here had functioned as a levee, directing the Santa Ana River toward the south side of the railbed. Within its floodway, the Mexican encampments were destroyed. The rich people lived higher up the hill and still had homes. Oil wells and nodding donkeys lined their Yorba Linda foothills where the Richfield Oil Field wells were still extracting money.

It all seemed so unfair. There'd been a dam proposed upstream to stop the floods, except the Prado Dam had yet to be constructed. Clearly the Feds were not concerned how many people died downstream. They were just migrants who had perished, and nobody seemed to mind.

He slicked his hair back into place. Wiped the mud caked on his feet onto a doormat that informed him he was calling on "The Nortons". He tucked his shirt in, rolled down his trousers. No point in looking like a hobo who would never get respect. He needed help to find Elena.

Porch light was on. He rang the doorbell. Checked his watch. Just shy of eight. Willie hoped someone might answer. Lights were on inside the kitchen. He waited. Watched the second

hand go twice around the dial. *Eight o'clock.*

A bolt slid. Someone cracked open the door.

A slim woman in a farm dress with anger etched into her wrinkles glared at Willie. Her six-inch chain bolt blocked the threshold. She looked livid.

“Who are you?” She smoked a Parliament. The pack was in her hand. She exhaled in his face.

Willie stepped back.

Behind the door the stranger glowered at Willie.

A man behind her racked a shotgun, making certain Willie heard it. Guy looked scared. Pointed both barrels of the shotgun straight at Willie.

Willie stammered. “I’m so sorry, I’m, uh...” Willie took a breath. “I’m out here looking for a flood victim.”

“We look like victims to you, boy?” The lanky woman cocked her head and rubbed her pack of cigarettes until some cellophane peeled off onto the rag rug on the floor.

“They used to live out in your barn.”

“We have no barn.”

“Before the flood.”

She gave Willie a look that could freeze hellfire, took a long draw off her cigarette and frowned.

The man holding the shotgun didn’t move.

“Just south, there used to be a barn. Elena lived there with her grandfather.”

“There was no barn. There never...”

“What?”

“There never was no lousy barn down there.” The old man with the shotgun interrupted, nostrils flaring. “Go away. We never rented out them barns. They were fer...”

“Liar.” Willie crammed his foot into the opening. “Yes. You did.”

“Never had tenants. Never will. Don’t care for half-breeds. Never did.”

“Except, I’m Irish.”

“You and Anthony Quinn both,” the woman snorted. “Hollywood swears on it. But any smart person can see it in your eyes. Mexican blood.”

“Well I’m American. Born right here in Santa Ana,” Willie said, fearing he didn’t feel as certain as he sounded.

These people lied right through their teeth. And they looked scared to tell the truth. “And don’t come back, ever again. Ya hear me, boy? We don’t like half-breeds.” The woman blew her cigarette breath straight at Willie.

He stepped back.

Felt the door slam in his face.

Half-breed? What in Hades? A lot of Irish had dark features. He’d read his people were in Ireland before the Celt invasion. Even his father had dark features. Told his friends he was “black Irish.”

Cold bone-numbing gusts blew west from Santa Ana Canyon.

Their chill froze Willie in the dark outside a town that wasn’t here, that never was here, evidently, although Willie could recall it like the backside of his hand. No one would speak about Elena. Couldn’t somebody just come up with the truth?

A blink of lightning.

Except there was no truth in Atwood anymore. There was no Atwood.

A crash of thunder.

A big live oak swayed in the wind on an embankment past the orchards.

Willie rubbed his weary eyes.

Two brighter flashes. Louder rumbling. It was too dangerous to make his way back home. He was exhausted. He'd need to sleep beneath that oak tree up the slope beyond the orange groves. The oak could shelter him from rain. He said a prayer any new lightning struck the tree and not himself and that its branches didn't fall down in the rain.

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CHAPTER TWO

SANTA ANA: SATURDAY, MARCH 5

It was as if the recent storms had washed the Mexicans away. Had even washed away the memories that migrants had existed. Everyone was in denial or in no-win situations. No one wanted to admit they might have rented out to Mexicans, and everyone seemed terrified some do-gooder attorney might sue their pants off if the word got out some tenants might have drowned.

