

Pygmy wasn't his real name. I never knew his real name. He was one of the toughest chicanos I ever met, but he didn't look it, lean as a starving hound, and walking with a slight limp. The day after the factory laid us off, he called me to have a drink. Until now, the whole of our experience together consisted of eight hours a day of plucking and gutting chickens. Plus I didn't usually drink. But we were unemployed, what else was there to do?

I joined him at a dive joint close to where he lived, a place called the Broken Spoke. We drank beer after beer and talked about what we were going to do next. Pygmy said his girlfriend was pregnant, and she wasn't happy about his losing his job. I didn't have a girlfriend, but I said I understood.

After a round of tequila shots, things started to go south.

Pygmy was staring at a woman with long, straight hair and oversized, wet-seal eyes. The woman was with a man, presumably her boyfriend, but Pygmy didn't care, he kept on staring at her. After a while, Pygmy got up from his seat and approached the woman, leaning on the counter and talking smooth as if the boyfriend weren't there at all.

"Ma'am, I just want to say that you got the prettiest eyes I've seen in a long time," said Pygmy in his most resonant tone.

The woman's eyelids fluttered and she looked as if she didn't know what to say. She grinned like a child, then she blushed and glanced at her boyfriend. He was a big fellow, built like a refrigerator with a ball of meatloaf for a head, and he was seething.

"What did you say, chico?"

I don't know how Pygmy did it—but his eyes were fixed as stone, and never flinched from the woman. The boyfriend was simply invisible. But evidently the meatloaf-head had had a few drinks of his own because he started causing a scene, slapping the bar, trying to get Pygmy's attention. Then he shoved Pygmy back. But Pygmy returned to stand by the woman, who by now was looking worried.

"Thanks for the compliment," she said, "But you should go now."

Meatloaf wasn't going to let her ask twice. He slapped Pygmy hard across the jaw with his open hand. And although the blow issued a pop that silenced the room, Pygmy absorbed the blow like a prizefighter, his head barely turning. His eyes turned to fire and a smirk cracked in the corner of his mouth.

"Alright, take it outside," said the bartender, slinging a rag over his shoulder.

Meatloaf gestured to the door and said, "After you."

Pygmy responded, "Hit me if you want. But you can't expect me to tear myself away from the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"That's it," said Meatloaf.

"Hold it!" screamed the bartender, but it didn't stop the massive man from breaking a bottle over Pygmy's head.

The woman shrank back in horror. Pygmy was bleeding down his face, his eyes still fixed on her.

"Oh god," said the boyfriend, "Hey man, I didn't mean to hurt you that bad."

"Out," said the bartender, "Both of you!"

I practically carried Pygmy to the car, his legs no more useful than a couple of noodles. His bandana was soaked in blood.

Once we were in my car I sped away, glancing in the rear-view to make sure the angry boyfriend wasn't tailing us.

"You'll probably need stitches," I said. "What the hell was all that about?"

Pygmy smiled. "Did you see her, man?"

"Yeah, I saw her. She was pretty, I guess, but not worth the injury."

"No, man," said Pygmy, his hand hovering in the air as if he were receiving a message from above. "I mean, her *face*? When I told her how pretty she was, it made her day, man. She *needed* that, man."

"She looked freaked out to me."

"It made her day," he sang.

"What are you doing, flirting with other girls when you've got a woman at home?"

He waved me off. "Man, it wasn't like that. I wasn't flirting, I was doing my good deed for the day."

"You'll definitely need stitches. That looks bad."

"She *needed* it. And I was there to give it."

Pygmy passed out soon after that, but his head continued to bleed the rest of the way to the hospital. They sewed seven stitches into his face, the gash resembling, oddly enough, a heart shape. When I dropped him off at his house he'd sobered up a little, but not much. He told me we should do this again some time. I handed him his bloody bandana, and he said he was done with bandanas, that he wanted everyone to see the scar in his forehead, that way they'd know what he was about.