Santos Profanos

Chapter 1

Sunlight invaded the room: searching for something in the dark, forgotten spaces. Dawn had come, aggressive and demanding on this baking summer morning, bouncing its interrogating rays across the city at barely four o’clock. There would be no let up until late in the evening. If you were able to see it for yourself, you would see the city of Tijuana, a great hot mass of steel, concrete and glass surrounded by the ramshackle earlier settlement town built at a much earlier time when the west was still wild. All of this cut up by freeways and a colossal multi lane highway swooping into the border crossing, congested at almost all times of the day and night. There it is, glinting in the baking sun, shrouded with a dark halo of pollution and smog, set in the dust bowl and scrub of the desert surrounding it, evidence of the mass of humanity living or waiting to escape an un-hospitable environment.

On closer inspection you would see miles of high ugly wall topped with razor wire and decorated with crucifixes and graves of those fallen in the war that rages there. Everyone in that city knows someone who has been caught up in this ugly war between opposing factions that make their fortunes in the trafficking of illegal drugs. It has been raging for more than a decade and those in power seem to be unable and perhaps in some cases unwilling to stop it.

Yet, despite all this ugliness and evidence of destruction, you would see neighbourhoods, where communities live and strive to make their own lives better, taking for granted that across the border, just a few miles of bare desert and scrub land away, live their more wealthy, neighbours. These are the communities of the old tenement blocks built by those pioneering settlers who wanted to trade with North America in the first half of the nineteenth century.

No curtains hung at the grimy windows of this apartment. The sun broke in heating up the room in minutes. Antonio rolled over and turned his face to the bare, peeling wall. The patina of poverty, evidence of previous inhabitants attempts, to patch up and tame the wall was apparent, although age and the harsh environment had proved the attempts futile. The twisted, wonky iron bedstead had seen better days, hunkered into the corner of the room, covering a hole in the blistered and decaying Lino. The bed creaked as he turned over as if sighing in its own exhausted state. The sun continued its assault and eventually Antonio sat up, surrendering as there was no shadow in which to hide from its rays. He slung back the coarse, threadbare, sheet; sat up and swung his legs down to the floor checking as he did so. There might have been scorpions, perhaps a tarantula but most likely just the everyday armies of cockroaches that patrolled the apartment. Rent was cheap here because the infestation was out of control, even the men dressed in white protective clothing and armed with toxic pest killing machines had given up trying to control the population. The roaches barely suffered even if you stood on them and people said that they would be the only creatures left standing if a nuclear bomb was dropped on the city.

Antonio located his sneakers, pulled his jeans on and then slipped his feet into his sneakers, checking them first for stowaways.

He stood up and rummaged around in a pile of clothes for a tee shirt. He ran his hands through his hair pushing it off his face and temples and then sat back down on his bed and held his face in his hands.

That night, sleep hadn’t diminished any of the details. How long would it be like this? He thought of school and the kids in his class. Their smiling, enquiring looks, they would all ask where he had been, it was useless. And Maria, she would ask him where he had been and the light in her eyes would fade if he even tried to shrug it off. He loved the way her eyes sparkled when she looked at him, somewhere between strong and fragile, it unnerved him, maybe, sometimes, but it wasn’t the way he wanted it to be. He had to control his urge to tell the truth. He had to believe that it was all he could do to protect her. He missed her, he missed everyone. He didn’t want to live this way.

He thought of his father, the same as he did every day. That day, years ago when Antonio was a child and his father had carried him on his shoulders, he sensed the feel of his hair and the way he laughed. Perhaps it was his imagination? The harder he tried to look at the images the more fleeting they were. His father had died when he was very young, no one really talked about it and he didn’t really feel that he could ask.

His mother stirred in the next room shaking Antonio out of his memories and into reality.

Chapter 2

Hunger gripped him; it came in waves of deep constrictions, an internal stranglehold. The fridge would be bare, he guessed. Money was scarce now that his family had been decimated. His mother had no one but him to bring home any money. The church helped and now and again the city helped too. His mother had all but disappeared from view. She slept a lot; she lived in the shadows, hiding from the world in her own long forgotten narrative. He knew that she wasn’t really sleeping. She was just broken hearted and not able to cope any more with the difficulties they had found themselves with. She just existed, shuffling around like a scared, wounded animal surviving in her washed-out house coat and plastic slippers from the Chinese Emporium, shuffling about echoey apartment, doing what? He didn’t know. She didn’t really cook any more, and there were very few signs of food around the place although the cockroaches knew where to find any that were.