It took four hours to walk home with all the trolleys out of service. When there were no cars on the highways, it was difficult to hitchhike. Frightened locals whispered hobos had been flushed from their encampments. But no survivors he encountered looked like Mexican *obreros* Willie might question to find out about Elena.

At last, he made his way down Tenth Street, half a block away from Mildred's place. He hadn't learned a thing about Elena up in Atwood. Three men had told him he was crazy. "There were no wetbacks. End of story." Sounded so certain he had wanted to believe them and go home. Except he *knew* it was a lie. He could still taste Elena's kiss, last time he'd seen her in her cotton dress she'd sewn with her own hands, her flirty smile and her laugh, the way wild butterflies would follow her, like magic, the way she held him like she wished their warm embrace might last forever.

But it hadn't.

Straight ahead was Mildred's house.

He swallowed. He couldn't stand that shoe-faced shrew. She soured his stomach. He wished he had another mile to walk before he faced her.

He wiped the mud from his bare feet, climbed the porch steps, turned the doorknob. It was locked. Pop wasn't home. He heard Mildred in the kitchen.

Willie knocked.

She didn't answer.

Pacing, Willie waited, piqued that Mildred let him stand out in the rain in his bare feet. He held his temper. It wasn't Mildred's fault he hadn't found Elena.

But it seemed Mildred was even more annoyed than Willie.

Yes, he'd left without permission. He'd been scared about Elena. He was *still* worried. It was pointless telling Mildred about that. This was *her* house. She reminded Pop at every opportunity. Willie spied her through the door glass. She was carrying a suitcase. *His* suitcase. She set it down and unlocked the front door.

Willie swallowed extra hard.

Mildred smiled and cleared her throat.

"We need to have a little chat, Willie." Her cheery tone gave Willie nausea. It was that tone she usually saved for when she'd won a round of hearts. It set Willie's nerves on red alert.

"I've done a little research, and..."

"Where's Pop?"

"It's not important. What *is* important..." she smiled, inviting him inside, "...is in this envelope. I suggest that you sit down."

Willie stepped back.

Mildred flashed the sort of smile he used to see when cops were apprehending bootleggers on newsreels.

His heart cranked into overdrive.

Stepping inside, her home felt colder than the inside of those ice boxes at Sears. Pop was gone. Something was up. With Willie's suitcase by the front door it was clear Mildred had some sort of agenda up her sleeve. Willie braced himself.

She gave the envelope to Willie.

It was nine by twelve, manila, with a string around the clasp that took a minute to unravel. Everything about the moment seemed bizarre. Willie reached inside the envelope. He found a slip of paper from the Orange County Courthouse. A birth certificate.

He read it:

CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH

Guillermo Juan O'Toole

Sex – M

Born 3:15 A.M. January 4th 1919

Santa Ana, California

Mother: Maria Juana O'Toole

Father: undisclosed

Race – Mexican.

Mexican? He wasn't Mexican but Irish. Pop had said so. The last time he'd been called

Mexican, he'd punched that sucker out his junior year behind the tennis court at Santa Ana High. A darned shame he couldn't do the same to Mildred.

His breath fled. He felt dizzy. He fought to appear calm and cover up emotions crawling all around his head. He was at least three-quarters Irish. *Wasn't O'Toole an Irish name?*

"What is this, Mildred?" Willie's hands were shaking harder than an air hammer.

"A certificate of birth."

"I know, Mildred. But whose?"

"I think you know, Willie." She said it with such coldness Willie almost felt the frost but didn't see it on the windows.

"Is this...?"

"Your mother?"

"How 'bout Pop?"

"I'm afraid he's not your father." Mildred shrugged as if she'd just informed him water could be wet.

"Not my father?" Willie's heart stopped.

"Never was, honey. I found this on your birthday at the courthouse. Stanley implored me not to tell you. He likes to keep up the charade. But I no longer see the point. When I asked you to remain with us and guard my place from looters, you made it clear that your priorities weren't with us."

So that was it. Words unfit to speak swirled through his mind. But it seemed Mildred's rage was just getting warmed up.

"Willie, your mother was a whore."

A flash of anger seared his brow. "A bit of nerve you have. You really shouldn't speak ill

of the dead.” He glared at Mildred. Raised his hand, but he restrained himself from slapping her.

