

End of the Line

Jeff Kerr

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Arrival

Three days were not long enough for Miranda Flores to accustom herself to riding atop a moving freight train. When she and Facundo began their journey in far south Mexico, she had comforted herself with the thought that her fear would diminish with time. That didn't happen. Her heart still leapt into her throat with every bounce, every jerk, every change in pitch of the boxcar's roof. The mountains were the worst, but even rumbling through the flat terrain of the Chihuahua Desert fed the terror lurking in her mind. Terror made even worse by Luz's fate.

Luz. Cute little 8-year-old Luz. Miranda helped her climb onto the roof of the boxcar in Tapachula three days ago. Her brother and mother scurried up the ladder after them. The mother, Pilar, shared Miranda's terror. She too had fled violence in El Salvador for perceived safety up north. As the sun dropped, she nestled her children against her body and fell asleep. So many others atop the train, Miranda included, had also given in to fatigue. But Miranda and those others woke up the next morning to continue the journey. Luz did not. Her mangled body now lay somewhere along the tracks in the mountains south of Mexico City. Sobbing, Pilar and the boy climbed down from

the train when it stopped, agonized beyond what a person's heart should be expected to bear.

Pushing such thoughts from her mind, Miranda dropped a hand onto the uncomfortably hot roof to steady herself and withdrew a water bottle from her backpack. The long, cool drink she took refreshed her. Facundo lay nearby, head near the center spine of the roof, feet toward the edge. He looked as relaxed as ever. His calm in the face of their situation annoyed her. She wanted to see his eyes widen when the train made a sharp turn. She wanted to hear him gasp as they passed over a rickety bridge spanning a bottomless gorge. She wanted him to share her fear.

But he did not. And, as much as this annoyed her, she also found his presence a calming influence. Nothing fazed him. Nothing shattered his composure. Nothing disturbed him enough to crack his serene façade.

She wondered what direction their lives would take in the United States. No romantic bond held them together. They had been friends for years, yet their lips never touched, and their embraces were those of friends, not lovers. Would they follow different paths once they crossed the border? She hoped not. In the week since her family's murder, she had come to rely on Facundo's strength and couldn't imagine a life without her best friend in it.

Facundo stirred and sat up. Miranda offered him the water bottle. He accepted and took a quick sip. "Thanks."

"I think we're almost there."

"God, I hope so."

"Do you know how to find your friend? Ciudad Juárez is huge."

Facundo pressed his lips together. "He's not really a friend. More like an acquaintance. We did some stuff together when we were young, but not so much in high school."

“Why not?”

“He started hanging out with a really rough crowd. Stealing cars, selling dope, that kind of thing. Some of them are in prison now. At least one of them is dead.”

Miranda’s heart sank. She had assumed Facundo’s connection in Juárez was a good friend, someone who would be eager and willing to help them. “When is the last time you saw him?”

“It’s been at least five or six years. He went north with a friend from Mexico.”

“Do you think he’ll help us?”

Facundo drew a deep breath. “We’ll find out.”



As Miranda descended the boxcar’s ladder an immense weight flew from her shoulders. No matter what lay ahead, never again would she have to cling to the top of a moving train. She dropped to the ground and stretched. “It feels good to be on solid ground.”

Facundo stomped a foot. “Good old terra firma.”

They followed other refugees away from the tracks to an open patch of barren ground. At the far end a row of tractor trailers terminated at a metal shack, in front of which stood three men in hard hats. The men watched with evident disgust as the small horde streamed onto the site. Miranda and her fellow travelers kicked up enough dust to drive them into the shack.

The crowd halted. Some people broke into small groups, while others kept walking until they reached a four-foot brick wall bordering the freight yard. Coils of razor wire spoiled the first man’s attempt to climb over. He dropped back to the ground and made his way toward a distant gate.

Miranda noted the confused faces milling about them and wondered where she and Facundo should go. As if reading her mind, Facundo said, “We’re not far from the river. We should reach it if we just follow the tracks.”

Miranda shouldered her backpack. “Let’s go.”

They trudged north toward the Rio Grande. The cluster of tracks in the freight yard converged into a single line. See-through iron fences topped by barbed wire converged from either side, funneling them closer and closer to the rails. At the point where the fences turned to follow the track, a uniformed man raised a hand. “You can’t go past here.”

“Why not?” Miranda asked.

“It’s not allowed.”

“Where can we go?”

“Anywhere you want except along the train tracks.”

