FIXING A HOLE

By Matt Burch

The cut was cleaner, no slag, a smooth kerf all the way around. It appeared as if the coyote had traced the head of a plasma torch around a particle board stencil, easily sheared a hole in the quarter-inch thick aluminum patch plate. Arriaga stared through the perfect round aperture in the border fence to the miles of rangy scrub on the Mexico side. "Coyote." He used the word in his mind, though there were none of the usual tell-tale *mojado* signs. No tracks in the surrounding dirt, no discarded knapsacks or empty water bottles. He reminded himself these were the patrolmen's concerns and not his own as he stood from a crouch, wincing at the brief, sharp twinge in his forty-three-year-old knees. His job was to mend the holes, not to consider the motives of those who made them. *La Migra* paid him well not to think of such things.

Arriaga returned to his rusted Ford pickup, thinking things he shouldn't think, suspicions he felt for certain deep in the pit of his stomach, queasier than usual as of late. They were as real to him as the pain in his knees, the dull ache of his vertebrae as he lifted another corrugated steel plate from the truck bed scrap. He heard them in the slow hiss of his acetylene tank as he opened the release valve, smelled it in the sharp sulfur snap of his striker as he lit the torch and proceeded to bond metal with flame. He patched the holes knowing they would return, knowing it was the same man making them each time. His signature lay in the smoothness and precision of the cuts, first acetylene and now a more precise plasma head. The coyote could've easily made his holes elsewhere, used simple garden shears in the portion of the fence that turned to chain-link a hundred yards away or traveled a few miles down to the place where the fence vanished all

together. Arriaga wasn't sure if this man could accurately be called a coyote, but he knew one thing for certain—he was inviting him to play a game.

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His daughter had been giving him trouble of late, "acting out." It was a term he'd first heard on one of the American talk shows that used to spill through the crack of her open bedroom door. When he took the job welding fence breaches for Border Patrol three years ago, Arriaga bought Lucia a flat-screen TV and a receiver with 500 stations. He let her keep it in her bedroom the way some of her *güero* classmates did. To save money, he ran the cable himself, out the rear of their modest rancher to the tool shed roof where the satellite saucer sat like a curious weather vane, receiving the strongest signals. He buried the wire beneath the chicken pen, his one remaining concession to the farm life he knew as a child. At first, it amused him to think of the birds pecking blindly atop the five-hundred flowing stations, until one of the roosters dug up the shallow cable with his beak, forcing him to go back out, rebury the line. Maybe the proud old bird had been "acting out," too.

These days, his daughter's door was tightly closed, her TV deathly silent. But what Arriaga could hear through the thin Sheetrock walls was more unsettling than before. Pitch black music by bands with violent names—*Asesino* or *Brujeria* or *Payasos Come Niñas*—their singers barking like rabid dogs in a mish-mash of English and his native tongue. Arriaga knew rebellion was the way of American children, especially a teenage girl growing up in a new country without her mother. He tried not to let it alarm him. What worried him now were the things he couldn't hear, the silent conversations tapped into her phone, his most recent purchase for her, the one with pink plastic casing and what she called "mad bling." She no longer talked to him when they sat down for dinner, only typed into the little machine, barely touching the food on her plate.

Arriaga could only assume she was texting one of the boys in the group he'd seen her with when picking her up from school days earlier, the ones with piercings in strange places, the swirling black tattoos climbing his arms and legs then disappearing into the dark overhang of their baggy shorts. At first, he was surprised to see her with them; this was not the same group of *güero* kids from the El Paso subdivisions she'd played with the year before. These kids were Mexican like her but *nacos*, border trash, bad news on either side of the fence. He'd seen them around town loitering in front of gas stations, the What-A-Burger, trying to look fierce like cartel kingpins, twisting their smooth baby faces into hardened prison stares. Arriaga thought he'd even heard one call out to him that day when picking Lucia up from school: "*Puto de La Migra*." "Border Patrol's Little Bitch."

Though he couldn't tell her then, Arriaga was ashamed. These were not the type of people he'd encouraged her to befriend. It was why he drove the extra distance, sent her to the nicer suburban school in the first place. Arriaga wasn't sure if his daughter had heard what they said, or if they'd indeed said it, but he believed Lucia would never use such words against him. Despite the silence and the mad barking music, his daughter still treated him with respect. At the time, she'd only looked down to her pink phone when he climbed back into the truck's cab, touched more words into its face.

