San Antonio Review

Migrante

Nick Young

Published on: May 16, 2021

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Photo by [Dong Xie](#) on [Unsplash](#)

I was there again and didn't want to be because I hated the goddamned place. But now that there was a body in the weeds, I had no choice. Not as the duly elected sheriff of Brandon County.

So, with the hour pushing one on a Friday night, having been torn away from my drink at the Eight Ball and the flickering prospect of a one-night romance, there I was standing in a chill rain, shirt soaked through, at the place I loathed. I fished a pack of Winstons out of my pants pocket, cupped a cigarette to shield it from the rain while I flicked my lighter until it caught, and pulled in a lungful. I was at the edge of the gravel access road that ran back between the fields to the blacktop into town. I smoked, watching the raindrops sheet through the headlights of one of the county cruisers. About the worst way I could imagine to start the weekend.

Charlie Blake had his big flashlight up in the air, angled down on the body while the coroner looked it over. He was at the bottom of a ditch about ten feet below the level of the road. Charlie was on the incline which was so steep that he had to stand with his feet far enough apart to brace himself so he didn't slide. The body was that of a female, her bare brown skin glistening wet and cold in the flashlight beam.

Charlie cast a look back at me. His face was partially shadowed, but I could tell he was bothered, unnerved would be the right word. He was young, a fairly new deputy, and this was his first homicide.

I didn't know it was murder, not officially. But I was calling it that. Hell, under the circumstances — a naked corpse that by every appearance had been rolled into the ditch — could it be anything else? A good many thoughts ran through my mind as I stood in the rain, but the one thing I never considered was just how out of hand life was about to get.

I'm getting ahead of myself, which is my nature, I guess. Or, so my ex was fond of reminding me, right up until the moment we signed the divorce papers in her lawyer's office.

"You'll never learn, Stip," she had said with a weary shake of her head, as her attorney handed her a cheap, black ballpoint with the firm's name embossed on it in gold lettering.

"And you'll never let me forget, Bobbi," I recall responding, with a good bit of venom. "Among my myriad other sins."

She just rolled her eyes, put her John Hancock on the dotted line, and we walked out of Bannon, Bannon and Humphries man and ex-wife.

I suppose I'd better lay some necessary groundwork here. I am Steven MacNeil and I am forty-one years old. Everybody knows me by the nickname Stip, which was given to me by my mother when, as she tells the story, I was three and insisted on calling myself "Stippie" instead of "Stevie." Rather than fight what she foresaw as a losing battle, she opted to go with the flow.

I have lived all my life in the town of Humboldt Junction, Illinois, which is the Brandon County seat. If you look at a map, the county is in the part of the state bordered by the Mississippi that bulges west toward Iowa near Keokuk.

I already mentioned that I am the sheriff, first elected to the job seven years ago, required to face the voters in one more. Law enforcement is all I've ever done with my adult life, minus a two-year hitch in the Army just as the Vietnam fiasco was playing out to its sorry fucking conclusion. I started as a town cop, then moved to the sheriff's department for a few years before one day it hit me like Saul on the road to Damascus that I could run the jailhouse show a helluva lot better than Franklin Pine had been running it. So, when Frank announced his retirement, I decided to make my leap into elective politics.

First time around, I ran against Cory Fettridge, who was nothing more than a dilettante from the west end of the county. Didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground when it came to police work, but he had the family name. His old man owned a big John Deere dealership and a few thousand acres of choice farmland to go with it. He also had plenty of campaign green to splash all over the map. But when election day rolled around, the voters — at least in my view, though I'm sure Corey would dispute it — had the good sense to see things for what they were, and I ended up with the gold badge.

I've got three deputies under me, responsible for covering an area of roughly 850 square miles with a population just over 30,000. More than a quarter of those folks live in Humboldt Junction, which is close to the geographic middle of the county; the rest are in the small towns and villages that are scattered like buckshot over the countryside.

Aside from a couple of modest factories and some retail in a fledgling mall on the eastern edge of Humboldt Junction, the name of the game in Brandon County is agriculture — corn, soybeans, wheat and oats. Those are the marquee crops, always have been. Line up a hundred farmers and ninety-nine of them will tell you they're growing one or the other or some combination of them.

The hundredth farmer? Well, that would be Floyd Ripperton. His money is in peas. Sweet peas. It's not only his farm, which is big enough. He grows the peas, harvests them and then cans them at a small plant in town. Sells them regionally under the label Pick'd Rite. Nowhere in the same league as Del Monte or Green Giant but big enough so that a few generations of the Ripperton family have done just fine by those little tasteless green balls, if you don't mind me interjecting my opinion.

Now here's the thing about Floyd — he's a self-important asshole. You know the type, I'm sure. He carries on like he owns the town *and* the county. He's never shy about

reminding anyone within earshot how many people his operation employs, how much he contributes to the tax base and all the juice he claims he's got with the legislature in Springfield. He's been divorced twice and is now running around with a flashy little bottle blonde. If you believe the grapevine, old Floyd was at a convention in Kansas City when he met his current beloved — dancing at a gentleman's club called Kit Kat A Go-Go. She's less than half his age, which is fifty-one or two. That means she's not much older than his son, Richie. And he's another one. Chip off the old block. A seventeen-year-old kid who's taken after the old man in all the worst ways.