Facundo tugged her arm. “There’s a gate over there.”

Miranda looked through the gate at a wide street, and then back at the uniformed man. “Does that street go to the river?”

The man shrugged. “All the streets end at the river.”



Once outside the freight yard, they plodded along Avenue Francisco Villa, a bleak thoroughfare split by a weed-choked median lined with scrawny palm trees. They passed a bull-fighting arena, after which a brick wall adorned with graffiti and cat murals stretched for several blocks. When the wall gave out, shops and office buildings took over.

Ten minutes later, Facundo touched Miranda’s arm and said, “Look.” Off to their left, two men labored to remove what looked like a dead body hanging from an overpass.

Miranda jerked her arm free. "Let's keep moving."

They hiked another few blocks and the street dead ended at a broad avenue. Looking to her left, Miranda saw the busy roadway dive beneath an overpass. "That must be the International Bridge," she said, pointing.

Facundo said, "Without papers, they won't let us across there."

Having no other plan than to find a place to rest and regroup, they turned right. Soon they reached an area devoid of permanent buildings. Instead, dozens of makeshift tents dotted the ground. Scores of refugees sat or squatted among them. Here and there a cooking fire sent a thin ribbon of black smoke skyward. Squealing children darted to and fro.

Miranda gazed on this tent city with despair. How long had these people been here? Judging by the elaborate setups she saw, some families appeared to have arrived days, or even weeks ago. What were they waiting for?

By now the sun hung low in the sky. Miranda unslung her backpack and found a place to spread out between two tents. Facundo dropped down next to her. "What do you have to eat?" Miranda said.

Facundo dug around in his backpack. "Some dried apples, a box of granola bars, and an orange. You?"

"Granola bars, raisins, and beef jerky."

Spreading his supply out on the ground, Facundo said, "Let's have ourselves a feast."



The packed earth of the encampment made for an uncomfortable bed. Nevertheless, Miranda was thrilled to be able to go to sleep without fear of plunging to her death from the roof of a speeding train. She lay

on her back trying to pick out constellations among the stars. Finding she couldn't keep her eyes open, she propped her head on her backpack and fell asleep.

She dreamed of her parents and brother. All now dead, murdered by government soldiers because her brother had joined the rebels. All now lying in unmarked graves in the burial ground outside of San Salvador used by the government to dispose of the bodies of its victims. She'd be lying there too if she'd been home that fateful day. Sometimes she wished she had been, so strong was the ache in her heart.

A noise pulled her from her dream. She sat up. What was that? A distant popping noise. Then, not so distant. Then, far away again.

She saw Facundo was also awake. "What is that?" she said.

He propped himself on his elbows. "Sounds like gunfire."

"The cartels?"

"Probably."

"I'll be happy to leave this city."



After hours of fitful sleep, Miranda awoke to a clear blue sky. She lay there for a minute or two watching birds dart across her field of view. A low rumble of conversation brought her fully alert. She sat up. Dozens of people stirred around her, some still rubbing their eyes, others striding toward...what? A man in a nearby tent poked his head out, saw her, and said, "What's going on?"

"I don't know."

She nudged Facundo awake. He looked at her with questioning eyes.

"Get your pack. Something's happening," she said.

They shouldered their backpacks and merged with the thick stream of people heading toward the river. After crossing an empty expanse of packed dirt, they encountered a fifteen foot fence of vertical metal poles. Across the top ran an ugly tangle of barbed wire. Men and women from the camp were pressed up against the fence to watch something going on across the river.

Miranda slid through a gap in the crowd to find an opening from which she could see. At first, she observed nothing out of the ordinary. Traffic zoomed past on the highway beyond. Cars stretched out behind the checkpoint on both sides of the International Bridge. In the distance the city of El Paso, a sprawling urban mass nestled against the Franklin Mountains, sprang to morning life.

Then she saw an object floating in the river. What was it? It rolled with the current and she emitted an audible gasp. It was a body. A man, judging by the clothes, but she couldn't be sure.

Downstream of the dead man Miranda spotted more bodies. A woman, whose hair drifted along behind her like a long, black ribbon. A man in a white T-shirt, his ample paunch protruding out of the water like a whale blowing its spout. Another woman, this one old and gray. Two more men. A child.

American Border Patrol agents used long poles to fish the corpses out of the river. They laid the bodies out in a line, the dead on their backs, staring lifelessly at the same beautiful sky that had greeted Miranda when she woke up. A sky they would never see.

