

One

Antonio Richards awoke to a familiar, earthy aroma, vaguely reminiscent of ripe fruit, as it drifted through his small home. A spoon tapped three times on a battered and charred pot his father Victor used to make the morning coffee. The sound of a chair scraping against the kitchen's well-worn floorboards interrupted his parent's hushed murmurs. These comforting routines drew the sleepy nine year old out from beneath his thick blankets and into the chilly morning air. His stomach rumbled. Coffee, tortillas, fresh fruit and fried plantains. More coffee.

Victor always offered Antonio just enough sugar to sweeten the young boy's cup. The mornings when Antonio wanted to show his father how much he had grown, he refused the sugar and gritted his teeth against the thick black brew. His mother Rene rolled her eyes at this gesture while exchanging a knowing grin with her husband.

This morning Antonio accepted the sugar with a small nod when Victor quietly held up a spoonful and raised an eyebrow to his son. Each sip chased away the morning chill with comfortable familiarity. At over three thousand feet, the coffee growing region of Salavandra was ideally suited for cultivating high quality Arabica. The mornings, however, seemed downright chilly, even for well-bundled Antonio. This morning he savored the coffee's warmth on his small but calloused fingers and snuggled deeper into his thick sweater. He looked forward to peeling off the woolen layer as the sun rose and work warmed his body.

Half a sack of coffee cherries by the afternoon. Half a sack would prove to his father that he could work hard. Last year's harvest found Antonio staying at home helping Rene while hired hands worked the

fields with Victor. All January, February and March Antonio anxiously arose each day, hoping to be invited out into the fields. When he finally worked up the courage and asked to go, Victor promised him the next year. Antonio expected the hired hands back again this year, but since January was still young, about two weeks would pass before they arrived. By then the trees would be heavy with ripe coffee cherries and additional hands would be needed all over the region.

Harvest was busy and exciting, filled with strangers coming from Saint Matthew, Hutch and Jola. Small bands of men also arrived from other Caribbean islands, hitching rides on fishing vessels in search of work. This pattern of labor, with extra workers arriving during the dry harvest months, sustained Salavandra's coffee yields for generations.

Breakfast was usually quiet at the Richards' home, a pleasant and sleepy hush broken only by the creaking of late-morning insects and later by Henry, the obnoxious rooster. After lunch was wrapped in a bit of cloth Victor finally spoke, softly telling Rene that he loved her. Then they were off, father and son, each carrying several large burlap sacks. The canteen of water hung heavily at Victor's side as the two stepped onto the road leading away from home. Rene stood watching from the porch, smiling at Antonio and cautiously waving when he turned back for one last look.

"There's Mary, son," said Victor softly, gesturing towards a small home a few doors away.

Antonio's heart skipped and he wished away the hot blush suddenly covering his face. He stared at the ground and kept walking, acknowledging his father with a small grunt.

Victor chuckled, "You need to look them in the eyes, Antonio. Be a man. People respect that. Women respect that. Even young Mary."

Heartened by his father's encouragement, Antonio forced his chin up. He already knew where to look for her. It was the same place she always stood, right next to the steps leading off her front porch. With a deep breath he bravely turned his head and caught Mary staring at him. She smiled and waved.

In a sudden act of bravado, Antonio greeted her loudly. "Morning, Mary," he called out to her, his thin voice cracking horribly. Victor coughed wildly as he fought to suppress a laugh.

“Good picking today,” she called, and quickly stepped inside. Antonio could not be sure, but Mary seemed to show a little more color in her cheeks too.

“One year behind you, right?” asked Victor as Mary’s home disappeared behind thick trees a few moments later. Antonio nodded.

“She’s very pretty, son. Watch to make sure the other boys don’t distract her when school starts again.”

Antonio, already awash in emotion, felt excited and anxious all at once. He crinkled his eyebrows at his father as they walked.

“School? But I thought I was helping you now, Papa. There aren’t any other boys to distract her. They’re all helping in the fields and don’t come to school anymore.”

Victor looked down at his son. The eyes of his nine-year-old son gleamed up hopefully, trusting him to make the right choice, hoping it was for work and not school. It pained Victor, knowing his son wanted nothing more than to work the coffee fields. He stopped walking and bent to look at Antonio. He took his son firmly by the shoulders, wishing Antonio could understand the importance of what he was about to say.