So, I have not much use for the Rippertons, which goes double for their labor practices and the main reason I detested going out to the migrant camp they operated south of town.

Now, as you might surmise, a homicide in Brandon County was a big deal. It goes without saying that I wanted to solve the crime as quickly as I could. I also wanted to make sure I did it right.

But from the get-go, I had problems with Floyd.

Let's get back to where this story began, the Saturday night in the rain. By the time the coroner had finished up at the scene and the ambulance boys had taken the body to the hospital morgue it was nearly three. An hour later, after a hot shower and a shot of rye, I called it a night. Or tried to. It wasn't easy putting the image of the victim out of my mind. Not that I hadn't seen a dead body or two in my time. But this one had hit me differently — young girl, pretty, no more than fifteen or sixteen, I guessed — the look of raw fear fixed in her face and eyes, which had seen everything but could tell us nothing.

I'd just drifted off when, at a quarter-past-five, my phone started ringing. It was Ripperton, and no hour was too early for him to behave like an overbearing prick.

"Stip? Floyd Ripperton." I rolled onto my back, jabbing a thumb and forefinger into my eyes, trying to rub some life into them.

"Yeah, Floyd . . . what can I do for you?"

"That's a damned good question, Stip, the goddamned sixty-four thousand dollar question."

Of course I knew why he was on the phone, but I confess that sometimes I succumb to a wicked passive-aggressive impulse (another quality Bobbi had found endearing). In

Floyd's case, I couldn't help myself.

"What's on your mind, Floyd?"

"What's on my mind, *sheriff*, is a dead body and what you intend to do about it.

"Well, how do you suppose I'd answer that question, Floyd?"

"Is that supposed to reassure me?"

"I don't know what it does for you. What do you think grilling me at — what the hell times is it? — five o'clock in the morning does for me?"

"Now, look, Stip, I'm in the middle of harvest season with a bumper crop to bring in and a window of opportunity that's going to close pretty damned fast, especially with all this rain lately. I shouldn't have to remind you that as the largest single employer in Brandon County, I've got a couple of dozen cannery workers not to mention a hundred illiterate Mexican pickers to deal with. I guaran-goddamn-tee you they'll start raising hell about this soon enough. So, again, let me ask you — and it's a simple enough question, *sheriff* — what are you going to do about it?" I let that hang in the air but only for a moment.

"Well, the first thing I'm going to do is get off the phone with you." And I hung up on him. Just like that. Ignorant bastard.

Now, Floyd did have a point. All the things he said were true, but I sure as hell wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of agreeing with him. With sleep now out of the question, I got dispatch at the jail on the horn to alert all the deputies to a six o'clock sit-down at Alma's.

At the appointed hour, the four of us were gathered around one of Alma's big round tables up near the front window. Along with Charlie Blake, there were Norm Guthrie and Mike Strund. Alma sauntered our way with order pad in hand.

"If I had any criminal friends, I'd let'em know the cream of county law enforcement ain't out on patrol but right here at this table."

"Morning, Alma," I said. "How are you on this fine Saturday?" She returned a crooked smile.

"The dream is alive, Stip, and I'm livin' it. A round of coffee to start?" She didn't need to ask, and she didn't wait for an answer before turning away. There was a bit of half-

hearted banter while we waited for Alma to return with our coffee. No one had that much sleep, and that meant the joviality was rather muted. Once Alma had set the mugs down, she looked around the table. "You boys ready to order?"

"Give us a few, okay?" I asked.

"You may have as many as you want. Just wave me over when you're ready." As I watched her walk away, her place slower now, to be sure, it struck me that I had been coming to her cafe since my dad had brought me in for the first time more than than thirty-five years before. It would be impossible to imagine the town without Alma's and Alma's without Alma.

"Before you get to distracted by the menu," I said, turnng to the matter at hand, "let's do some business." I took a sip of my coffee, shook out a cigarette and lit it.

"We got any idea who the girl is?" asked Mike Strund.

"We do not, but I expect we'll know soon enough. After the autopsy, and once we start talking to people at the camp."

"Bound to be one of theirs," said Norm Guthrie.

"I suspect," I said.

"Whose else could it be?" Norm went on. "Them people . . ." I turned my head in Norm's direction and looked hard at him.

"What's that mean, 'them people?'"

"Well, you know"

"No, I don't, Norm, that's why I'm asking." I knew exactly where he was coming from, but I wanted him on the hook in front of the others. Norm was the oldest of the deputies, a holdover from the Frank Pine days. I was never crazy about the guy, but you learn to work with what you've got.

"I mean, them being Mexicans and all." The other two guys at the table were starting to fidget. I figure, they knew what was brewing.

"And what's 'being Mexicans' got to do with the price of soybeans?"