His stomach groaned and ached: it had been empty for too long. He was used to the way it felt and it seemed harder to bear a few years ago when he was younger. Now he knew where to blag a good meal when he needed one. It wasn’t so easy, but then he figured, it was normal because, it had always had been this way. He slid his hands through his hair again, so perfect that even sleep could not alter it. It was the first thing people noticed about him after his pale eyes and his athletic physique.

He found some coins in the pocket of his jacket and made for the front door. On his way out he gently knocked on the bedroom door where his mother was sleeping. There was no sound and so he opened the door and looked over to the bed where she was sleeping. There she was, just a crumpled heap and he watched and waited for her to move. Once he was sure that she was sleeping he closed the door again softly, leaving her in peace, for he knew that she was troubled with nightmares and that only when the dawn broke did she begin to let go of her fears and sleep soundly.

The door opened and closed as quietly as he could manage. He ran down the stairs two at a time and out on to the street. It was still early. Not much happened in this neighbour hood so early in the morning. It was a good time to go about incognito. Disguarded bottles, cans and smoking debris littered the streets alongside over-stuffed trashcans. Forgotten and abandoned cars parked up and picked over by the bounty hunters. Leave anything out on the streets here and it will be recycled in a matter of hours. He walked at speed around the corner past the drug store with its boarded-up window, waiting to be repaired after the last break in and on to Benny’s Deli. Benny was setting out his fruit and veg as Antonio stepped inside. Antonio had been coming here as long as he could remember.

‘Hey, Antonio, what’s up?’

Antonio looked at him, shrugged and smiled his shy lopsided smile,

‘Not much Benny, how about you?’

It was pretty much the same greeting every day. And every day Antonio picked up his bread and milk and Benny refused to let him pay. Antonio feigned surprise and thanked him gratefully. He was grateful and he knew not to push his luck. This was a symbiotic relationship. Benny had an idea that he may need protection at some point in his life and perhaps Antonio might be able to provide it. Benny knew his father and the tragic circumstances of his death and he knew that Antonio would soon be fighting the same battles, innocent though he was of this arrangement. He was born to the wrong family for it to be any other way.

Chapter 3

As Antonio made his way across town to school, he thought about the end of school. He thought about what school meant to him and what life without it might be like, and that is where he stopped, his mind closed to that idea, school was safe, a place to go every day that gave meaning and structure to his day. Where nothing too bad could ever happen and if it did there would be people who noticed and who would try to help. Where the odds were that you could always find a friend and that no matter how many enemies you made, you could probably over power them by being in the right gang when they were obviously not. He knew from bitter personal experience that life on the outside would not be like that. What would he do when it ended? He knew that he needed a plan and he needed to think about it soon. Procrastination was not an option.

Most of the boys in his year were ready to leave, they had plans for their future at least, he heard them talking about them and mostly he switched off. It wasn’t that he didn’t care; just that he couldn’t face thinking about his own future. It hurt too much.

He knew what was coming for him and he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Yet, he had a genetic disposition for optimism. Everyone who knew him had always remarked upon it. He had the tenacity of a fighter and that was a strength that his coach had noticed and it was why he chose him to be captain of the basketball team. His coach had, misplaced or otherwise, high hopes for him. Antonio knew that the coach believed that he had talent and people listened to him. Antonio knew too that his peers respected him. Their team was climbing the leagues.

He felt good about his sport, he loved to play and he loved the adrenalin rush that came when they were winning a great game, the harder the better. The more the opposite team fought, the more Antonio wanted to fight to win. Winning wasn’t the most important thing, it was the only thing. He knew too that many of the team had dreams of the US College leagues and with them, scholarships to America and a way out of Mexico and the struggles. There was a lot at stake as they took on greater challenges. But he knew that it couldn’t be his path out, however hard he fought and however much he deserved it.

A car screamed up behind him and jolted him back from his thoughts. The heat was rising and waking up the smells of the city; warm, stinking garbage and sticky tarmac.

Today there was a big game. He rounded his shoulders and smiled. Knowing that you are good makes you feel better about everything. Today they would win, he would see to it and Maria, she said she would be there to watch, he had to make sure of it.

He arrived at school just as the bell was ringing. Not bad, he thought as he punched the air.