“Listen, Antonio,” he paused, searching for the right words. “I know picking the coffee is fun for you, and I certainly do need your help. But after harvest the work is very unpleasant and requires a lot of spraying. Your mother and I don’t want you around all those chemicals. Besides,” said Victor softly, “boys that work the fields during the wet season do so because their parents can’t afford to send them to school.”

“But they’re really working Papa, even in the rain. Ignacio’s father even lets him tote the sprayer when it’s half-full. Otherwise it’s too heavy.”

Victor nodded, “I know, I know. I see Ignacio out there with his father. But we’re different, Antonio. We have a little more money because we have a few more trees. Also, Ignacio’s parents are sick a lot, and they desperately need his help. As badly as the Munoz’s need Ignacio to work the green coffee cherries, your mom and I need you in school.”

“Need me in school?” Antonio asked, confused and a little hurt. “Why would you need me in school?”

Victor looked around at the forest, still holding his son by the shoulders. He considered the mountain, the island, his hard life and the

harder lives of his neighbors. Antonio had never left Salavandra. He barely understood what lay beyond the Caribbean. Europe, Canada, even the United States; anywhere but Salavandra, thought Victor.

“So you can leave Salavandra, Antonio. So you can forget coffee, get off this island, and live free.”

Picking only ripe coffee pained Antonio’s little fingers. Each red cherry had to be gently twisted off its branch without disturbing the unripe beans. Dew-soaked twigs poked him mercilessly, and the occasional spider kept him on edge throughout each day of exhausting work. Fortunately, the red, ripe beans stood out in clear contrast to the green, unripe coffee. In a few weeks, however, most of the coffee would turn red, and then it would be suddenly difficult to keep pace with the ripening.

Antonio worked the bottom half of trees deliberately left unpicked by Victor. The burlap sacks grew heavier as the hours passed, and by late morning Victor had picked almost an entire sack.

“They’re coming fast, Antonio. Finally that Rocanophyl seems to be kicking in.” He lifted a branch and peered beneath the leaves. “Look, no leaf-rust anywhere!” He handed Antonio the canteen and motioned to take a break.

They sat and rested on the hillside overlooking a valley that fell away to the northeast. Several other coffee fields clung to the steep slope, and in the next orchard down Antonio could just see their neighbor Juan Munoz walking from tree to tree checking his coffee. Looking closer, he saw Ignacio following behind his father, mimicking his movements.

“What did you mean about leaving Salavandra, Papa?” Antonio asked. He handed Victor the canteen and laid back against the hillside. Clouds gathered in the distant sky and marred an otherwise perfect blue.

Victor paused before answering. Antonio heard water bubble in the canteen as his father swallowed.

“Salavandra’s more than what you see, Antonio. Right now the island’s nice for you because you’re young, and it’s probably very exciting. When this is yours,” Victor swept his hand across the orchard, one of several plots he owned, “you’ll see things differently.”

Antonio felt a swelling pride as his father gestured across the hundreds of trees clinging to the steep mountain soil. He imagined pruning, spraying and harvesting the orchard, just like Victor. He neither wanted nor could imagine anything else in the world.

“But we stay on Salavandra, Papa. Does that mean we don’t live free?”

Victor looked down at Antonio and experienced a profoundly aching heart blended with immense pride. He realized that right before him his only son was growing, thinking and trying to figure out the world. Too young right now, Victor thought, too young and too innocent.

“In a way, I...”

Antonio waited patiently for his father to continue while gazing into the immense sky. He imagined what Salavandra must look like from above, just a small speck in a glittering sea, hardly anything at all.

When Victor’s pause grew long Antonio sat up and turned to him, suddenly concerned. Victor’s glazed eyes drifted unfocused across the valley while his hands desperately clutched the canteen.

“It’s ok, Papa. I’m right here.”

Victor did not answer or even acknowledge Antonio’s presence. It was like this often now, with spells occurring more frequently and lasting longer than before. Antonio patted Victor’s big shoulder, trying to bring his father a modicum of comfort deep inside his seizure. This always made Antonio feel horribly awkward, but he forced himself to continue, to be responsible as he told himself a man ought to be responsible.

“Come on back, Papa. Everything’s fine.”