"C'mon, Stip." I figure Norm knew what was coming, too. But, having stepped in shit, he wasn't smart enough to realize that no matter where he put his foot, he was going

to leave a mess. "You know, they ain't like us. They come into town, dirty. Some of them are just about as dark as ni — you know, *coloreds*. Can't speak nothin' but Mexican. They — "

"No, Norm," I cut him off.

"No? What do you mean, 'no?'"

"Not 'Mexican.' They don't speak 'Mexican.'" I wanted to add, *you fucking dimwit*, but knew it wouldn't help.

Mike Strund had lit a cigarette and turned away, staring out Alma's window into the early-morning fog. Charlie, who'd emptied a packet of sweetener into his coffee was stirring it with all the concentration of someone peering into a microscope. Norm's face began twisting sourly.

"They're from Mexico, ain't they? So what else would they be speaking but Mexican?"

"It's Spanish. They speak Spanish," I said, trying to keep my tone of voice level. Norm was getting increasingly annoyed at being called out.

"Spanish . . . Mexican — whatever the hell you want to call it, they don't sound like us. They don't speak American." He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"Neither do we," I said.

Norm leaned forward, staring at me with the look only the profoundly ignorant display without the slightest hint of self-consciousness.

"What are you talking about now?" he demanded.

"We don't speak 'American,' Norm. We speak English."

"Well, Jesus-my-fucking-Christ, Stip!" he muttered bitterly and sat back in his chair again.

"Now listen up, all three of you. I'm only going to say this once — and I shouldn't have to say it at all — we are dealing with the killing of a *person* here . . . a person who happens to be Mexican. And, the last time I checked, Mexicans are part of the human race. So I expect you to treat everyone you deal without at Rippington's camp with that in mind. Is that clear?"

I got nods all around, Norm's more grudging than the other two. In one of those cheap paperbacks they sell in the wire rack at the drugstore, this is the part where you'd read something like "tension crackled in the air like a live electric wire." It wasn't so melodramatic.

The bells above the door tinkled as a couple of new customers came in, Alma returned to our table, topped off our coffee and took our breakfast orders.

After we finished our meal and I was on my way to the jail, I thought about the stupidity of Norm Guthrie and what it reminded me of all over again. That kind of ignorance is a lot more deep-seated around Brandon County than most would like to admit. Hell, most people would have you believe the county is chock-full from end to end with nothing but kind, Christian folk. And I'm not saying those people don't exist, but guaranteed they are scarcer than many would let on. So, in my experience growing up and what I've seen as sheriff, there's a sort of benign indifference. Those people — the Mexicans — were around, but like the clouds, they pass through. No one pays them much mind, or maybe they go out of their way to avoid them, choosing to wrap themselves in ignorance about what the migrants' lives really amounted to, especially when they're forced to work for Floyd Ripperton.

Most folks around here no doubt wouldn't agree with me, wouldn't understand why I even gave it a second thought. Norm had looked at me through his haze of bitterness at being called to accounts in front of the others with bafflement. I could see it, almost hear him saying it to himself — *What the fuck?!?*

It wasn't the first time. Swing back for a moment to my ex-wife. During the waning days of our marital idyll, I had an occasion to come to a dispute with some of the locals over the presence of a Black man in a county park. And the reason it became an issue for me is because of how this park is situated. While most of its five square miles lie outside of Humboldt Junction, under an agreement worked out a few generations before my time, a finger of the land extended into the geographic area of the town. I point this out because that bit of the park is not within the town's jurisdiction but the county's. And this came to a head one late October weekend when word got around that there was an older Black man who had pitched a small tent in a spot amid a stand of maple trees. Well, apparently that was too close for comfort for some of the good townspeople. They started calling the city police. Some complained of feeling fearful, forcing them to lock their doors. Others fretted that their views of the fall foliage were being spoiled by the presence of a "dirty, old Negro hobo." You think I'm kidding? I am not.

Under the system that had been in place for years, any law enforcement questions involving that sliver of the park directed at the city police were kicked over to the sheriff's department. So, I decided I would find out for myself what this grave threat to the local peace amounted to.

It took no time at all to determine that the man, whose name was Bryson Chandler, was harmless. "An itin'rint world traveler," he called himself. Said he would be moving on in a few days after he rested up a bit and tended to an infected paw on his pet collie, which, he said, made it very hard for her to walk.

"I don't aim to cause nobody no trouble, sheriff. Me and Annie just need a little break from the road."

I saw no harm in it, and true to his word, within four days, Bryson Chandler and Annie were gone. But, let me tell you, during those four days, I caught as much shit over leaving that poor old guy and his dog alone as anything I've ever done. And a healthy measure of that grief came from my ex-wife.

She got all wound up, as she usually did, after a couple of gin-and-tonics, her "little g-and-t ohs," which she insisted on singing *à la* an oldie by a band called Ronnie and the Daytonas. It annoyed the hell out of me, which I came to see was, apparently, the desired intent.