“Just being honest.” Mildred shrugged. “Are you so sure your mother died?”

“Pop said so.” Willie slammed his palm against the door jamb. Rubbed his hand.

Mildred’s words had stung him harder than her doorframe.

“You weren’t even Stanley’s baby, even if he raised you like you were. He came home drunk and spilled the beans to me on more than one occasion. He had this friend. Miguel O’Reilly used to show up from Chihuahua. A dark-skinned Irishman whose grandfather had been a San Patricio. I looked them up. They were deserters who, in eighteen-forty-six, committed treason. Joined the Mexicans and fought against our country. This man Miguel shows up and knocks up Stanley’s girlfriend, then skips town. So Stanley raised you as his own. The man’s a bleeding heart, a do-gooder. It’s almost like he thinks it makes him Christian.”

“Stuff it, Mildred.” Willie paused to take a breath and recollect himself. He shuddered. He’d need to get a grip on his emotions. But what was he supposed to think when his whole life people had said he was American? It seemed neither of his parents had been born here. Worse, the white side of his family had been traitors.

“Willie, you’re just like them. You *deserted* us,” said Mildred.” We needed you to help defend my house after the flood.” She straightened herself. She always wore her pumps to appear taller. “Willie, you can’t run from the truth. Sooner or later it will find you. You’ve been dodging it for years, and it’s high time somebody told you.”

“So, where did Pop go?”

“I told him that he might not want to be here when....”

“You threw his son out on the street.”

“You’re not *his* son. You’re Miguel’s.”

She crossed her arms and shrugged again, shaking those ugly ash-blond curls from off her cheeks onto her shoulders.

“And you call yourself a Christian?”

“Oh, be a man. You *are* nineteen.”

“I don’t believe this.” Willie balled his fists and shook his head. *Best to stay calm.* He might say something he regretted. Or explode. A bad idea if he knew Mildred. She’d go straight to the police.

Mildred handed Willie his old suitcase.

She pointed toward Tenth Street. “*Au revoir*, Willie,” she whispered.

He grabbed the handle. “Goodbye, Mildred. It’s been swell. Thanks for the memories.”

“Toodle-loo.” Her voice was sweet enough to make a fellow’s ears bleed, and all those sharp and shiny teeth looked like a buzzsaw.

Willie turned, hoisted his suitcase. He made his way out the front door and down the steps. He started whistling to chase away his fury. From *Snow White: Whistle While You Work*. It made Willie think of witches and their apples.

The door shut in the bungalow behind him.

He set his chin and soldiered on in his bare feet with his old suitcase. He wished that he could spit, but that would just make him look weak. Weakness was a luxury a man could not afford in this Depression. He would need to find a way.

One silver lining. Noone could stop him now from searching for Elena.

The rain dripped from his hair into his eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Willie thought if there was any place he might run into Pop, it was either at Hub's Tavern or downtown at Clark-Dye Hardware. After rifling through his suitcase, he laced on old Buster Browns he had outgrown. Willie made his way down Fifth Street toward Downtown.

The too-tight shoes pinched on his feet, raising raw blisters on his toes. But what blistered even worse was the way Pop hadn't stood up for him. He'd thought the old man cared about him. Now he felt conflicted. *Fat chance*. The old man only cared for Mildred and cheap whiskey.

All hotels downtown were full. Thanks to the floods, there were no rooms. Even the Hotel Santa Ana's neon sign spelled out "NO VACANCY." Not that it mattered. It was like Willie wore a sign that said, "NO MONEY." He'd saved up eighty-seven dollars, but Saturdays his bank was closed.

Four girls played hopscotch on the sidewalk. Willie made his way around them. Saw the hardware store. He peered in through the window. There was Pop, behind the ladders. It was clear he'd had some drinks. He wasn't walking straight but didn't seem aware that he was sozzled.

Willie straightened. Marched inside, feeling his temples drum with fury. All these years he had been treated like an outcast. Now he knew why.

Inside the door, he set his suitcase down. He beelined toward the paint section where Stanley read the label on a can of Dutch Boy Paint.

Willie smacked his palm and cleared his throat.

