

Princess

Three young men ambled up the roadway toward the Bustamante Bridge. A girl stood at the apex, her eyes fixed on the horizon. Gripping the guardrail with both hands, she leaned forward, watching the evening sun settle over the Texas plain.

Her view was impressive despite the abandoned shacks, tumbleweed piles, and pyramids of junk cars at either end of the crossing. The road beneath her arched high above a set of railroad tracks extending as far as she could see.

At first glance, one might think the young woman had stopped there on her way to a formal occasion. A diamond tiara graced her hair. Her pale blue gown fluttered in the breeze above her silver dance shoes. Violet clouds flanked the sun like royal escorts, complementing the girl's regalia.

The boys gathered around her. "Hey, girl. What's up?" The speaker was tall and bony. The other two, short and squat, might have been twins except for their noses, one flat, the other narrow and bent to the left, perhaps from a blow struck in anger. All three wore black T-shirts with purple gang logos.

The girl didn't seem to notice them. Far below, the tracks ran westward in a straight line. Had a train passed beneath her at that moment, the girl could have watched the sun swallow the engine, boxcars, and flatcars one by one.

"Hey, Mona Lisa. Whatcha doin' out here?" Their eyes crawled over her willowy figure. "What's with the crown? You Princess Kate or somethin'?"

The girl seemed oblivious. She kept a tight grip on the rail and her eyes locked on the sun, its glow marred by buzzards scouting for a late evening snack.

"Hey, girl! Ain't you got no tongue?" Tall Boy snapped his fingers in her face. "Whatcha doin' here, sweet face? This ain't no place for honky debutantes." His companions giggled. The girl remained silent.

"You got any money, honey?" Flat Nose asked.

"Use your head, dude!" Tall Boy shoved him with a bony hand. "How's she gonna have money without no purse?"

"Maybe she's got it hid in that sexy dress," Bent Nose leered.

"How about that, Jordyn Jones?" Tall Boy leaned closer. "You got a secret hidin' place?"

“Got your money in them fancy shoes?” Flat Nose added. “Tucked inside your undies?”

Their grins faded as the girl watched the sun dip below the horizon.

“I’m talkin’ to you, girl!” Tall Boy said. “Ain’t you got no manners?”

“Yeah! This bridge is our hood,” said Bent Nose. “We ain’t invited no blondies.”

Flat Nose passed a hand across her face. “I think we got her so scared she can’t talk.”

“How about that, Taylor Swift? You scared of us?”

“You think we’re gonna just go away if you ignore us?”

The girl maintained focus, her fingertips white from gripping the rail.

“I think she’s just teasin’ us,” Tall Boy said.

“Yeah, she’s a tease,” Flat Nose echoed.

“She ain’t gonna tell us nothin’.”

“She sure ain’t gonna give us nothin’.”

“Naw! She’s gonna make us look for it.”

A gleam appeared in Tall Boy’s eyes. “Let’s have a treasure hunt!” He yanked her hands loose and spun her around. “Hoo, ain’t she pretty?”

“She’s fine!” Flat Nose frisked her roughly. “She ain’t got no money, though.”

“She’s got somethin’ better than money!”

“Let’s see what you’ve got.” Tall Boy’s fingers probed for zippers. “How do you get this thing off, Baby Cheeks?”

The girl’s eyes cleared. A moan of terror rose from her throat. Her hands flailed at him.

“Now we’ve got her attention.” Tall Boy laughed, seizing her wrists. “Hold still.” From behind, Bent Nose grabbed the bodice and ripped it open. “Whoa! She’s juicy under this thing!”

“She’s about to get juicier!”

“You’re gonna give it up, girl!”

“No! No!” She yanked one arm free and slashed at Tall Boy, her nails tearing four deep gashes in his cheek.

“Wha . . .” His fingers came away with blood. “She cut me! She tore my face!” Furious, he backhanded her, slamming her head against the rail. The others tore into her with fists, kicks, and curses.

Twin beams of light pierced the scene. The trio spun around to face them.

“Let’s get outta here!” Tall Boy cried, blood oozing from his face. He ripped the tiara from the girl’s hair and sprinted in pursuit of his friends. They vanished into the sanctuary of dead automobiles and empty hovels.

The car stopped beside the unconscious victim.

“Keep going, Stan. That’s none of our business.”

“Betty, that girl’s hurt bad! Look at her!”

“Keep going, I said!”

“Shouldn’t we at least call 911?”

“And stay in the police station all night, answering questions? We’re fifteen minutes late as it is!” The vehicle sped over the archway and into the twilight.

Several minutes passed. Long shadows from the fading sun crept over the girl’s body.

A bicyclist came along and paused beside her. He looked around uncertainly, then pedaled down the slope into the encroaching night.

By now the horizon was a deep blue. The buzzards were gone. Trickle of blood ran from the girl’s nose and mouth, staining her blond hair.

As darkness fell a second car roared up the incline, stopping with a screech of tires. Now the only sounds were the chirping of crickets and a persistent *ding* as a door clicked open.