

In order to transport horses from Mexico to the United States by truck, the USDA requires a mandatory three day quarantine in a facility just north of the Texas/Mexico border. Due to organizational misfires and the general trappings of bureaucracy, the quarantine period often extends into the four to five day range, pending paperwork, transportation, and the efficiency of the border crossing itself. One autumn, I accompanied two horses to Mexico and back, and though I was technically traveling alone, I ended up crossing the border with a small cohort of Mexican American men, also professional grooms, whose respective employers were using the same horse transportation company as my boss. For the duration of the trip from Mexico to America and the extent of the quarantine period itself, I was the part that didn't match, an English speaking, American born, mixed race female in a sea of masculinity and lyrical Spanish slang, marooned in a community that seemed populated by rednecks, Hispanics, superstores, and nothing but tacos.

Southern Texas is an enigma to me, an interesting conglomeration of cultures meeting in a manner that seems simultaneously tense and fluid. In the town of Del Rio, where we stayed, Don Marcelino's Mexican cuisine serves tacos by the dozen and writes the specials board in Spanish, yet its walls are emblazoned with a colorful collage of badges from the nearby Air Force base. When I slurped my horchata next to the cacophony of my traveling companions' Spanish banter, I watched members of the Air Force - all probably my age - drink Coke and eat pico de gallo in their somber olive green fatigues. Only thirty minutes from the United States - Mexico border, a small house with a screened in porch and an overgrown driveway sports a huge piece of plywood with red spray paint letters scrawled: "Make God's People Great Again, Vote Republican." A few days later, someone flips the plywood around to reveal a new message. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

I spend nearly a week commuting between the Best Western of Del Rio and the USDA stabling area in a pickup truck with the six men with whom I've traveled. One drives, one sits in the passenger seat, a third perches on the center console. The rest of us cram in the backseat, where I try to make myself as small as possible, spine straight, legs clamped together. The boys run on their own schedule and make their plans in Spanish. Their dependent, I am at their mercy. I struggle to care for the horses in the decrepit quarantine facility, where I have limited access to feed and bedding and there is scarcely a place to move them from their stalls to stretch their legs. I do little besides feel anxious about their well-being, feel anxious about my own well-being, and have solo dance parties to Prince in my motel room every evening, because I want to go running but don't feel particularly safe. On the night we arrived, it was an unseasonably cold thirty degrees, and despite my many layers of clothing, the man loading the vending machine cat called me on my way to my room.

Mostly my traveling companions treat me respectfully, with kindness. There is one Canadian - the seventh man, he doesn't work with the horses, but drives the trailer belonging to one of the trainers whose horses are in our group. He doesn't come to the stable with us during the day, but when he joins us for dinner, he talks a blue streak and constantly finds ways to touch my leg, my arm, my bracelets. He makes me sit in the front seat, instead of in the back where I usually ride, so I end up perched halfway on his lap. I want to see another woman. I want to drive my own car.

After five days in Del Rio, in which I feel I learned the true meaning of biblical Purgatory, the quarantine period ends and we begin to roll home on I-10 West in a burgundy gooseneck. The initial few hours of driving on I-10 are marked by intense beauty and extreme desolation. Beautiful old iron bridges span turquoise creeks, dusty expanses of open land spool out along the interstate, running unburdened till they hit the horizon line, and above that, big sky full of clouds and light. Mankind's detritus appears sporadically, small settlements, equally small towns. Reno's Rentals - "We Sell Dirt!" A Super Walmart, acres of asphalt and white lines. A self-identified "Sick" Tattoo and Skate Shop next to a shuttered Oriental restaurant a faded shade of fuchsia - stucco with a sad, sinking roof. Apple scented corn for sale. Fireworks. Abandoned lots. A dilapidated white house surrounded by an untoward quantity of goats.

Then open land again, agriculture. A trio of round bales painted like pumpkins. Cornfields, glittering. A road sign warning motorists: "This is God's country. Please don't drive through it like Hell."