

The frosty morning air still hadn't warmed up yet. However, the pink and yellow sunlight breaking over the horizon was an inspiring sight and a favorable omen on this chilly early spring morning. Across the landscape, the low-hanging sun cast dazzling rays of light, warming still dormant brown grass and stark naked gray trees. Birds chirped their early morning song, informing the rest of nature that a new day had begun. Thus started another day in Indiana, April 2116.

Morning light shone through the south window of a dilapidated white trailer. Inside, unsullied yellow sunbeams caressed the brown face of Jesús Binnya Sanchez, a boy of about eleven years. Jesús was fast asleep on a bare, thin mattress on the floor, which he himself had positioned so the morning light would awaken him from his slumber. He rolled from his back to his right side, trying to get a few more precious minutes of sleep. A moment later, though, he rubbed and opened his eyes. He pulled away the worn brown and red quilt that had kept him warm all night in his cold, unheated bedroom. It was time for him to get up.

Jesús, a thin boy with short, straight black hair, was wearing only a white pair of underwear. He stood up and looked at the clothing scattered on the floor. He selected to put on a ratty pair of blue jeans and a stained blue and yellow sweatshirt that said, "Pacers." Jesús couldn't read the words on the sweatshirt; it just happened to be the cleanest shirt among the other articles of clothing strewn across the dingy, brown-carpeted bedroom floor.

Jesús knew from the silence in the trailer that his mother, Daw Mi Sanchez, had not come home last night. The Chinese traders had come to Losantville just yesterday. His mother always had to work when the Chinese arrive. Her not coming back was not unusual; it just meant he would have to make his own breakfast.

At the front doorway Jesús slipped on a pair of orange flip-flops before going out. Outside he descended a rickety set of wooden steps to the ground. Before going to the well for water he had to stop first at the ramshackle outhouse behind the trailer, which was located at the edge of a large, now empty, corn field. After finishing at the outhouse, he walked to a hand pump situated to the right of the trailer. Sitting upside down on the handle was an empty ten-gallon white bucket, which he then filled with water. Back inside the trailer, Jesús used some of the water to make noodles, which he boiled in a small aluminum pot on the portable propane stove.

Jesús and his mother lived on Highway 1, just north of Modoc. Highway 1 had never been a major artery in Yulin County, even before the Chinese took over. For years the Chinese allowed the road to degrade into a dusty, gravel, secondary service road. The only motorized traffic traveling on the road any more was loaded and unloaded garbage trucks and the occasional armored personnel carrier.

As soon as Jesús finished breakfast, he threw the pot he ate out of and his dirty spoon into the water-spotted stainless steel kitchen sink. Now that breakfast was over, Jesús grabbed a large, heavy burlap bag that was hanging on a nail by the front door, slung it over his shoulder, and left the trailer to go to the "Mountain."

From their trailer, it was only a three mile walk to the Mountain. In past times, people referred to Mountain as the county landfill. After seventeen decades of continuous dumping, the massive pile of garbage had grown to tower over three hundred feet. Because of its height, and its geographical elevation, in 2020 the Mountain had earned the title of “Highest Point in Indiana.” In 2116, the Mountain still functioned as a dump. And now, it had also become an open mine for gathering scrap metal and hard plastic to sell to the Chinese traders. Jesús, along with hundreds of other young boys and teens, trudged to the Mountain daily to dig through garbage to make a living.

On the walk north to the Mountain, Jesús watched the same daily stream of bedraggled urchins marching somberly to begin their day. Often Jesús envied of the other boys who were walking with their friends and brothers. They got to split up the work of carrying the recyclables back to town. There was also the important matter of protection. The Mountain was a dangerous place. Girls of any age were not safe around the Mountain – day or night. The major menace was gangs of teenage robbers and rapists who roamed the area to prey on the small, the weak, and the alone. Jesús was safe on the road as the other garbage diggers would band together in case of attack. It was the code of the Mountain.