Later at the dinner table, her silence became too deafening to bear. When Arriaga could no longer stand it, he put his fork down beside his plate and explained himself to his daughter, carefully answering the question she'd never directly asked.

"The job with the *gringos* is a good job, Lucia. Not because of what I do or who pays me, but because it will always be there. As long as that fence stands, there will be holes that need mending. It puts food on our table, the clothes you wear on your back. It puts that phone in your

hand and pays for its thousand minutes. Without this job, we couldn't live in this house, this country. Without this work of mine that embarrasses you, we would be right back in Sinaloa."

His daughter didn't respond at first, just kept gaze on her tiny pink phone. For a moment, Arriaga thought this was the end of matters and picked up his fork to resume his own half-eaten meal.

"And what if we were back in Sinaloa? Would it be such a bad thing?"

Arriaga was surprised to hear his daughter's voice. He stopped eating and looked up to see that she was staring at him intently, her phone placed down on the table for a change.

"I'm just trying to protect you, Lucia."

"Protect me from who? My friends?"

"People who don't have your safety in mind."

"My friends are not dangerous, Papi."

"Not yet, but they are trying hard to be."

"They're just being honest about where they come from, where we come from. They're not the bad people you're talking about."

"What do you know of bad people, Lucia? Other than what your little *naco* friends chatter about?"

"They tell me plenty."

"It's just talk. Talk from little boys playing Big Boss. Little *putos*."

"Funny you should say that."

"Say what, girl?"

"*Puto de La Migra*."

His daughter may or may not have said these words. They could've easily come from inside Arriaga's own mind, repeating as they had been since earlier that afternoon. The phantom phrase suddenly pulled him from his chair, forced him to reach across the table and slap his daughter across the face. It was a blow sixteen years overdue and delivered to the wrong person. The impulse had jumped back into his hand instantly as if it had never left but grown twisted over the years, stifled and perverse with age. Arriaga had never laid an angry hand on his daughter until that day.

His daughter didn't cry, but she stood and threw her phone down to the kitchen floor, bits of "mad bling" unmooring from the plastic base and scattering across the tiles. It wasn't the violence of her actions that unnerved him but the conviction behind her words.

"You don't even care, as long as they pay you! You've totally forgotten what happened to Mamá!"

Arriaga didn't see her storm away, his eyes already lowered to the table in shame. He only heard the clomping of her heavy graffiti-covered boots, the air-sucking blast of her slamming bedroom door. Then came the mad barking music, raised to top volume. Sludgy metal guitars and screeching voices, shouting in a mish-mash of English and his native tongue. For the first time, it sounded good to him. It drowned out the disapproving voices humming in his brain.

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Arriaga hadn't forgotten what happened to his wife sixteen years before. He'd just covered it over in his mind with a serious of unsatisfying explanations, like the colorful quilts the old women in his village used to make from scraps of mismatched cloth sewn together in big, fraying seams. He had a better job at the time, a honorable job, welding structural beams on a new skyscraper in downtown Houston. It gave him enough money to buy the rancher outside of

El Paso, finally bring his wife Luz and one-year-old daughter across to the North. His older co-worker, Rayos, told Arriaga he'd done the same with his teenage son and was planning on bringing over his eight-year-old daughter, Juanita, in a group soon leaving from Culiacán. He told Arriaga the price—two thousand dollars—assured him the coyote was reputable. If Arriaga's wife were to join his daughter's group, they could look out for one another, share the task of carrying Lucia and the water jugs necessary to cross the arid Texas border in the punishing August heat.

Arriaga knew his hearty, full-figured wife would need no help carrying the jugs or his daughter, but he suspected Luz wasn't ready to make the three-day trek from Sinaloa to El Paso all the same. He could hear it in her voice the last time they spoke long distance, the lapses between her words for once not due to the worksite pay phone's garbled connection or the cheap international calling card he regularly used. His wife had never been the type to bite her tongue. The men in their village even used to tease him about it, calling her "*La Potra*," his untamed pony. But ever since Arriaga arrived in the North and had been wiring back monthly thousand-dollar checks, she'd become quieter, challenging him very little. For better or worse, the promise of more *gabacho* money seemed to soothe her wild pony ways. The money would not always be there, so Arriaga knew he had to act quickly. He wired her a full month's pay—just over three thousand dollars—and gave her instructions on when and where to meet the *mojado* group, how much to give the coyote, how to hide the remainder in her stockings once she'd reached the safety of the North. He remembered the proud feeling it gave him, like a real *chingon* worthy of his wife and child. He'd only been in the North for little over a year, less than most of the other laborers, and already he could afford to bring his family over to live in a house of their own.

