

It's Saturday · Geoffrey Martino

THE LAST FIFTY YARDS he drove down the wrong side of the street before quickly stopping the *camioneta* directly in front of the butcher shop. There were six passengers and the driver's helper in the old van. No one looked surprised.

The driver gave his attention to the open door of the shop where inside hung a scale and cuts of meat and stood a woman behind the wood and glass counter. In the case were trays of meat. Behind the trays the woman's wide skirts stood like a stage backdrop for the trayed flesh. Spontaneous generation breathed in the long heated meat; the woman waited.

While still facing the open door, the driver spoke to the helper. "Matches," he said gruffly, his hand, a simian paw palm up, out over the console. The helper brought a book of matches from his breast pocket and firmly pressed it into the driver's hand who only then took his eyes from the meat shop. The driver had a great round head and he turned it slowly as if a capstan inside his neck had begun winding into position the tremendous block above. The helper, who was holding the matchbook down with one finger in anticipation of some gust of wind, removed his hand.

Scowling, the driver opened the cover. His scowl deepened as he saw the small congregation of fire-heads in one half of the book.

"When will you learn?" he said, teeth showing, head round as a frying pan. "Have you learned that little by now?" The frying pan held its eyes and teeth on the young helper who said nothing but could not look away. "Half a book of matches. Less. What do you expect me to do with *this*?" he asked, pumping the accelerator. The helper could not answer and only nodded his head to the rushes of the engine.

"Dear Mother of God," said the driver and got out. Nervously rolling the pencil behind his ear, the helper watched him go and enter.

A dog sitting by the door with his legs spread open sniffed at the driver as he entered the meat shop and the woman expectant behind the counter pulled lightly at the towel over her shoulder and breast. Other than the towel over her faded and stained print dress she wore a stained apron and on her head a pulled-tight and tucked handkerchief. Hair showed at the peak and before her ears as landmarks around the pallid terrain of her face. She was a big woman with mannish shoulders. By her left hand was a

much sharpened fine-pointed icicle of a knife. She had for a long time worked with meat.

The driver came in and forward on long ponderous strides. Near the counter he said, "And he returns."

"And . . .," and he put his steering wheel-soiled hands on the edge of the case out from his body, "he returns." The head of the driver came easily forward then withdrew and he withdrew his hands slowly from the edge and, opening the matchbook and making a face to let her know of an odor passing before his nose or of a great internal stitch of pain, pulled free a match, struck it and said strongly, "And . . .," then hushed, "all is hot again. As if in the same womb arise not only flesh but vengeance and lust." For the moment it took to place the burning match beneath a big-hanging cut of meat he took his eyes from her.

"Saliva and blood," said the driver in readiness, turning the match to get the most of the flame. Then, as if toasting friends at a wedding, he said, "And big-boned they were. So without grace but with the hearts of deer. They were not quite young and saw each the other how much. They met how often. Often he came." The flame shortened and vanished.

He did not look to the matchbook as he took a second match from it. His eyes held hers as he struck match to striker. It spat. A snake of smoke came between the man and the woman. Intently and slowly he put the second flaming match under the hanging meat.

"She called him her poet. *He*. But he was seized in heat's lock. *He*. He would only say, 'Oh my love' as a poet would say. He could say no more. So transfixed by heat was the poet." Then to the match beneath the meat, "It is a risk." The woman breathed heavily as the flame moved down to the driver's fingers.

He puffed the flame out. "She would wait. Naturally."

The engine was running outside. He listened a moment and, saddened, broke out a third match and lighted it. The match was directly below the meat and the smoke streaked the rounded part. The streak held the woman's attention as he began again.

"Naturally he would hold her belly and she would worry for his hands. He would touch her stomach like a spider considering weight in its net." The match burned. "He knew as a poet knows of hidden significances. The voices in veins. The voices in mine shafts yearning to be more than captive vapor." He was guiding the match now, turning it, so that it

burned longer. She was anxious for the flame. “He knew as a dreamer knows that what conceived on a horrid night can scrape like meat on a floor through to frozen daylight. Can drag itself dead through. What if it were a monster? A beast? Or worse—sprout of a poet who knew the tongues in veins? Or a misshapen imagining uncoiling like smoke in its torrid dream to be born ice?”

The shriveled flame at last died at his fingertips and he snapped the match away. The woman lifted the end of the towel from her breast and, holding the hanging meat with her other hand, wiped clean the smoke streak.

He lighted another match.

“Innocent things words appear to be. All the while forming organs as hands and paws to haul themselves stealthily along. Innocent baby’s words extending soft fingers grafted to the shanks of hauling horses. He drank. He cursed. He knew. He threw himself against her, against the door, against the straining-to-be words. But no poet, not with the heart of Cortés, could prevail against their hauling. Their jeering. Their prattling demand. Didn’t they have the hearts of deer?”

The flame disappeared to smoke. He drew strength from his measured words and calmly lighted the next match.

“Great was their surprise what gave to light. Again he threw himself. She cursed him, his words, his vigilance. He cried in flight. He cried on Satanic God-formed wings. From each tear spewed new winged words like devils dancing in broken glass.”

The match went out. He lighted another, his voice mounting.

“Yet she followed, spitting hate. Together they ran, big-boned, ungainly. Chased like animals. Rocks and curses flew at them. From lust they ran to vengeance. From saliva to blood—slipping, clawing, hating. Blood filled their eyes. Their dog thoughts raced. Their burden turned to bits of bone on a carpet of meat. Their brains and the hottest of mouths dissolved what they could. Vengeance was lust. Lust risked itself, swearing that blood was saliva.”

His voice now tense, the driver spoke his last words at high pitch as the flame burned his fingers. He threw the match down in anger. He hissed, grabbed at the pack and struck a match. The head flew off no more than a spark. “Whore!” he breathed into his fumbling hands. Then with force, “Whore!” he said and struck another match. He pinched the match hard

between thumb and finger; his arm swayed.

The man and the woman stared at the flame as if it were a timepiece. Then he said, "Hate alone filled her. Only that." With purpose he turned his massive flat-faced head to look at her squarely. "Monsters," he said through his yellow teeth, "beget monsters." The match burned to his fingers without him feeling. In the heat of the butcher shop, sweat came to his lip, heavy breathing paced his chest.

With the towel end the woman dabbed her neck beneath her fleshy chin while her other hand fingered the handle of the old thin knife.

Sighing deeply the driver took out another match—the last. He held it a moment contemplating its hidden heat, then struck it and held it under the stonelike meat.

"She said all would be well again. Her teeth were like flames that burned to her eyes." The driver's hand trembled under the flame. "'It is you alone I want,' she said. In her hands were blades, in her eyes flames."

Together they watched the match flame burn the flesh frozen above so long ago, all the time the woman's fingers seeking more of the knife's handle.

"Was it saliva or was it blood? Her hands with the blades came round, her mouth opened in flames. She was about to touch him. . ." The flame all ready at his fingertips burned a moment longer. ". . . when . . ."

The flame was gone.

The driver's head dropped from sadness and exhaustion, pulling his shoulders down against the support of his arms, hands now on the counter's edge. He could say nothing. The woman watched, her mouth a little open, then began to wipe the meat with her towel.

In the van the passengers had at last grown impatient enough for the driver's helper to turn to them, his hand up in resignation. "After all," he said, "it's Saturday."

The helper was facing forward when the driver came out from the meat shop. The driver mounted his seat. He sniffled as he brushed his cheeks. "When will you learn," he said to his helper, "how things are meant to be told?"

He threw the empty matchbook against the dashboard.