The Chinese traders and the soldiers who patrolled Highway 1 in APCs called the boys who dug on the Mountain *baiyi*, “termites.” The mountain of garbage, which sat quite visible a quarter-mile from the road, appeared pockmarked with thousands of small holes. Because of the constant digging, slag piles of decades old newspapers, fast food boxes, and plastic convenience store soda cups had spread out and up to two feet deep up all the way to the edge of the highway. Exposure of discarded organic matter to the open air, plus the fact that the boys used the dump as their toilet, made the stench coming off of the Mountain almost unbelievable.

Upon finding at a good spot on the Mountain, Jesús started rummaging with his bare hands through a six-foot high cliff of trash. To his left he saw D’Trayvon, a pudgy, medium-height kid, about fourteen years old, with brown mocha skin and a high, uncombed column of frizzy black hair. On Jesús’ right worked a small boy with bronze-colored skin, who was probably no more than six years old. His hair was greasy and black. He wore a tiny, filthy white T-shirt, burgundy shorts, and no shoes. He looked cold and he didn’t dig very well. Jesús hadn’t seen him before and he wondered if he were alone.

With three years experience at the Mountain, Jesús was a young veteran. Through experience he had learned that red trash bag were dangerous to open and had nothing inside worth collecting. Black household trash bags were generally worthless, as well. The real prizes were in old appliances and debris from demolished houses. Scrap iron commanded low prices; aluminum was worth more. Copper wire was always a good find. Junk computers and cell phones had copper wire and rare earth metals; they always sold well in Losantville.

In fact, in addition to the smell of rotting trash and shit, the air reeked from small fires boys lit to burn off the plastic shells when they found a computer. The plastic and glass generally were not worth carrying into town if a boy had a large load of copper.

Two hours into digging, Jesús found an old home hot-water radiator. It was a great find. Up until then he had just stashed a few aluminum soda cans in his sack. Now he'd have to drag the radiator all the way home, though. But at least he would be done for the morning.

It took Jesús around an hour to bring the heavy iron radiator back to his trailer. He stashed it behind the trailer so no one on the road might see it and steal it. He slipped off his flip-flops before entering his home. When he went inside he saw his mother lying on the tan couch. Her eyes were closed so he wasn't sure if she were asleep or not.

"Binnya," his mother said without sitting up or looking to see who it was, "you back early. What matter?"

Daw Mi called her son "Binnya," his Burmese middle name. His Spanish name had come from her absconded common-law husband, Pancho Villa-Sanchez. He had named his child from this baby-mama, "Jesús."

"Bitch, nothing's the matter," Jesús replied.

Daw Mi sat up and frowned. She had brown skin, a wide face, and epicanthic eyelid folds. She brushed a few strands of her very long, straight, black hair out of her face. She had not yet changed the pink halter top and black leather miniskirt that she had worn to work overnight. Her weathered face belonged to a fifty year-old. But she was only twenty-nine.

"Hey, you have do your part! I can't afford feed both us. That all you have?" she asked, pointing at the sack with a dozen or so aluminum cans.

Daw Mi spoke English as a second language. She had grown up in New Rangoon (Fort Wayne), where her family and community spoke only Burmese. Her family there had disowned her when she announced she would marry a short, fat, square-headed Mexican day laborer from North Oaxaca (Richmond).

"I got a fucking radiator behind the trailer," Jesús announced in a flat voice. "I'll go back out after lunch."

"Good boy. I fix you something."

Jesús had never met his father, as Pancho had run off just after he was born. However, Jesús did inherit his father's hot blooded temperament and foul mouth.

As his mother heated up basmati rice and watery, golden-colored tofu soup on the stove, she told him that another trading caravan would be coming in this evening from West Beijing (Indianapolis). She said she would take the radiator with her when she went back to work.

"Don't take less than a hundred *kuai* for that son-of-a-bitch."

*Kuai* was slang for RMB (Renminbi).