Pop glanced up. He flashed Willie a stunned look and backed away.

Willie stepped forward. "We need to have a little talk, Stan, but you're drunk." Willie's fists felt like two wrecking balls that dangled from his arms.

The old man raised his chin, and then he staggered two steps back. "Willie, what'sh up?" He rubbed his knuckles like he did when he was nervous.

"I think you know." Willie's fist pounded his palm so hard it felt like he had bruised it in a fight he'd never had.

The old man grinned through crooked teeth the color of canned corn. His head was shaking. He was sweating. Then he stammered. "Shit. You saw Mildred?"

Willie glared at him. "Good guess."

"I meant to tell you."

"Sure, you did."

"Why did that woman...?" The old man steadied himself, reeling, almost knocking over paint cans.

"It's her house. You know the rules as well as I do."

Pop glanced away.

Willie was trying to stay calm. "And when I needed you, you split, you hen-pecked coward, letting your girlfriend wear the pants while you get pickled. I just got tossed out like the

trash after I paid the rent through March so I can sleep in a garage that's now a full foot underwater. I have *no* respect for *you*, Stan." Willie's voice cracked. He took a deep breath. "Zero." He made a zero with his thumb and index finger and shot a glance over his shoulder.

Customers stared his direction.

His gut was swimming with emotion. Memories were carouselling like some old forgotten newsreel. In it, he longed to see his mother. Those nights the old man came home drunk, and he'd punch Willie in the face, nights he'd wished there might be somebody to tuck him into bed, tell him a story like the real boys got to hear in real houses.

"I can exshplain, son."

Willie breathed in. Tightened his jaw. "Don't you ever call me *son*." He crossed his arms. "Mildred just spilled all the beans. Says Mom's alive."

"Your mother's dead, Willie."

"LIAR!"

The old man took a swing at Willie. Missed.

He swung again, connecting this time with a hard jab to the jaw that rattled Willie.

Another gut punch. A left hook toward his ear.

Ducking, Willie caught his fist. Bent back the wrist.

The old man shrieked.

"My real father," Willie whispered. "Who's my father?"

"I-I don't know."

"Where's my mother? Did she run off with her lover?"

"Who gives a damn, Willie? I don't. I stopped Mary June from killing you. She had tickets for the bus to TiaJuana. To abort you."

Willie froze. He'd never heard that. "Liar, you told me she was dead. Seconds ago."

"No. I didn't."

"You really think that I'm that stupid?"

Willie's spine felt like an icicle. "I'm sick and tired of all your lousy contradictions. Gimme the truth for once." He bent back the wrist so hard the old man winced.

"Okay, okay. I had to marry her to shtop her."

"Well how did that work out?" snapped Willie, fearing he sounded too sarcastic. Time to dial down his temper. Be the adult if no one else would.

Time stood still. He looked around.

He sucked in a deep breath.

Somebody was looking his direction.

His temples pulsed like Chick Webb's snare drum on the radio when he stomped at the Savoy. Gene Krupa hammered on the other temple, pounding even faster.

Crowds gathered around like Pop and Willie were in the ring, and all the locals in their overalls had paid to see a fight.

"Mary June left when you were five."

"She didn't die, then."

"She died later."

"How do *you* know?"

"Got a letter."

"My dead mother writes you letters?"

"Don't be a shmarty-pants."

"A what? Don't be a liar. I got evidence. From Mildred. A birth certificate. Says my real

name's Guillermo."

"Mildred *what?*" Stanley's eyes enlarged. They looked like two alarm bells. He was wobbling, the booze plus the exertion from the fight.

Willie glared at him. "You lied to me. For years."

The old man stood his ground. "For your own good, Willie."

"For *my* good? Are you expecting me to thank you?" He couldn't stop shaking his head. It made no sense.

Stan raised his fist again to throw another punch.

Willie dodged, then shoved him hard into the row of Dutch Boy paint cans stacked up high between two aisles. Gallon cans rolled all directions across brown and green linoleum. Pop grabbed his elbow where he'd fallen. A can of paint had busted open, bleeding orange across Stan's brown lumberjack shirt.

Stooping, Willie pressed a knee against Stan's chest and leaned down hard. "I'm only gonna ask you one more time."