"Who the hell is this old man to you anyway, Steven?" It was her custom to refer to me by my formal Christian name on these occasions. I had just opened the refrigerator and taken out a fresh can of beer, likely my fourth or fifth, so you can get some idea of how this conversation was shaping up.

"Just another wandering soul on life's happy highway, Bobbi. Is that a concept you can grasp?"

"You can leave your sarcastic shit out of it. People are talking." I took a long pull at the beer.

"Are they now?"

"I'm getting stopped on the street, at the store. I was waiting to get checked out at the Kroger this morning when Toni Sanders, who was in line right behind me, started in. What was strong with my husband? Why wasn't he doing his job? The old man was scaring her kids and ruined their plans for a family marshmallow roast in the park." That brought me up short.

"Ruined a 'family marshmallow roast?' Are you serious?"

"Well, Toni was *real* serious, I'll tell you that. And why shouldn't she be?"

"Look, Bobbi, that man out there isn't bothering anyone. In a couple of days, he'll be moving on." Bobbi, who was mixing herself another "little g-and-t-oh," paused, her mouth setting into a thin, hard line.

"I guess a lot of people — and I'm one of them — just don't get it. Why are you more worried about an old Black bum than you are about your friends and neighbors who, I might remind you, are also *voters*?"

"Well, here's a word you and all my friends and neighbors — the *voters* — can try on for size: compassion. That old man out there — he's no *bum* — is tired. His dog is hurt. They need a few days' rest, that's all." I tipped the beer can and took a long drink. I wasn't finished. "And let me tell you something else — nobody would be bitching and moaning if it weren't for the shade of his skin." She rolled her eyes and leaned her head back.

"Oh, so now we're all *racists*? she said indignantly.

"I'm saying that a lot of people in this town have got feet that shoe would fit. I know it, and so do you, Bobbi."

"Go straight to hell, Stip."

No need to recount anymore. I'm sure you get the point. The attitude of my deputy? Don't for a minute think it's an isolated case.

Word gets around fast in a small town, and by the middle of the morning, everyone and their uncle had gotten wind of the body. And things started to happen quickly. Doc Ramsay completed the autopsy. His conclusion shocked no one: the girl had been strangled. She'd also been raped. At that point, no one had come forward to identify the girl. That's when the phone rang. I could have guessed before I picked up.

"Stip, goddammit, you better get on out to the camp," Floyd Ripperton fairly bellowed. "I've got a hundred Mexicans all yammering at once about what's happened. They're mad as hell, threatening to stay out of the fields. I can't have that, Stip. You hear me?"

"Calm down, Floyd. We're working on the case. We need to identify the victim, first of all. Hasn't anybody come forward to report a missing child? This girl couldn't have

been more than fifteen, sixteen."

"There's a mother and father. Gomez or Gonzales, maybe. I can never keep them straight. They say their daughter's been missing since early last night. Name of Maria. Anyway, they're crying and carrying on, stirring the others up. We need to put a lid on this right now, Stip."

"We're working on it, Floyd. It's only been twelve hours. Show a little patience." Didn't I say he acted like he owned the county?

I did need to get back out to the camp and see what my deputies had found out — get a handle on the case. But I was going to require some help. Floyd had a foreman who worked the farm. He spoke a little Spanish, enough to boss the workers which is all Floyd really gave a shit about. That didn't cut it as far as I was concerned, so I called up Dennis Prater, the Spanish teacher at the high school. Good guy. I knew him, felt I could trust him, which was not what my gut told me about Floyd's man. Dennis agreed to give me a hand, so I picked him up and we drove the three miles out to the camp.

The early-morning fog was gone, but the day remained overcast, promising more rain to come. Fine. It matched my mood, which was only growing darker the closer Dennis and I got to our destination. There was no need to prepare him for what he was going to see at the camp; he knew only too well.

Dennis belonged to a small Unitarian Universalist church in the next town over. I'd heard some of the locals dismiss them scornfully as the "U-U Yo-Yos," presumably because they looked down on the Unitarians' theological take on the world, which was pretty laid back by comparison. Love thy neighbor and later with the fire-and-brimstone. All to the good as far as I was concerned. Plus, I was impressed by their charity, and that's where Dennis came in. Because he could speak the language, he was a key to the church's efforts every year to help provide for the workers — hygiene basics like soap and shampoo, canned goods and decent used clothing.

When I tell you the place the migrants were forced to live was about one step removed from those concentration camps you've seen in the old newsreels, you can take it to the bank. Floyd Ripperton's idea of accommodations for these poor bastards was two wooden barracks, each holding fifty people, a much smaller building that housed a few crude shower stalls and pair of ancient washing machines. A third building, not much more than a hut really, served as the field office. All the wood siding had been badly abused for many years by Mother Nature. It was way past the time when a paintbrush

might have made a difference. The roofs had shingles torn and hanging, with patches where they were gone altogether. And all around was bare dirt which became a nasty muck when it rained. This little cluster of happiness was just steps from the first of the big pea fields. Close to their work. Just the way Floyd wanted it.