Rene would be worried all over again. Neither he nor Victor would tell her when they returned home, but she would know just the same. Upset and perhaps tearful, she would insist that Victor go to Saint Matthew’s clinic for an examination. Antonio could already see his father gruffly refusing, insisting that he would not get any real care anyway. A thin stream of drool leaked from Victor’s half-opened mouth and Antonio quickly wiped it away.

“Come on, Papa. Wake up. Please.”

Nothing. Antonio knew he could only wait; perhaps a few more seconds, perhaps five more minutes. With each passing moment Antonio choked down the urge to start running for help, reminding

himself that nobody would come in time and that he would only embarrass his father. Finally Victor uttered a small grunt and blinked.

“You ok? You had another attack.”

Victor turned slowly, and looking bewildered addressed his son in the blank manner Antonio learned to expect following a seizure.

“Hmm.”

He patted his father’s hands, now loosely holding the canteen on his lap. With each passing minute Victor became a little more lucid, and after about twenty minutes said he was fine. Then, standing slowly, he insisted on getting back to work.

Victor’s attacks had become more frequent and severe in the past several months, and with each one he became more short-tempered about his worsening condition. Three years of fighting seizures took its toll, and though he would never admit it, Antonio could see weariness gripping his father. With a sad irony the attacks coincided with steadily increasing coffee yields and more food on their table. This year, Antonio thought while gazing at the heavily laden trees, was surely a bumper crop.

Later that afternoon, clouds thickened and the sky threatened rain. Antonio scowled from beneath the coffee branches and muttered about the dry season never being dry enough. He listened to his father’s steady and comforting rustling from a nearby tree. As expected, Victor spoke no more than necessary. Antonio expected him to remain quiet for the rest of the day.

A light mist dropped, cooling the air and making Antonio brace himself against the chilly showers that he came to expect so early in the harvest. Victor’s rustling never slowed, so Antonio continued working and hoped his father would notice his effort and throw him an encouraging word. When the sky darkened a few moments later and a hard rain began to fall, Antonio ignored his chills and continued picking, just like Victor.

From within the steady rain he listened for his father’s faint rustling, barely audible over the heavy raindrops. High above, thunder suddenly cracked, and then the sky really opened.

The heavy downpour made the work slippery and frustrating. When dry, coffee picking took considerable effort but was not immediately exhausting. Soaking rain made finding beans difficult and picking quite challenging. Each little orb slipped out from between Antonio’s fingers

as tried to grab hold. The trick, he learned after several frustrating minutes, was to grip harder than normal before twisting the coffee cherry. Locking a bean between his fingers, he forced it to come loose despite the rain.

The burlap sack, weighed down with product and made heavier from the downpour, dragged behind Antonio as he struck out for the next tree. Sheeting rain roared down the hillside, obscuring the entire orchard. Swaying branches twisted away from his grip and provided little cover as he crouched beneath the next tree's leaves. Overwhelmed by the torrent, he shamefully tucked his head to his knees and waited for the deluge to slacken. He thought only of his father noticing that he had stopped picking.

Gradually the rain slowed and then disappeared altogether as sunlight streamed to the ground. Thousands of dripping leaves still made considerable racket, but the rain's deafening roar was blissfully absent. Antonio took little notice, however. He immediately began picking and hoped to make up for lost time by doubling his efforts.

After several minutes of furious work he felt a creeping sense of distress. An unfamiliar quiet disturbed him in its obvious contrast to the harvest's normally energetic and rustling noises. This quiet shouted want and signaled that something stood amiss in the orchard. The leaves still dripped, but an opaque silence flowed beneath the trickling water. He paused, suddenly fearful to turn around, as if some creature sneaked up the mountain and crouched behind him, slaving, waiting, hungry.

"Papa?"

The thick, moist air swallowed Antonio's voice. He waited for a response and turned from the tree to carefully survey the orchard. Nothing seemed out of place.

"Hey, Papa?"

No sound responded to his call. No rustling disturbed the peace.

Concern tripped into panic when Antonio suddenly spotted his father lying face-up on the muddy ground. Victor had clearly slid several feet down the hill before coming to a stop against a large clump of weeds. Dropping his sack, Antonio ran towards his father but immediately slipped on the wet ground and began sliding down the steep slope. Coated in thick mud, he clawed at the ground and tried stopping himself from sliding. He finally caught a tuft of grass, and as

he lay panting, wracked with fear, he looked up the slope to see if his father was breathing.