Stan glared back up at him. "I shtill don't know. But he was...."

"Mexican? You always told me I was Irish." Willie frowned. "Finally admitting that you lied?" Willie leaned back.

"*He* was Irish. Irish-Mexican. What the hell difference does it make?"

"He wasn't born here. Mildred tells me I'm descended from deserters. San Patricios or some darn thing"

"In Mexico, they're heroes."

"We aren't in Mexico," said Willie. "And up here they call it treason. People hang for it, especially if they don't even belong here."

“Willie, no one’s gonna hang you.”

“Where am I supposed to go? Who’s gonna hire me if my birth certificate calls me a Mexican?”

“One-quarter Mexican. Miguel was Irish. Your Ma was half-Irish half-Yaqui. You’re not so dark you couldn’t pass yourself. Tell people you’re a dago.”

“Doesn’t matter. My face can be as white as Crisco. I’m still a greaser. A half-breed *cholo*. People say that’s even worse.”

“Shpare me the pity party. How would it help to tell the truth? It ain’t helpful. Don’t you get it? You need to keep the mashquerade up if you’re shmart. Or did your gal forget to tell you Mexicans can get deported? Nothin’ wrong with ‘em. They work their bloody tails off like serfs. But there ain’t no one saying *gracias* up here. People are hungry, and the Mexicans are taking away jobs.”

Willie rose to let a stockboy with a dust bin and a mop sponge up the puddle of orange paint from the linoleum. Pop was straddled among paint cans. Paint seeped though the old man’s trousers. His shoes and all his clothing had been ruined.

The stockboy brought a can of turpentine and scrubbed the tile clean.

The old man stumbled back onto his feet.

He glared at Willie, hands on his hips, shaking his head, his face contorted. “All I can tell you is shove off, you lousy ingrate. After everything...Oh, crap.”

Here came the store owner.” Both you guys. Outta here.” He jerked a nail-less thumb over his shoulder.” I said, scram. Lickety-split outta my store. We’ve had enough trouble already with the floods. I don’t need more. If you two amateur Joe Louis’s ain’t gone before I find myself a phone, I’m gonna call in the police.”

“I shoulda dumped you off at County.” Stanley glared at Willie. Spit. “For all the thanks I gets.”

Willie about-faced. No point in arguing with drunks. He had enough trouble already, and he needed to find work. He made his way toward the door, marching in quick time. Grabbed the suitcase.

“Willie, you ruin my new trousers. Anger my lady friend. And now?”

“You’re the one who threw the punches.”

“Now I can’t even show my face in here. Go screw yourself. You lousy no-good *cholo*. Find Elena. Find...a job.”

“I *have* a job.”

“Not bussing tables at some taco stand.” He wagged his finger like the nuns at Saint Anne’s Catholic Church on Main Street. “Know what your problem is, Willie?” Pop shook a fist. “You think life’s fair. Well it’s a hustle. Every palooka’s got an angle. You ain’t owed shquat.”

Willie kept walking, and Pop’s voice faded behind him.

“So, shut your yap. Go find a job. Shomeday, you’ll thank me.”

Willie shook his head.

The poor old man had looked pathetic in that paint aisle and still did. But he’d never treated Willie well and hit him all the time. Willie had never punched him back, he thought. And that took some control. Maybe he was a lousy ingrate, but it didn’t matter now that they had thrown him onto the street when he’d already paid the rent.

Willie glanced back. But now he didn’t say a word. He’d find a hustle. No thanks to Stanley there, or Mildred, or his dead-or-alive mother. Somehow, he’d have to find Elena. She was the one person who made him feel strong.

Willie picked up the pace.

Didn't look back.

He had a job at Josefina's bussing tables.

Willie glanced down at his wristwatch.

Four-fifteen. He'd need to hurry. His paces became quicker.

It gladdened him the rain had finally stopped.

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So according to his birth certificate, he was a Mexican, even though he'd heard only a quarter of him was. But even Mrs. Norton had picked up on it in Atwood. Dark brown eyes, proof enough he wasn't 100-percent white. Not to mention a complexion one might call "Mediterranean." Mildred saw it. He'd been fooling himself. Everybody saw it. He was a fake, a fraud, a phony trying to pass as a Caucasian, a mutt trying to pretend he was some purebred with a pedigree like Mildred's, when he belonged down at the pound.