When Dennis and I arrived, Norm Guthrie was standing outside the office hut smoking with Jim Bascomb, Ripperton's foreman. Nearby, a small crowd of workers was milling around muttering amongst themselves, looking confused and stricken.

"Stip . . . Dennis," Bascomb greeted us in a flat voice that lacked even the lie of friendliness. At five-nine and one-fifty, no one would say he was a physical specimen to strike fear into the heart; but with a face cut like a hawk's and hazel eyes that veiled meanness, no one doubted Bascomb's intent when it came to seeing Floyd Ripperton's will carried out. Though he worked with a crew of people whose skill with English was broken at best, he felt not the slightest inclination to learn any more Spanish than was necessary to see the job through. I didn't like Jim Bascomb any more than his boss. Less, really. He and my deputy made a fine pair, standing and smoking in the mud. Ignorant peckerheads, no two ways around it. I looked at Guthrie.

"Anything?" The deputy took a last drag from his cigarette and flicked it, arcing, with disdain toward the migrants. He looped his thumbs in the belt of his holster, rocked slightly on his heels and answered with a touch too much self-satisfaction for my taste.

"I think we got our boy." I looked at Bascomb, expecting nothing. I was rewarded.

"What makes you say that?" I'd shifted my gaze back to Guthrie, but it was Bascomb who picked up.

"Best I can tell from their palaver, Stip, is that the girl is -- was -- one of the daughters of Esteban Morales and his wife. He says she went missing last night after she left with her girlfriends to go into town. We found out she had a boyfriend. Kid named Hidalgo. Jose Hidalgo."

"And he's acting real suspicious, Stip," Norm Guthrie chimed in. "He's the one. Bet my badge on it." That was a wager I was willing to take.

"Dennis, why don't you go in and talk to the parents?" I said with a nod toward the barracks. "I'll want to have a sit-down with the boy. You mind if I use your office, Jim?"

"Be my guest. I'll clear out enough space for us all."

"No need," I told him. "It'll just be the three of us — me, the kid and Dennis."

"Your call, sheriff." I had zero desire to look at Bascomb any more than I had to. Ditto for Guthrie.

The inside of the office was just about what you'd expect — dingy whitewashed walls, bare except for a bulletin board. There were a few random thumbtacks pushed into the cork. From one of them dangled a curling, faded sheet of blue paper bearing the heading:

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

STATE OF ILLINOIS

It was very official-looking, and I remembered it from an earlier visit to be a site inspection certificate, complete with a dated, stamped seal of approval at the bottom. I recalled thinking the first time I saw it that if Ripperton's operation made the cut, how the hell bad did a place have to be to fail?

A beaten gunmetal-grey desk, a battered filling cabinet with a cheap coffeemaker on top and a couple of folding chairs completed the decor. I settled in behind the desk and lit a cigarette. Within a few minutes, Dennis arrived with a very scared-looking teenager. He was dressed in a faded checked workshirt and jeans, clutching a scuffed-up Houston Astros baseball cap. I gave him a smile, tried to put him at ease, and motioned for him to take a seat. When we were settled, Dennis brought me up to speed.

"He knows the girl. They began seeing each other a few weeks ago, but on the sly. He's eighteen and she had just turned sixteen. Her parents were strict, and they didn't want their daughter seeing a boy that old, so they had to go behind their backs. But he says he was always very respectful of Maria." At the mention of her name, Jose's eyes widened, shooting rapidly between Dennis and me.

"*No sé nada, señor. No sé nada!*" I looked at Dennis for the translation.

"He says he doesn't know anything about what happened."

"*Nada, señor. Nada.*" His voice, fraying at the edges, trailed off. Dennis turned to him and patted his arm reassuringly.

"*Tranquilo, hijo.* It's okay. *Tranquilo.*"

So the story came down to this: Maria went with a group of girls to catch a movie at seven. At the theater, she met up with Jose and watched the movie with him. It let out just before nine. Jose said the plan was for the girls to hang out for an hour or so while he and Maria slipped away to a spot where they parked and made out. By 10:30, 10:45 at the latest, they would meet up with the girls at the Dairy Queen so Maria could be home by curfew at 11:00. But Jose said that while they were parked under the old creek bridge north of town it started to rain really hard, it got muddy and his pickup got stuck. Before he could get it free, it was already 11:00. They swung by the DQ, but the girls had left, so Jose said they drove straight back to camp. He dropped María off at her family's barracks, swung around behind the other unit where he lives, parked his truck and went inside.

"That story jibe with what the other girls say? Her parents?"

"Yes — and no," was Dennis' reply. "The story matches as far as the girls go. They say they were worried they'd get into trouble if they were out past their curfew, so they waited as long as they could for Maria and then left, went back home."

"And her mother and father?"

"They say she never came home, that the last time they saw her was when she left to go to the movie. By 11:30 or so, they were getting worried, so they went looking for Maria's friends.

"And when they started asking questions, the girls had no choice but to fess up," I broke in. Dennis nodded.

"Her dad was pissed at this point, so he went to find Jose, who told him just what he told me."