“Hey Papa,” he screamed out in desperation, “Hey Papa, get up. Roll over, please!”

The harsh absurdity of a quiet evening several months ago crashed into Antonio’s mind.

“If you ever find him lying on his back, roll him to one side quickly, or else his tongue will choke him,” Rene told him privately. She found Victor face up earlier that day in the midst of a seizure and suffocating from a swollen tongue.

Antonio clawed up the hill, gathering massive clumps of sodden earth in his little hands. It was like a bad dream. The faster he tried to go, the slower he actually went. Victor did not move. Sharp rocks and scrubby twigs tore mercilessly at Antonio’s hands and knees, but he felt nothing even as mud pushed deeply into his cuts. All that mattered was reaching Papa.

A minute passed, then another as he made his way slowly back up the hill. Finally his father lay beneath him. A blue hue touched Victor’s lips. It contrasted sickeningly with his waxy face. Eyes stared blankly, dryly, deeply up into the peaceful blue as if lost in thought. With fearful tears Antonio pushed hard against Victor’s side, trying to roll him. He succeeded only in pushing himself down the hill again, slipping away from Victor’s much heavier frame.

Crying with fear and unable to stand on the slick mud, Antonio screamed out and swore loudly at his father. If anything would move him, a curse would. Victor always forbade expletives and punished Antonio whenever one slipped out. Victor, laying a few feet up the slope, did not move even after Antonio screamed out several harsh comments. Antonio reached him again after another mad scramble across the sticky mud. He unsuccessfully tried once more to roll his father to one side.

Blinded by frantic tears he pried open Victor’s mouth and tried to clear his throat. Thick saliva made Victor’s tongue slip maddeningly through Antonio’s muddy fingers. Each time Victor’s throat cleared, his tongue quickly slid back and blocked it again. Antonio’s dread grew as the minutes passed and no breath escaped his father’s lips. He slowly realized that his panicked fight for Victor’s life was lost.

“Come on, Papa. Help me out, Papa!” Antonio screamed into Victor’s face with a shattered voice. Victor’s muddled mouth remained bizarrely open to the sky as Antonio sank weakly onto his father’s motionless chest. Beaten and exhausted, he wept.

“We’re on our way down. Phillip wanted to watch the storm break over the mountain. It was quite a sight, very dramatic. I got a few pictures that might be good for Marketing. I’m sending them now.”

Tom Penkava, President and CEO of Penkava Incorporated, lightly touched a button on his Link communicator. In two seconds all twenty snapshots passed to a satellite orbiting high above the Caribbean and landed on a partner’s desktop computer in Lower Manhattan.

“We should be in Saint Matthew in three hours. I’ll Link again when I’m on the jet.”

The partner’s image, clearly displayed on the three-inch square screen, nodded quickly and faded out. Tom tossed the communicator toward the Hummer’s open trunk, aiming for the large pile of camping gear. He missed, and the Link clattered loudly across the rocky ground.

“Phillip,” Tom called out loudly. “Let’s get moving.”

A young boy’s voice called out from somewhere below. After a few minutes his son’s head appeared as he climbed back up towards Mt. Tabor’s peak.

“There’re caves down there, Dad! They go way back into the mountain. I left my mark in one of them.” He ran over to the Link and carefully picked it up.

“Is it broken?”

Tom shook his head and tossed more camping gear into the truck. “It’s virtually impossible to break that thing. You could throw it on the ground and it would still be fine. It’s specially made for the outdoors.”

Phillip, Tom’s son and heir to the Penkava fortune, promptly hurled the Link back onto the ground. The unit hit a sharp stone but failed to break. His father chuckled as he threw the Hummer’s back gate shut with a loud thump.

“Bullet proof, Phillip. I don’t think either of us could break it. Come on,” he said, motioning to the passenger side of the vehicle, “it’ll be tricky driving after all that rain.”

Over three thousand feet above the Richards’ orchard the Hummer’s engine cranked to life and the Penkava’s waved goodbye to

their campsite. The two nights spent camping atop Mt. Tabor made a pleasant end to an otherwise bland business trip. Tom was grateful for the brief vacation, rough though it was, and for the time spent with his son.