Plus, Willie had another problem, even though he had a job. He needed someplace he could stay since he'd been thrown out on the streets, which still hadn't been swept free of the debris left from the storms. Willie struggled west on Fifth Street.

He lugged his heavy suitcase, switching arms after two blocks. Cramps knotted his neck. Time to stop to catch his breath. Blisters stung his feet. But there was no point being angry. There were names for folks like Mildred. A part of Willie hoped he'd never see that witch again. The old man had disappointed him. Sad how the Depression had emasculated Stanley. Willie had looked up to him. All of that had changed within two hours. Willie was comforted the man bore no relation.

Then he recalled both of his parents had deserted him as well. Even his parents were

ashamed of him and hadn't stuck around.

But that was life in the big city, or the big town of Santa Ana, population 30,000 and the seat of Orange County, or what remained of it after record-breaking floods had scoured through town. His steps quickened. He had hoped to be at work a little early.

There were so many things it seemed Willie O'Toole had just shrugged off until today, such as how people sometimes labeled him as "Spanish," the local euphemism for Mexicans who happened to speak English. It was making perfect sense as Willie made his way toward work.

Why he'd been hired at Josefina's having the only Irish surname, why he'd connected with Elena, why he'd never felt at home living at Mildred's. He'd been denying it, but now it fit together, memories of his mother singing songs and telling tales of *La Llorona* drowning two sons in the Santa Ana River after their father had deserted her. Then *La Llorona* had drowned *herself*, perhaps why nightmares about drowning had been troubling him for years.

Still he'd swam across the Santa Ana River for Elena. She had this way of making Willie feel brave the way his mother had. He'd adored his mother. Then she'd disappeared like *La Llorona*. He remembered how she smelled, the scent of *masa* on her hands when she had hugged him. Her charming smile like Elena's that had warmed his very soul. But like a fire that goes out on a dark night, Willie now shivered, and the hole inside his heart sucked in the cold.

Fresh scents of cornstarch were a quarter block ahead at Josefinas. The smell reminded Willie of his mother even now. It was part of why he liked it there, besides the fact they'd offered him a job in the Depression. They always made him feel at home, something he needed even more since he'd been thrown out on his own.

Willie stopped at the new mural on the wall of Josefina's. A girl painted on the masonry bore Elena's spitting image. *But how could that be?* His jaw dropped. Surely Elena never came

here. Her home was in that barn with her *abuelo* up in Atwood.

The sun glared from the west into Willie's weary eyes.

He took a hard gulp and remembered. Set his jaw and swallowed tears. Hard to think about Elena's disappearance. Like his mother, he had no clue where to find her, had no proof she had survived. He breathed in deep. Once he got back onto his feet he would find out.

It was time to go to work.

He made his way up concrete steps. Willie's blistered feet were throbbing.

Josefina turned toward Willie. She wore a black polka-dot blouse over gray slacks. She waved hello. "*Parece triste*. Why so sad?"

"Long story," muttered Willie. Then he pointed toward the mural. "*Esa chica*." He looked at Josefina. "*¿Quién es ella?*"

"Why, *es Loretta, mi vecina*. Comes here Saturdays for supper. Her boyfriend, Rico, he drives that thirty-seven Auburn," Fina whispered.

"They come often?"

"Every month. Not so often for her friend."

Willie studied the maroon car parked on Fifth Street, an Auburn boat-tail convertible, the sort of car driven by movie stars and gangsters. Willie's mind was piqued with curiosity. What was an Auburn boat-tail speedster doing here in Santa Ana just a day after the record-breaking floods?

Nobody local drove an Auburn. Auburn stopped making those in 1937.

He glanced back up at the mural, and the image of Elena. Then, he looked down at his watch. *Four-fifty-eight*. He shut his eyes.

It was time to go inside and get to work bussing their tables, washing dishes.

The scent of *masa* warmed his heart, and he embraced it.

He liked it here. At times he even thought he was at home. He made his way inside the shop, telling himself after his shift he'd need to find a local park bench where he'd catch up on some sleep.

But for three and one-half hours he had to work.

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