Luz never arrived, only his one-year-old daughter three weeks later. She wasn't delivered to him in her mother's arms but carried in a quilted bundle by an old Mexican man who appeared at his doorstep. The *vejete's* clothes were covered in orange desert dust, his eyes sunken, hollowed out. He explained that the *mojado* group had a close call with Border Patrol near the Juarez crossing, forcing them to backtrack towards Agua Prieta, increasing their journey by several days into the harshest part of the Sonoran Desert. The women rationed their water supply, giving the children most of it. As a result, some of the mothers died en route. The old man told Arriaga that his wife was one of the dead, then handed over sleeping Lucia in her patchwork bundle. He reached into his dusty jeans and produced a clump of sweaty bills, the few hundred dollars remainder Arriaga told his wife to hide in her stockings. The *vejete* said she'd given it to him to continue on and deliver the baby to her husband at his home outside of El Paso. He handed the damp currency to Arriaga, saying he couldn't keep it. It was his duty, not a profession, to deliver a child so young.

Arriaga remembered the warm feeling of his daughter's bundle in one hand, the soggy bills in the palm of his other. Were he not so speechless at seeing his daughter for the first time since the day of her birth, so shocked by the news of Luz's passing, he would've insisted the old man keep the money or, at least, invited him in for a cold *cerveza*. Instead, Arriaga took the wet bills, stuffed them gruffly in his pocket. "I want to speak to this coyote," Arriaga said.

The old man's creased features wrinkled inward hearing this, his hollow eyes submerging deeper into his bony head.

"The coyote separated from the group when we crossed in Douglas. No one knows where he is. But, if you were to find him, it would be better not to rub the old dog's fur the wrong way."

The *vejete* tipped his hat, excused himself from Arriaga's front porch and headed back into the unforgiving Texas sun, the shadows of the porch seeming to elongate and travel with him. Arriaga didn't know what to make of the man's parting words. Though his own crossing the year before gone without incident, he'd heard stories of coyotes disappearing into the desert with their *pollos*' money, holding them at gunpoint, having their way with some of the wives. Arriaga knew any coyote who tried such tricks on his Luz would have to kill her with his bare hands, and this was a realization that both filled him with pride and chilled him to the bone. "Better not to rub the old dog's fur the wrong way." What did the dusty *vejete* mean by this? Could it be that he was the coyote?

When Arriaga returned to work a few days later, Rayos quickly shunned the idea: "If that old *vato* were the coyote, you would've never seen him or your money."

He told Arriaga that his own daughter, Juanita, had also made it across but was sick from the heat, sleeping most of the day. When Arriaga pressed him for the coyote's name, his co-worker became sullen, tight-lipped, saying only that he should be happy his Lucia made it safely across, put the rest behind him. "Remember, *cabrón*, we're still illegal in this country. Better not to dig too deeply into these things."

His co-worker then dropped his safety visor, returned to his glowing torch, shutting the door on the inquiry, sealing it over for good. Standing at the man's back, watching his unsteady hands hastily bead a T-joint, Arriaga's first impulse was to strike him from behind, lay him down to the concrete with one swift blow. But reason took hold, told him this would risk his final paycheck, possibly cost him all future work. The few second's pleasure he would take in watching Rayos' knees buckle, see him clatter to the ground with tank and plastic visor tumbling

wasn't worth the damage it could do to his one-year-old daughter waiting at home in El Paso in the arms of a friendly *güero* neighbor. No, that would be a mistake. The old way, the *naco* way.

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"Arriaga?" the boozy voice on the other end growled. "I don't know any Arriaga."

"Tomás Arriaga. From Houston, the Windsor Towers job. But we all called each other 'Paco' back then in case of *La Migra*."

Arriaga listened to the silence and the low purr of a distant window fan on his landline. He wanted to hang up, slam the receiver to its cradle, forget the effort it took to make this call, the six others it took just to get his old co-worker's number. Here he was after all these years trapped in another of Rayos' maddening silences. The man was never quiet, except when you didn't want him to be. Then it was like talking into the wind.

"Oh yes...Arri-a-ga," Rayos grumbled. "You have it wrong, *cabrón*. We didn't call each other Paco because of *La Migra*. It was just to fuck with that *güero* foreman's head."

Rayos's casual correction made Arriaga's stomach churn worse than usual, caused him to tighten his grip on the receiver until all he could hear its plastic creaking in his ear. After all this time, his co-worker was still treating him like a wide-eyed country brother who didn't understand big city things.