Numerous switchbacks made the drive from Mt. Tabor's peak to Amadica challenging on dry days. Now the slick mud threw the Hummer around on the steep road and threatened to toss it off the mountain. Tom gripped the wheel hard as he made his way down, grateful for the four-wheel-drive and the Hummer's heavy ride.

Phillip, oblivious to his father's driving challenges, connected to the orbiting Link satellites and began team-playing a search-and-destroy game. The game's objective was to find an enemy commando's hideout and release a melee of destruction with seven compatriots simultaneously playing around the globe. The rough ride interrupted his game several times as the Hummer slid across the road.

"What the...?"

Tom slammed on the breaks and sent the vehicle sliding across the mud towards the road's precipitous drop. Phillip's concentration broke as the Hummer slammed against a boulder and shuddered to a stop. He carefully peered out his window at a steeply sloped coffee patch tipping away to the northeast while opening one of Salavandra's grand panoramic views.

"What happened?" he asked with a heavy breath as he stared down the steep hillside. The truck seemed to barely cling to the road's edge.

Sighing with relief, Tom looked at his son while pointing through the windshield. Sunlight sprayed crazily across the mud splatters and partially obscured the view, but as Phillip turned to look he saw the strangest sight. A boy stood directly in front of them, caked in mud and staring quietly. He did not move. It was as if Salavandra's mud encapsulated and transformed him into a bizarre statue, a mockery of a boy.

"Is he real?" Phillip whispered, unable to tear his eyes from the living sculpture now blocking the road.

Tom nodded slowly. He released his seatbelt and opened the door.

"Stay here Phillip. I'll see what's going on."

Tom cautiously approached Antonio asking if there was trouble and watching carefully for some response. He crouched down and looked into the eyes of the little muddy figure. There was definitely life in

there, panicked life by the way the pupils danced. He took the boy's shoulders in his hands and gave Antonio a little shake.

Rene would step from the porch and immediately begin crying. Antonio quivered at the thought. His mind raced with ways to avoid going home, to avoid bringing his mother the news. Alone with her, but somehow Victor always stood there too, as he imagined awkwardly telling her that Papa had died. Victor, Papa, he always stood strong and unmovable like the mountain. Now he lay in a damp heap far down the orchard's slope, cold, dead and very heavy. Antonio never imagined his father being so heavy.

Antonio snapped out of his daze and found a stranger peering into his face. He smelled clean and looked important, and shaking Antonio gently asked if there was something wrong.

"My father," he whispered in a voice just audible over the Hummer's engine. He pointed down the slope.

"Your father?" Tom Penkava asked, eyebrows wrinkling. "Is he ok?"

Antonio shook his head. He could not bring himself to say anything more. He felt heat coming into his eyes and suddenly large tears formed and ran into the muddy furrows on his cheeks.

"He's too heavy," he croaked and slid through Tom's arms, dropping heavily to the road.

Tom stepped to the edge and peered down into the orchard. Tree after squat little coffee tree, arranged in a crazy patchwork that somehow proved productive, made it impossible to see many details. This meager patch, perhaps a bit larger than others but just barely, was so very similar to the hundreds of others peppering Salavandra's coffee region. Combined, they made Tom a wealthy man and Penkava Incorporated stockholders very happy. Coffee, in addition to the island's numerous other operations that Phillip would control in due time, made his family's business one of the most stable investments on Wall Street.

Antonio's wrenching sob distracted Tom and he turned quickly.

"Sorry kid, but I can't see anybody. Can you point?"

Antonio gathered his strength and did better. He guided Tom down the hill and stood several paces off to the side while Tom drew in for a closer look at Victor. The mud around Victor's mouth was beginning to

dry and crack, and recognizing death, Tom did not try any resuscitation.

“Damn, kid. Is there anyone around that can help you?”

Antonio’s eyes quickly welled with tears again.

“Now you knock that off,” Tom said sharply while pointing a stern finger at Antonio. The last thing he needed was a weeping kid mucking up his plans to get back to New York. Surely there were other people around that could get this corpse off the mountain, he thought. Besides, the muddy road had already put him well-over his scheduled departure time.

Antonio forced back his tears. This adult, with his big truck that could move him and his father, was the only blessing of the day. He stared at Tom, looking especially miserable. Surely, he thought hopefully, this man would not abandon him to dragging his father up the hill.