As Dennis was laying it out, I had been keeping a close eye on Jose. Scared shitless, you bet. But I wasn't seeing a killer. He just didn't hit me that way. For one thing, what about a motive? Dennis had asked him if he was getting along with Maria, if they'd had a fight, or maybe her parents were pissed at him for some reason. The answer was no.

At that point, I didn't see any good reason to continue.

"*Ya puedes irte, hijo,*" Dennis said to José quietly. The boy rose from his chair, nodded nervously, and left.

"What do you think?" I asked Dennis as I lit a fresh cigarette.

"I think he's one frightened kid." Dennis paused, ready to continue but stopping himself.

"And — ?"

"Well, I don't know how far I should trust my gut, Stip, but I think he knows more than he's saying."

"Then your gut and mine are on the same wavelength," I said.

Jose's fortunes went from bad to worse in a hurry as the afternoon unwound. By that time, the whole county knew what had happened. And a killing never fails to make a good headline, so out-of-town reporters started showing up. Now, I'm all for the First Amendment, but some of those people didn't show any more regard for a young life that had been taken than if it had been road kill found laying in the weeds. All in a day's work, I suppose. Defense mechanism against the horrors their fellow men visit on each other. I get that, but Jesus Christ

Let me sum up here. I'm in my office in between interviews with these newspeople when Norm Guthrie comes in to tell me he's had a talk with Jason Dillahunt. He's a senior at the high school, standout jock, a pal of Richie Ripperton. His parents are muckety-mucks at the country club, tight with Richie's dad. Both the boys run with a bunch of other students who were part of the same clique, the "snob squad" is the way I'd always heard them referred to. Anyway, Jason Dillahunt told Guthrie that he was at the DQ the night before around 11:00 and saw Jose parked in his pickup having a big argument with a girl. Got really heated, said Dillahunt, with the two of them shouting at each other in Spanish, waving their hands around. Then, Jose hauls off and hits the girl across the face — once, twice. And these were no love traps, according to Dillahunt's telling. After that, he said, they drove away.

"Anybody else see this?" I asked the deputy. He looked at me as if the question was immaterial so why would I be asking.

"Nobody I've talked to, but Jason Dillahunt said he seen it. Why would he make it up? Maybe we should have a closer look-see at the Mexican's pickup."

For once, I couldn't fault Norm's thinking, so we got the warrant and went back out to the camp. Jose hadn't moved the pickup. And while the boy, his parents and just about everybody else in the camp stood by, Norm flexed his hands into a pair of latex gloves and began checking the inside of the truck. There were a few prints to be lifted from

the front of the glove compartment, and an empty Dairy Queen cup and straw for bagging. What I expected. But then there was something else Norm uncovered when he started searching more closely. He had opened the passenger door and was using a small flashlight to go over the floor.

"You better come take a look at this, sheriff." I moved in behind him and he turned, handing me the flashlight.

"What is it?"

"Under the seat."

I bent in close and when I shined the light into the darkness beneath the seat I could see what looked like a piece of white cloth with a dark red stain bunched up as if it had been shoved there.

"Get a bag ready and take it out. See what we've got," I said, "and be discreet about it, Norm. I don't need all these people to see what I think it is." And it was — a pair of girls cotton panties with what I was sure was blood on them.

"I'd say this ices it, Stip," Norm said as he zipped the evidence bag closed. I gave him a hard look. He was looking back with than I cared for. But it was plain that what we found didn't help Jose's case.

"Bring him in," I instructed. "We'll book him on suspicion."

* * *

That night, about 10:00, I had parked myself at the end of the bar in the Eight Ball, wasting no time putting away one whiskey.

"You ready for another one?" I cocked my head and knitted my brows.

"Let me give that a moment's deep thought, Doreen." The young barmaid smirked and swept up my empty tumbler.

"As if there was any doubt about the answer."

In the time it took me to light a cigarette and let my eyes roam around the lounge, Doreen had put a dry cocktail napkin and a fresh bourbon on ice just where I wanted it, an elbow bend away. I raised the glass in a salute of thanks, taking a generous drink.

"You know, Teddy was in here earlier," Doreen said.

"That right," I replied blandly.

"She was asking about you."

"She was, was she?"

"She was." I drew on my cigarette, turned and once again surveyed the room. Typical crowd — some young bucks in snug jeans putting the hustle on a few women in Levi's that fit tighter. The rest? People like me, mostly, pushing into middle age, hoping they've still got enough mojo left not to have to face another night alone. Now Teddy Blaine ran the gift shop at the Truck World Gas Mart out by the interstate. Apart from divorce papers, we didn't have a lot in common, but she was an attractive woman in her late thirties. I'd run into her a couple of times at the Eight Ball, but matters had never progressed beyond drinks and bar talk. That didn't mean they couldn't or they wouldn't only that they hadn't. Maybe that would have been the night, but it wasn't in the cards.

"She left a little while before you came in," Doreen said.

"Greener pastures?" I said, turning back to the bar. Doreen winked before being beckoned away to by another customer.