"It's my daughter, Lucia," Arriaga said. "She's gone missing."

Rayos didn't respond immediately, perhaps remembering the subject of their last conversation years before, perhaps not. Arriaga listened to the background window fan purr, its lazy propellers surely blowing lukewarm jets over his old co-worker's shirtless fifty-year-old bulk somewhere west of Houston, a half-finished Tecate in his hand.

"Sorry to hear it, *hermano*," Rayos said hesitantly. "But I have to ask—why are you calling me?"

"I'm calling because you know people, Ernesto."

"People? What people, *cabrón*?"

"The same people you knew years ago in Houston."

"Things have changed. I don't know the same people I used to. Haven't worked in over two years. That housing bubble, you know, it killed the construction work out this way."

"How do you make ends meet?"

Arriaga didn't care about his old co-worker's finances but knew he had to keep the man talking. In a burst of despair, he'd reported Lucia missing to the local police the night before, a call that only prompted more questions into his legal status than answers to his daughters whereabouts. Rayos was his last chance, the only avenue of inquiry he'd not pursued, and his old co-worker's voice came back more alive, happy to turn the conversation from Arriaga's missing daughter to himself.

"My son in Culiacán has a good job! Can you believe it? We used to come to the North to send money back to them, and now they go back home and send it North to us!"

His co-worker forced a phlegmy laugh, one that Arriaga could not reciprocate.

"A honest job in Culiacán? I didn't know there was such a thing. Maybe I should talk to your son about the people he knows. Maybe he could give me some information."

"My son would have nothing to say to you."

"He must know people if he's still in Culiacán."

"He knows no people, *cabrón*."

"He must know someone. When there's little work, we take what we can."

"Some of us, maybe. But my son is not like me. He is not like you."

The sudden steadiness in Rayos' boozy voice told Arriaga that he'd somehow heard of his job with Border Patrol before he ever picked up the phone. How could this man know these things, lounging seven hundred miles away, waiting for fat envelopes in the mail from his firstborn in Mexico? Who was this man without a job to judge him?

"If I can't speak to your son, then maybe I could speak to your daughter," Arriaga persisted. "About what happened to my wife."

"My daughter?" Rayos laughed hoarsely, his throat thick with disgust. "The little *puta*. Sure, you can talk to my daughter, *hermano*. She works at a club in San Antonio shaking her *culo* for *pinche gringos*, their sweaty dollars tucked in her underwear. I don't talk to the girl myself, but I'm sure the two of you will have much to discuss."

If Rayos were truly his *hermano*, or even the casual workplace acquaintance he once pretended to be, Arriaga would've taken the time to explain to him the sequence of events that occurred since he'd come home from work two days earlier, the night after his argument with Lucia. He would've told Rayos how he'd found her bedroom empty, her clothes pulled hastily from dresser drawers, the remains of her shattered pink phone placed deliberately like a stack of old bones in the center of her made-up bed. He would've told him about cruising the darkened streets of their hometown, looking for signs of her in blazing all-night storefronts, dimly lit residential windows, how he drove to the What-A-Burger at 2 A.M., approached the teens loitering in the lot, the ones with the swirling black tattoos and baby narco stares. How he asked if they'd seen Lucia and how they'd first avoided his gaze, laughing and texting into their phones, until one of the younger girls felt generous—or maybe just guilty—let slip from her black-painted lips: "I saw her with some guy named Chuy earlier, but that's all I know."

Arriaga would've told Rayos about his call to the Border Patrol station the next morning, how he asked Wanda the receptionist, herself a mother of two, to look up the name "Chuy," how it brought up hundreds of hits on her screen and how she narrowed the list by probable age, prior incident and known associations—"Chuy Rodriguez, age 17, aka ‘Wil-E',' last known employ a machine shop on El Centro." He would've told his old *hermano* about his trip to the machine shop that afternoon, about the middle-aged Mexican owner he met there, how the man greeted him at the door with a smile and a few words in his native tongue until Arriaga revealed his own name, only to see the man's eyes go cold, his mouth rigid, switching to English for the remainder of the conversation. He'd tell him how the man claimed he knew no "Chuy," offering little more than a shrug and a few mumbled condolences before showing him the door. Arriaga might've told Rayos about the plasma head torch he spotted on a corner shelf on his way out, how it was covered in a thin film of desert dust. He would have asked his old *hermano* for advice like he'd done years ago, whether he thought the man could be a coyote, whether "Chuy" could be a coyote, whether one or both of them could've taken his daughter or be the unseen cutter leaving holes in his patches in the border fence. Arriaga would have said all these things if Rayos were truly his brother, but he knew from experience he was anything but.

