

“The Way I See It”

By Shane Kehoe

The stars shone down on the almost still waters of the lake, reflecting their warped and other-worldly replicas back from its surface. The scent of pine lingered on the air. The mountains in the background cut their outline into the sky like a black curtain, absent of any twinkling stars. Peace. Pure tranquillity.

Lily’s head rested on my shoulder still, as it had for about the last 15 minutes, and I allowed my thoughts to wander. Would we both make it? Would border patrol tighten security and stop us and all the other crossers? Or worse still, would the land descend into anarchy before our escape? NO. I had not let anxiety creep its cold hands down my back yet, and I wasn’t going to. “Qué será, será” right?

Lily began to stir, almost as if sensing my discomfort. I looked down to her face. Her brilliant eyes pierced the darkness cast by tree boughs, with pupils as green as jade. She. Was. Mesmerising. The stars glistened in her eyes, enhancing her already plentiful natural beauty further. Standing at around five feet and seven inches tall, Lily was considerably shorter than I. She had sharp auburn hair, with a muscular build garnered from so much time on the road. Even in her currently musty state, one could not help but to be awestruck.

“What time is it?” she croaked, hardly conscious after her nap. With a grin, I responded “One-thirty”. Shifting her weight around, she cleared her throat, before

grumbling “Go to sleep then, we have to leave early tomorrow.” I could not take her one bit seriously when she was still mumbling, hardly awake. “Come on, the Patrols won’t find us that quickly.” I negotiated. “What’s wrong with staying one more day?”. The patrols were an impromptu police force put together with the sole job of hunting crossers before they could escape the country. They were more of a gang than a police force however, and any crosser caught by them would likely never see a jail cell, mostly meeting their grizzly end on a roadside somewhere. Easier to shoot you and pretend they’d never found you rather than going through all the effort of processing you. Lily came awake at my mention of the Patrols, explaining “One more day means more of a chance that that park owner rats on us.” She put a hand on my shoulder and rose to her feet, continuing “and that is a chance we simply cannot take, though I wouldn’t mind a 5-star stay in the back of a Patrol Paddy Wagon.” Smiling, I got to my feet too, and she acknowledged my reaction with a wry smile of her own. “The stars sure are beautiful tonight huh?” she stated, almost as if reading my mind again. No, the stars were nothing compared to her, but I’d not dare say that to her. “Yeah, they sure are.” I sighed. Taking one last longing look at the water, I turned and followed Lily back toward the campsite.

With nothing to do now besides remain silent or talk, I chose the latter. “So, why truly are you bothering to make this journey? To cross the border? Especially whilst knowing you may die on the journey, or that the outside may not be the Promised Land we expect it to be?”. She remained silent for a minute or two in thought,

carefully constructing her answer. Finally, she spoke. "It's quite simple really." An absolute certainty resided behind her words. "The way I see it, I'd rather die on my feet, than live on my knees" I thought she was done, but she was not. "I'd happily die in the pursuit of something better, versus accepting my fate and just rotting here. This place will never change Lewis. Voting is a waste of time, and revolution is a sure-fire way to become a martyr. So I'm choosing to run, and to avoid both."

The faint light of our campsite greeted us as we crested the ridgeline at the edge of the campsite. The owner's cabin was lifeless by this hour, and everyone had turned in for the night. It was like the whole world was empty except for Lily and I. "I'm heading in to get changed, just give me like five minutes." she said. "Fair enough" I responded. "And don't peek!" she jested. There'd never be any danger of that. Either way, I was more than content to wait outside. More time for stargazing. I sunk into the decrepit old patio chair at the embers of the campfire and emptied my mind once more. A blue light streaked at the edge of my vision. A shooting star perhaps. Beautiful. As quickly as the blue had appeared, it was replaced with that ever-recognizable red, followed by the trademark siren of the Patrols. "ALL RESIDENTS, REMAIN CALM AND IN YOUR ACCOMODATIONS, THIS IS A ROUTINE SEARCH..." The announcements continued but I paid them no heed, whispering to Lily "Get dressed and grab the stuff, we need to disappear."

The park lit up with camper van lights, gas lamps, and the frenzied movement of tactical lights attached to helmets. "Leave the tent, just grab the bags and let's go.

Toss me the sleeping bags too.” I kept an eye on the centre of the park, we had time. The Patrol teams were slow. “And don’t forget my Walkman!” I reminded. It was my final reminder of home. Lily burst forth from the tent, dressed in a pair of combat boots, worn and torn jeans, with a green tank top and red flannel jacket. Her face was a picture of steely determination.

We ran for the lakeside, making it in less than five minutes instead of the usual ten, and began circling the lake to reach the mountainsides. The chances of a helicopter low with a routine search, but you’d never know. We stuck to the treeline, moving slowly so as to avoid leaving tracks for the Patrols’ famous tracker groups. Suddenly, an intense rustling erupted from the hedges next to us, followed by hurried whispers. With no warning, two people burst forth from the brush, presumably crossers, and they tore past us towards the lakeside. We bolted for the mountainsides, abandoning any hope of being impossible to track, and turned when we saw the hue of a group of helmet torches pointing towards the lake where the two other crossers were swimming. I grabbed Lily and forced her to look away, but I was too late to spare myself the sight. Shots rang out through the previously quiet forest, scaring birds from their nests.

Before we could continue our sprint to safety, there were shouts and torchlight beams coming straight toward us from in front, blocked only by a slight defilade from a ridgeline ahead. We had nowhere to go, and surrender was never an option, so we closed our eyes and awaited our imminent fate.

“Get down, quick.” came a gruff whisper from seemingly nowhere. A large bear of a man rose from the underbrush ahead of us, throwing a small capsule towards the ridge. I threw Lily to the ground, landing on top of her so as to shield her from the blast. A deafening crack completely deafened me. A few other short, faint snaps could be heard over the ringing in my ears. The man dragged me and Lily to our feet, and pointed towards the mountains, shouting something I couldn’t hear. His two accomplices dropped from trees armed with assault rifles both, and advanced beyond the ridge. These people must have been the infamous Wildfires, a rebel group fighting against the tyranny of the government. And now we owed them our lives.

We hiked to the mountaintop, hearing still the sporadic cracks and snaps of gunfire and grenades. The rebels must have been putting up a good fight. We made good time to the mountaintop. We sat atop a large rock and gazed down onto the surface of the lake again, lit up occasionally by the odd gunshot or grenade blast. We were fine for all essentials, I thought, but we just need a break. “As misguided as your efforts were back there, thank you for *trying* to save my life”. She stared off into space as she spoke, still somewhat in shock due to all that just happened below. I could hardly respond myself.” The stars sure are beautiful tonight huh?”. After all that happened, I’d finally built up the courage to say what I should have all those hours ago. “Only when I’m looking at them with you.” she immediately broke her gaze from the lake, and locked eyes with me. I couldn’t look away. She leaned in, and I followed suit. After our lips touched for the

first time, it felt as if I'd been shot into space. After we parted, she resumed her previous position of looking at the water's edge. "You know what?" she started, "Maybe leaving isn't the right thing for us. Maybe we should fight, make a difference." She had roused her own heart, and mine. "Maybe, we should join the rebels."