Around 1:00, both Jesús and his mother had finished eating. She washed their dishes and Jesús' breakfast pot and spoon. Afterwards she said she was going to sleep for a few more hours before she would leave. Jesús just snorted, grabbed his bag, and headed out the door.

This was actually a pretty good day for Jesús. The sun was warming the air and the weather was lovely. It was neither too hot nor too cold. At the Mountain, there were not going

to be the swarms of flies buzzing around the trash, as there always were in the summer. Plus he had found a somewhat valuable, sellable object earlier in the day.

Jesús returned to the garbage cliff where he had digging in the morning. Again, to his left was D'Trayvon and to his right was that little new kid. For all Jesús knew, perhaps neither had stopped digging to take a lunch break. Neither of their sacks looked very full.

After a few minutes, the little unknown boy on the right yelled, "*¡Caray! Yo he encontrado algo!*"

Jesús turned so see what the matter was.

The little boy reached into a small, brown paper bag in the garbage cliff and pulled out a small grey revolver. The boy smiled ear to ear as he held up and examined the gun. It was a very lucky and very valuable find.

At that moment Jesús became insane with jealousy and rage.

"I should have been in that spot. I should have found the gun. If I hadn't had to carry that stupid radiator back to the trailer, I would have torn the cliff apart and grabbed the pistol first!" he raged in his mind.

"That's mine!" Jesús growled, taking the gun away.

"*¡Mi arma!*" the child cried as he tried to take the gun back.

Jesús heard a voice behind him.

"Give that motherfucking gun back, mofó!"

D'Trayvon had turned and faced Jesús. His mocha face reddened with anger and intense hatred. Now other termites on the mountain stopped to watch what would happen next.

Making no sudden movements, Jesús peered over his shoulder at D'Trayvon. Then, in a swift motion, Jesús pivoted. Jesús raised the pistol. Aiming directly at D'Trayvon's head, Jesús pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Jesús scowled and hissed. He pulled the trigger again. And again. The gun had no bullets. All the chambers were empty.

"*¡Carlos! ¡Roberto! ¡Juan! ¡Diego!*"

D'Trayvon lunged at Jesús in an attempt to tackle him. Jesús jumped out of the way, kicking D'Trayvon hard in the stomach when he lost his footing in the garbage. Jesús had known the code of the Mountain, but now it was too late. His temper and his greed had gotten the best of him.

He stuffed the gun in his pants and began to run. Not far off below him, he saw four teenaged Mexicans running towards him. He had to get out fast.

The Mexican teens were running at him from different directions, scampering up the garbage mountain. Jesús had no chance in running down past them. His only hope for escape was to run up to the top of the Mountain, jump, and roll down the other side. As fast as he could, he sprinted up the twisting termite trail to the top. In his way, though, ahead he saw five large Liberians. In that group stood Kofi, the hulking seventeen year-old, six foot two jet-black

monster. So far, the Liberians had done nothing aggressive; they had just taken a pause from digging to watch the action unfold.

Jesús could not retreat. Below him, the Mexicans were closing in. Up in front of him, stood Kofi and his crew. Jesús had no choice but to run towards the unsmiling Liberians.

“I’ll give you some *kuai* tomorrow! I promise!” Jesús yelled as he approached at full speed.

The Liberians nodded. They stepped aside and opened the path.

As Jesús ran by, without warning, one of the Liberians tripped him.

At once, all five of them jumped on Jesús, beating and stomping him.

Jesús wailed and begged for mercy.

After a minute or two of brutal thrashing, the Liberians stopped. Two of them held the prone Jesús’ arms down while the other three stood up. Big Kofi brought over a tire iron.

“Shit, motherfucker!” Kofi screamed as he raised the black tire iron up over his head for a full swing.

The tire iron careening down towards his forehead would be the last thing Jesús Sanchez saw in his short eleven years of life.

This was another typical day in Modoc, Indiana, April 2116.

The End