"*Gracias,*" is all Arriaga could muster, before quickly hanging up.

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Arriaga studied the pole and not of the girl twirling above. Stainless steel, a high polish, its base and top plates bolted to floor and ceiling by industrial lags. The spot welds connecting pole to plate were cheaply done, thick and ropy like the scarred ridges he'd seen beneath the girl's heavy, immobile breasts the first and only time he'd looked up from his seat at the side of the stage. The base plate creaked and lifted slightly from the floor with each of her acrobatic flips, in

danger of coming unbolted at any time. It was making his own stomach somersault more than usual, worse than sickly-sweet twelve dollar cocktail he'd ordered just for appearances, worse than the deafening *narcocorrido* pumping from the speakers above. Arriaga wondered what kind of man would trust his entire business model to such a dubious weld.

"I heard you asked for me, Papi?"

Arriaga turned his bloodshot eyes from the loosening stripper pole to the girl at his side, prettier and softer than the one onstage. She'd slipped into the booth next to him without his noticing and was already fingering the pearl snap buttons on his dress shirt with a pair of lengthy lavender nails. Her caramel flesh spilled from the ties of her tiny G-string, having the opposite effect than intended. It made Arriaga embarrassed, want to cover her young body with his jacket. He'd heard a co-worker say that all strippers were once someone's daughter, but this was a daughter whose father Arriaga actually knew.

"You don't look like one of the regulars," the girl continued, working her lavender nails further between the buttons of his shirt. "That's OK. We'll get to know each other real fast. How about you take me into the VIP room?"

"We're already know each other, in a way," Arriaga said as he carefully removed her hands from the buttons. "I'd just like to talk to you for a minute or two, Juanita. No dancing."

Hearing her own name, the girl suddenly retreated into the booth. It wasn't the stage name the bouncer had given him to use, the one that matched the color of her nails.

"Who are you, *vato*?"

"I'm a friend of your father's," Arriaga said. "Or used to be."

"I have nothing to say to my father…or any of his friends."

The girl started up from the booth, and Arriaga caught her by the wrist as she fled, a sudden, reflexive movement which caused her eyes to dart to the bouncer in the shadows of the entrance door, made him whisper into his headset and begin their way until Arriaga dropped the girl's hand, lifted his own in quick surrender.

"I just want to talk. I will pay you the same, whatever you would make in the VIP."

The girl rubbed the invisible hand still attached to her wrist, considered Arriaga from the safety of a standing position. She glanced back to the bouncer now halfway to the booth, shut down his approach with the barest of nods.

"It's two hundred for the back room," the girl said. "Double that for any friend of my father."

Arriaga removed a rubber-banded roll of fifties from his jacket, his latest paycheck entirely in cash. "Let's call it five hundred. For your trouble."

"Not here," the girl said, waving his bills away. "Meet me in the parking lot. Five will get you ten. Ten minutes. After that, you disappear."

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Arriaga watched the girl's lavender nails palm the ten crisp fifties, push them into the pockets of her frayed blue jean shorts. She shivered in the cool evening air of the parking lot and dragged heavily on a cigarette, a baggy Longhorns sweatshirt thrown hastily over her skimpy dancer's attire. He was tempted to offer her his jacket again but knew she wouldn't take it or, worse, take the offer the wrong way.

"Do you remember them?" Arriaga asked. "My wife, my daughter?"

"What did my father tell you?" the girl asked.

"Your father didn't have much to say. He was too busy drowning his tongue in beer. When I said we were friends, I only meant a long time ago and because of the work."

This seemed to comfort her, his distancing himself from her father, the man's mid-morning *cervezas*. Despite the cold evening air, her rigid body seemed to relax.

"I was only eight back then. I don't remember much. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know about the coyote," Arriaga said. "I'm afraid my daughter may have fallen in with some bad people, similar people."

"Let me guess. She was giving you trouble before she went missing. You and my father probably pecked it over like two old Sinaloan old roosters, complaining. Are you sure she just didn't run away?"

"It's true, my daughter and I had an argument the night before," Arriaga answered, leaving out the details.

He watched the girl process the information he had given, take another heavy drag on her cigarette. Its orange tip was the only thing burning hot and bright under a starless San Antonio sky, the dim chemical glow of the parking lot lamps.

