

WHEN WE RETURN by Eliana Tobias

Excerpt

Salvador entered the prison gates, following an orderline line of elderly men carrying multiple plastic bags. When a person in the back started to yell, the advancing lineup came to a stop. Almonds immediately a guard raised his baton and struck the unruly man to one side.

At the first security checkpoint, bags were opened for inspection. Since Salvador carried no package, he was told to move on. Next, he spread his legs wide for a pat-down. Up ahead, after showing his identity card, he was given a metal token with a printed number he'd have to return to the guards on his way out to account for his visit. Lastly, while shuffling along, he was asked to contribute a few coins for soft drinks for the guards. He reached into his pockets and found some money for drinks for the guards, which he dropped in a box at the end of the corridor.

In the prison yard, Salvador was keenly aware of the throng of people milling about. These places are jam-packed, he thought as he looked for his uncle in the crowd. Inmates talking to suited lawyers, visitors meeting up with family members, joggers getting exercise, and a group of men shooting hoops. Cooked meals, fruit, drinks, batteries, radios and clothes for sale were set up in stalls against decrepit walls. Long lineups of raucous men waited to use a few public phones that only accepted calling cards. Among the cacophony, supervising guards moved through, keeping an eye on the inmates while yelling into their megaphones.

Salvador noticed Tomas, drawn and frail, walking slowly toward his dragging his feet, his face grim. He seemed shorter than Salvador remembered him. It'd been years since they'd seen each other last, and the man had aged badly.

Tomas let out a deep breath, nodded, and pointed to a bench. Salvador checked out the courtyard, wrinkling his nose at the stench. Before Tomas rolled down his sleeves, Salvador noticed the naked female tattooed on his uncle's forearm. Tomas pulled two cigarettes out of his stained pants pocket and held out one for Salvador.

“No Thanks, I don't smoke.”

“So you found me, kid. How about that?” His voice was loud. He lit his cigarette with trembling hands. “How’s life?”

Salvador had no stomach for small talk. It was colder than usual for the end of March, and he wanted to be out of there as soon as he could.

Tomas coughed. “I’m stuck in this f***ing place.”

“I’m here for only one reason,” Salvador said, staring him in the eyes.

“Thought you’d be wearing your cop uniform.”

“Cut the crap,” Salvador snapped.

Tomas looked puzzled, his face carved with age.

Salvador removed a pad of paper and pen from the inside pocket of his light jacket.

“What the f**k is that for?” Tomas sneered.

“I need facts.”

“Say that again; I’m hard of hearing,” Tomas said leaning in.

“Since when?” Salvador looked at Tomas doubtfully.

“Be nice. Remember that I took you in when you were an orphan - when your mother and father left you alone. You were just a grimy little beggar. Now it’s your turn to take care of me- get me out of this nightmare.”