Tom stared at him, judging, considering. “Shit, kid. You gotta help. Now get back up to the truck.”

The bumper winch whined mechanically as Antonio played out the cable just as Tom instructed. “Keep it taut, kid, otherwise the whole thing gets tangled. You got it?” Antonio nodded and slowly let the cable out as Tom descended with a large blue tarp tucked under his arm. He caught sight of Tom’s son in the Hummer’s front seat, curiously watching the entire operation from behind the huge dashboard.

“Don’t let it get tangled,” Phillip yelled from his open window, “or you’ll get smacked for sure.” Antonio nodded and turned his attention to the winch.

A long silence ensued after Tom yelled up to Antonio and told him to stop playing out the winch. The late afternoon air, clean from the rain and beginning to cool, seemed to mock Antonio’s misery. He hated the day, the coffee, even the orchard that just hours ago seemed the most important thing in the world. He despised his own life. That it seemed so promising and exciting earlier was now just a bad joke. All was mud, and misery. He ground his heels deeply into the road’s pebbly muck while waiting for Tom’s signal.

“Not so fast,” Tom screamed up the hill a few minutes later after telling Antonio to begin winching. “You’re ripping my fucking tarp!”

His booming voice echoed across the hills. Antonio suddenly wanted to run far away from the shiny black truck, from Tom and his unfriendly son. He wanted to escape, but Salavandra's sticky mud seemed to root him firmly to the ground.

He pulled back on the winch's lever, stopping the cable and pausing operations. Tom swore again from somewhere down the hillside. Antonio gently eased power back into the winch and carefully wound the cable into the spool. With each turn he dragged his father up and out of the orchard. Tom's head finally appeared after half an hour of barked profanities. The blue tarp followed. Antonio's father lay wrapped in that thing, with a booted foot poking out of one end. The winch jerked to a sudden stop.

"A little more, kid. I can't get him over the road's edge without the winch."

Antonio checked his urge to run. He stared coldly at the large blue wrapper and gave the winch one last gentle nudge. With an unnerving jerk Victor's body popped up onto the road and slid a few inches before coming to a rest at Antonio's feet. Sweating, red in the face, Tom followed and looked little worse from his efforts.

"Phillip, toss out two drinks."

Tom eased himself onto the bumper and considered the tarp at his feet. It was a tricky job wrapping up Victor without rolling him further down the hillside. This would definitely be a story the Board would appreciate. Tom could already see their faces staring in amazement at his incredible adventure. He quietly chuckled at the thought until he noticed Antonio staring at him in horror.

After resting, Tom hoisted Victor's body up onto the Hummer's hood and drew several lines across the muddy tarp.

"To secure him, kid," he said after seeing Antonio watching him suspiciously. "We can't have him sliding off, now can we?"

The afternoon sun hung low in the sky when Tom turned his attention to Antonio. "Now, about you," he started, standing tall and imposing. First, you can't get in my truck covered in all that mud. The seats are leather, kid, and you'll ruin them. Since I can't waste another second unpacking any of Phillip's stuff, you're going to have to strip down to your underwear. We'll pile your muddies out here on the hood with Dad. Ok?"

Antonio stared at him, not immediately comprehending Tom's words.

"Second, you have to tell me where to go. Right after I Link, we're going to get the hell off this mountain and take you two home. You must live somewhere around here, right?"

Antonio nodded and fearfully imagined riding naked in the truck. Phillip would surely snicker. A hot flush bloomed across his cheeks.

"Ok then, get out of those clothes while I call New York. Phillip, toss out that Link, would you?"

Antonio's heart pounded. His head swam with the impossibility that he was being told to strip. His father would never allow this humiliation. He would crush this man for suggesting such a thing. His father, he remembered with a wave of nausea, lay dead inside the muddy blue tarp stretched across the Hummer's hood.

"Come on, kid," Tom scowled between sentences to New York. "I have to get off this island tonight."

Slowly, staring at the ground, Antonio peeled off his shirt, boots and pants and left them in a heap at his feet. He drew his hands protectively over himself and refused to look at Tom.

"Damn, kid, like I don't have one of those. Why the hell aren't you wearing any underwear?"

Antonio could only shrug and stare at his clothing. He wished he could pull on the filthy garments.

"We'll, it's better than wearing your clothes."