"Like I said, I was young. Not as young as your daughter, but still young. It's mostly just sights and smells. The heat rippling the desert. The stink of what water we had left in our jugs. The sweat drying and re-drying on my body like a blanket I couldn't take off. There was a woman carrying a baby. She seemed strong, no-*mierda*, like one of the older girls who works here. That must have been your wife."

Arriaga ignored the comparison of his wife to one of her gyrating co-workers, so offensive to him in every way. It would cripple his stubborn tongue further if he dwelled on it for long.

"Do you remember seeing Border Patrol? The old man who brought my daughter to me said the coyote separated the group because they were closing in."

"I don't remember. It's possible. Patrols were all over the place. I remember the older ones calling out '*La Migra, La Migra*,' but I didn't know back then what it meant."

The girl tossed her the nub of her cigarette to the pavement, watching the ember fade. In her face—still a young girl's face—Arriaga could see his own middle-aged disappointment reflected back onto him. She was used to appeasing men with her body, not her memory or her mind.

"I didn't see your wife or daughter after that. It was hot the next day, very hot. So what the old guy told you could've been true."

Arriaga phrased his next question carefully, suspecting it would be his last. The girl was getting away from him, shivering again, shuffling in place.

"What about the coyote? Did he go with my wife's group?"

"I don't remember. Maybe on his own. Maybe with your wife. Either way, he didn't go off with mine. I guess he had enough of me the night before. *Comprende*? Is that what you really want to know? I'm guessing that's why you drove all this way…"

Arriaga no longer knew why he was here, wasn't sure of anything the girl told him these last few minutes. Every word from her heavily glossed lips seemed designed to evade, to pleasure lonely, pock-marked men in darkened back rooms. He suddenly felt like one of them but worse, standing in the parking lot's pale phosphorescence, hanging onto her every tremulous word.

"I see," Arriaga said. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. Have a good night."

He turned and walked for his Ford pickup at the far end of the lot, covering the ground with hurried steps as he reached for his keys. He listened for the click of her heels to recede into the club, but the clicks never came, only a voice calling out from the distance as he reached for the pickup's door handle: "Your daughter…you probably shouldn't have hit her." The girl may or may not have said this, for how could she have known? The words must've sprung from deep inside his own tired mind, some dream he would never have, some sound sleep he would never realize. The source didn't matter. For the first time that night, they were words he could believe in. You could build an entire skyscraper atop words like that.

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The house was still empty when he returned from San Antonio at three in the morning. There was new hole in the chicken fence, no messages on the landline answering machine. Her pink phone still lay on the bed in broken parts, no light glowing from its plastic shell other than the dull shine from a few remaining flecks of "mad bling." Arriaga wanted to put it back together, see if it was a boy named "Chuy" she'd been typing to that night at dinner. He'd called the phone's provider but, like the police, they only asked for more and more personal information, were unable to give him anything of use. Arriaga needed to feel useful, knew he would be unable sleep. He grabbed his tool bag, walked across the darkened backyard, traced the invisible line of 500 channels flowing silently beneath his feet. He clicked on his flashlight, studied the rupture in the fence's wire mesh. It was jagged and hurried, a random tear less than twelve inches in diameter. An animal most likely, a stray dog or lost wolf, perhaps a careless coyote. The chickens were all still there, pecking blindly in the dark. Even the proud rooster was no longer "acting out."

Arriaga mended the tear easily, no need for his torch. A few snips of the wire cutters, several twists of the pliers, and a small bit of replacement mesh would do. The new day was beginning as he finished, the sun starting its slow climb in the sky. There was harder work to be done elsewhere, so he packed the tool bag into his battered Ford, grabbed his old rifle from the shed. He drove out to the border fence.

The hole from days before was still patched with corrugated steel when he arrived, his own firm welds unbroken. His daughter might be gone for a few days or vanished for good like his beloved Luz, but the holes would always return, of that much he was certain. Arriaga pulled the acetylene tank cart from the truck bed, dragged its squeaky wheels to the fence. He released the gas, smelled the sharp sulfur snap of his striker, its acrid aroma a welcome presence after days of too much talk and little work. The kerf began ragged, but soon his steady grip returned. It felt good to undo his own patchwork. What first seemed perverse in his mind soon felt pure in his grasp. He cut until there was a full circle, then clicked off his torch and pushed the loosened patch plate inward to the ground. He stared through the jagged aperture to the rangy scrub on the Mexican side. He lifted his old rifle from the acetylene tank cart and crawled through.