So I sat and nursed my drink and turned the case over in my mind. I couldn't shake my earlier take on Jose. I didn't know the kid from Adam, but I just didn't see him as a killer. The hardness wasn't there, the set of his eyes, his mouth. Neither was the look of someone sitting on a shitload of pent up fury just waiting for the right spark to set him off. But, like I said, I didn't know him, so my instincts could be way out of whack. Probably were, considering the evidence. Maybe it was just as straightforward as it looked — young guy gets pissed at his girlfriend, maybe jealousy over how she looks at another boy or he forces himself on her, she insults him and he loses it. It could be as simple as that.

After another cigarette, I decided to let the case lie for awhile. With Terry out of the picture, it was going to be another solitary evening. Just as well. I was dog-tired. So, I slipped a five-spot for Doreen under my empty glass and left.

It was early May and mild. The cloud cover had moved on leaving a dull half-moon hanging in the southeastern sky. I had parked next to a tall light pole, and as I reached the car, I could see small piece of paper had been tucked under the windshield wiper. It was a cash register receipt from the hardware store. That was one side. On the back was a note scrawled in spidery ballpoint, a nervous hand, hastily written:

It aint the Mexican — its Rippertons kid.

And so I determined it to be.

Case closed then? Wrapped up with a pretty bow? When was the last time life turned out that way for you?

I followed up on the tip, had my boys start nosing around a little more deeply, especially among Richie Ripperton's friends. I wanted to keep it low-key. That was a fool's hope in a town the size of Humboldt Junction. In a New York minute, the community's most self-important citizen was sharing his views on the matter with me.

"Just what the *fuck* do you think is going on here, Stip?" I was barely three cigarettes and one cup of coffee into my day.

"And a good morning to you, too, Floyd," I said into the phone.

"You haven't answered my question," he demanded.

"Well, Floyd, you're a smart man. What do you think I'm doing? I'm trying to solve this case."

"By running around asking a lot of questions, snooping into the lives of all Richie's friends? How do you suppose that makes their parents look? How do you think it makes *me* look?"

"Christ, Floyd, calm down. I'm not accusing anybody of anything here, I'm just trying to put the whole picture together."

"Goddammit, Stip, you've got all the picture you need. He's sitting in your jail, and if you know what's good for you and for the people in this town, you'll stick to that. And leave my boy out of it, you hear me?" No need to wait for my response, of course. Just issue the edict and slam the telephone down.

For Floyd, bluster was his typical M.O. Like I said, he felt he had divine right to see things run the way he wanted them run. But there was more edge, more menace in his

tone this go-round. He knew that his kid had attracted my attention. And this time, it wasn't like Richie's other scrapes with the law. Those were fairly tame — mostly the reckless way he drove around in his jacked-up '69 Camaro. Once, he got pretty mouthy when we had to bust up a big drinking party at his old man's weekend lodge. Every time, without fail, daddy was there to back him up, make excuses, pay his fines.

Floyd had good reason to be worried. The more we dug into it, the shakier it looked for Richie. His story matched up pretty well with what Jason Dillahunt had told us, but there was just enough of a crack between them that they didn't mesh. Not the way they should have if they were telling the truth. I won't go into it chapter and verse here, but over the following few days, the evidence as I saw it swung away from Jose and straight in the direction of Richie Ripperton and Jason Dillahunt. And that's why I wanted to get with Sal Lombardi.

"We should be on the same page on this murder case, Sal," I said as I eased into one of the wine-colored leather chairs in his office. I think lawyers all shop at the same furniture store. Lombardi was late into his first term as the state's attorney. At forty-one, he was trim, with a full head of salt-and-pepper hair. He had been popular around the county, with a couple of high-profile cases under his belt; and though there had been whispers from time to time about a run for statewide office, Sal had brushed them aside, saying he was quite content serving the people of Brandon County. I suspected otherwise, but be that as it may.

"And why wouldn't we be, Stip?" Sal come around his desk and thrown a leg over the corner so he could sit. He was jacketless, wearing a powder-blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Collar unbuttoned, rep tie loosened -- it was all part of the image he liked to convey: casual, but down-to-business. "We've got the Hidalgo kid across the street in the lockup, and I'm ready to move. Open and shut is the way it looks from my side of the desk."

"We have the wrong guy, Sal." I could see that what I said did not come as a shock. He folded his arms and looked at me with a little more intensity.

"Well, I don't know what you think you've got, but I can tell you there are a few folks who aren't pleased that you seem intent on finding some other answer than the one staring you in the face."

"Don't make me guess." He held up his hand to stop me. He knew damn well where I was going.

"Do you blame Floyd for being concerned?"

"He should be. I'll bet my badge his son is the one responsible for that girl's death, not that poor Mexican kid."

"And you've got the evidence to make a case?"

"The investigation's ongoing, so I don't have everything — yet. But my gut tells me it's Ripperton, with an assist from Jason Dillahunt." Lombardi screwed up his face and looked at me as if I were a three-year-old.

"You expect me to go into court based on your gut?"

"I told you, I don't have — " Again, Sal raised his hand sharply to silence me.