Tom pointed to the Hummer's door. "Phillip," he yelled, "unlock the passenger door and let naked boy squeeze into the back."

The Hummer's rear passenger door opened but Antonio stood frozen to the ground. He worried that Phillip would see him as he climbed into the truck.

"Get moving before I smack your butt," Tom ordered gruffly. "Damn, kid! Do you think I have all the time in the world?"

Phillip mercifully ignored him as Antonio scrambled into the truck. He sat next to a large green blanket. It looked dry and clean. He desperately wanted to cover himself with it but refused to allow his filthy body closer than a few inches. With a quick roar the Hummer jerked into motion and began making its way down the mountain. Antonio quietly gave directions as they drew closer to the hollow in which his home nestled against Mt. Tabor's slopes.

“Don’t you have any underwear?” Phillip asked, after cautiously peering around his seat.

Antonio’s face flushed and he barely shook his head. He stared down at the Hummer’s black carpet, embarrassed about his lack of clothing. Large flakes of drying, reddish soil lay at his feet. He could see bare patches on his skin where the mud had peeled away. The truck would be dirty, he realized. Expecting to get yelled at, he braced himself against the Hummer’s frame and lifted his feet from the floor.

“Here?” Tom asked suddenly, slowing and pointing down a narrow side-road leading away to the east.

Antonio let out an affirmative grunt, but with a jolt of horror realized that his neighbors would want to see who was in the truck. Normally the rusting and battered coffee truck drew out several people wanting news or gossip. Surely this huge black vehicle would draw everyone from their homes. Mary’s face suddenly appeared at his tinted window. He looked longingly at his clothing tucked under a line strapping his father down. Another wave of nausea rolled through his stomach when the Hummer jerked to a stop in front of his home. A small crowd quickly gathered.

Through the dirty windshield Antonio watched as a familiar figure appeared in his doorway. His mother’s shape, framed against his home’s dark interior, paused before stepping out into the late afternoon. She stood motionless for endless moments, and Antonio suddenly realized he would escape having to explain that Victor had died. Rene knew, of course. She knew the instant she saw the blue tarp.

More people gathered in front of his home, in front of the Hummer, all whispering and pointing. Mary ran behind the adults as she searched for a better view.

“Shit. This is going to suck,” said Tom, and released a tremendous sigh. He unbuckled his seatbelt and quickly threw open his door.

The cool outside air immediately settled into the cab and displaced the comfortably warm interior. At any other time Antonio would have breathed deeply, enjoying the refreshing and energizing air. Now he grew increasingly anxious. The cool air seemed to mock his feelings of dread.

“Let him out, Phillip,” Tom called from the front of the truck as he unfastened the lines securing Victor to the hood.

Always obedient, Phillip reached around and opened Antonio's door. To Antonio's horror all his neighbors peered inside and stared directly at his nakedness. Forgetting about being dirty, Antonio shrank from their stares and huddled against the clean green blanket. He vaguely heard Tom addressing the crowd and saw his neighbors parting as Rene stepped towards the truck.

Mary's out there, Antonio thought. His desperate mind raced for a solution to his awkward nakedness but no answer came. His heart hurt from its heavy pounding. He felt suddenly lightheaded.

"Well..." Phillip looked at Antonio with an expectant gaze. "You can't stay in our truck forever."

Antonio stared at him, astounded at Phillip's failure to notice his dilemma.

"You need to look them in the eyes, Antonio. Be a man." His father's comment somehow rang out, distant yet clear. In his haze of indecision Antonio grasped these words and held them, drawing strength from their simple message. Wishing to please Victor even in death, he took a deep breath and boldly stepped out of the Hummer. Behind him Phillip closed the truck's door with a sharp click. Antonio stood naked before his neighbors, before Mary, before the entire island.

Silently defiant and with a challenge in his eyes, he dared anyone to comment. Mary's face appeared and blushed quickly. He held her gaze as he held all the others, strong and unyielding. Victor's words grew more powerful with each second and strengthened Antonio's courage. His stubborn confidence reflected in his neighbors' stunned faces, and they looked at him first with concern, and then with suddenly expectant expressions. Serious faces, Antonio thought, that somehow showed respect despite his nakedness, as well as a nervous kind of aggression as their eyes flickered from him, to the Hummer and back again.

A neighbor stripped off his own shirt and quickly covered the young boy.