"Here's what you *do* have, Stip, and frankly I'm surprised I have to spell it out for you. You've got a suspect already in jail, yet you insist on using a stick to stir up unnecessary shit, and the smell has some important people in this town very upset. I shouldn't have to remind you that these people pull a lot of political weight and both of us will have to face the voters again in just a few months time. I don't know about you, but I have no intention of losing, so I intend to button this up with the least amount of drama possible."

"Well, what does that mean, Sal?"

"It means I'll make my appearance in court, file charges against Jose Hidalgo and then . . . " His voice trailed off and he glanced away momentarily.

"Then what?"

"Then the calendar becomes our friend, Stip."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I didn't know just where he was headed, but by this time I was pretty sure I wasn't going to like it.

"Look, the harvest season wraps up in a couple of weeks, and the migrants will be moving on . . . cherries, apricots, up north. And when they're ready to pack up and go, I'll see that Hidalgo is released. Charges dropped. Lack of evidence. He walks away. Case closed." At that moment he might as well have been a total stranger. We'd worked together on a lot of cases over the years. I thought I knew him, at least well enough to consider him conscientious, a straight-shooter. Never had reason to doubt that judgment.

This was the same man?

"Sal — for Christ's sake! You're telling me you'll just drop the whole case, knowing that the person responsible — knowing *who he fucking is* — goes free? I don't believe what I'm hearing here." He was staring directly at me, a hardness to his face. And something more — accusation, like I was the one who should feel guilty, who didn't grasp the score.

"Let's be pragmatic, Stip. Alright? A young girl is dead, and that's a horrible thing. But she was a *migrant*, wasn't she? She and her people will be leaving soon enough. So, out of sight, out of mind because we *won't* be leaving. We've got to live here. And it seems to me for our own good and for the good of the wider community, we get this unfortunate mess behind us as quickly as we can. It may be a sad fact, Stip, but it's nonetheless true: in this community, there would be a whole helluva lot more upheaval caused by proceeding down the path you're suggesting than putting the death of this migrant girl in the past. You think about it. You'll see that I'm right."

I gave it some thought, alright. About three bourbons' worth. And, if you want to know the truth, it didn't take nearly that. This was the way it was going to be? This was how they wanted their county run? The answers were obvious. Sal was right: The good people of Brandon County would not want to bother scratching too deeply into the rape and murder of a Mexican girl, especially one of the migrants who worked Floyd Ripperton's farm. Certainly not at the expense of the man himself, a pillar of the community, one who had his name above the entrance of the new family clinic at hospital, the one who donated cases of his canned peas and wrote a big check to the local food bank at Thanksgiving. Justice blind? Her scales balanced? You tell me.

So all of this brings me back to where I started, back to that lonely farm road at the goddamned place I hated. With the last of the pea harvest done, the migrants had moved on. At the spot where I stood, where Maria's body was found, they had left a small memorial, wildflowers roughly woven into a cross-shaped wreath and placed at the bottom of the ditch. A strip of yellow cloth crudely lettered with *Reza por Maria, Santa Madre* had been pinned to the wreath. By this time the flowers were looking pretty tired, even in the moonlight. Soon enough, they'll be gone, along with the cloth and the message, whatever it means. I'll be gone, too. There's nothing here for me any more. Two days after my meeting with Sal Lombardi, I handed the county executive my letter of resignation. Effective immediately, it said. Unspecified health reasons. Lombardi would know the truth. Maybe one day he'd see the thing he did for what it

was. It was more likely he was already past any of that. Life moved on. Deputy Guthrie was appointed to fill out my term. A perfect fit.

I'll be much better off out in Southern California where my older brother says he can set me up running the security operation at his small company. The climate's supposed to be real nice in San Diego.

I watched a light breeze breathe past me, stirring the nutsedge and foxtail that crowded the road. The night was mild, quiet, except for the occasional passing car out on the highway back to town.

What did I miss about this place all these years? Had I failed to see it, the truth of it beneath the all-American surface? No. I'm being honest with myself here. I had seen it — sensed it, to be more accurate — gradually, like a person slowly coming out of a deep sleep. The brain fog evaporates, the eyes focus, the realization dawns.

Sometimes, if I can play the metaphor out, it takes a splash of ice cold water to the face to wake up, *really* wake up. Well, I had gotten that. And when I did, I ran head-first into my limits, the boundaries of compromise, of self-interest, of being able to look at myself in the mirror without the immediate urge to turn away or put my fist into the glass.

In the end, it would be the way it had always been here, maybe most places — the Floyd Rippertons would call the shots, aided and abetted by the likes of Sal Lombardi. I would be the odd man out. Every time.

A scrap of clouds moved across the face of the moon. The night breeze rose and fell. Away to the north, a freight sounded its horn as it lumbered out of town.

I got the message.

Nick Young is an award-winning retired broadcast journalist whose career included twenty years as a CBS News correspondent. His short stories were selected for Vols. I and II of the Writer Shed Stories anthologies. He lives outside Chicago.