On the far bank, one of the bodies crawled out of the water and collapsed, face first. A Border Patrol agent jogged up to him and turned him over. As the man extended his arms, the agent raised a rifle. Miranda heard a staccato pop. The man's arms dropped.

Miranda spun around and staggered away from the fence. Facundo caught her. Turning her face toward his, she opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

Facundo said, "We don't have to risk this."

An image of her brother's headless corpse lying on the living room floor in a lake of blood flashed through Miranda's mind. Returning to El Salvador meant certain death. Albuquerque promised life, maybe even a return to normalcy. There must be a way across the border that avoided the deadly gauntlet at the river. Steeling herself, she looked Facundo in the eye and said, "Yes, we do."

2

Efrain

The street held no sign of life. There were no cars, no pedestrians, not even a stray dog looking for scraps among the rotting garbage on the crumbling sidewalk.

Sweat dripped down Miranda's face and neck as she fought to stave off the gloom clouding her mind. The building they sought appeared abandoned. Flaking green and blue paint covered the cinderblock walls. A sliding door split the two colors, above which strands of barbed wire promised pain to anyone attempting to peer over its dirty white metal. Cavernous potholes peppered the street. A dirt alley separated the building from another cinderblock structure, this one unpainted. Sitting catacorner, sticking out like a choir boy at an orgy, was a freshly painted church. "Are you sure this is the place?" Miranda asked Facundo.

He fished a scrap of paper from his pocket. "Yes. This is it."

Miranda rapped on the door, eliciting a hollow metallic sound. Nothing happened. Had the four-mile slog through the grimy streets of Juárez been wasted? She banged a fist against the rusty surface, once, twice, three times. A distant shout sounded. Running feet approached the door. A man's face appeared in the gap.

"What do you want?"

Craning his neck, Facundo looked up and said, “We’re here to see Efrain.”

“Who are you?”

“Facundo Crespo. We knew each other in school.”

“He went to school in El Salvador.”

“I know. That’s where we’re from.”

The face vanished. More running feet from within. Unintelligible conversation reached their ears. Another face appeared above the door.

Facundo shaded his eyes. “Efrain?”

Rollers ground through rusting tracks and the door slid open. There stood a young man in faded brown T-shirt and torn jeans. His face was tight, and his eyes burned with suspicion. His right hand held a gun. He stared at Facundo for several seconds before his face relaxed. “Motherfucker, it is you.”



They sat in a garage on overturned wooden crates that had once held auto parts. It wasn't a large space—maybe thirty by forty feet—but large enough for a mechanic to work on a vehicle of almost any size. A thick layer of oil and grease covered most of the concrete floor. A filthy workbench along one wall was home to dozens of tools. Pegs protruded from another wall, on which hung new tires. A third wall was devoted to belts, hubcaps, shelves stocked with motor oil, and tattered posters of scantily clad women. The look and smell of the place reminded Miranda of the auto repair shop her father had once owned in Albuquerque. The destruction of that shop by an arsonist ten years ago was the final straw that had driven him to take the family back to El Salvador.

“You came at a bad time,” said Efrain as he wiped sweat from his brow. “Two of the bosses are fighting. We’re expecting an attack any day.”

“What happened?” Facundo asked.

“I don’t know. Until last month everybody got along okay. Then their boss got pissed at ours and everything went to hell. We’ve lost two guys already. We’ve gotten one of theirs.”

“What are they fighting about?”

Efrain shrugged. “Who knows? Territory? Money? Maybe one of them was screwing the other one’s wife. All I know is, we can’t be too careful these days. We spend our days in here sitting on our asses waiting for things to cool down. At night we go home.”

Miranda and Facundo looked at each other and said nothing.

Efrain said, “Why are you in Juárez? I never expected to see a guy like you up here.”

Facundo filled him in on events in El Salvador. The civil war with its rebel attacks and heavy-handed army reprisals. His fear of being sucked into the conflict, either by being drafted or by being forced to fight with the rebels. The murder of Miranda’s family. He finished by recounting their hair-raising rides atop a succession of Mexican freight trains to reach Juárez.

A soft whistle escaped Efrain’s lips. “Shit, bro, you’ve been through a lot. Still, you can’t stay here. This town is a war zone too.”

Miranda said, “We were hoping you could help us get out. We’d like to get across the border.”

Efrain shot her a look that suggested she was out of her mind. “Do you know what those motherfuckers across the border are doing? Ever since that new guy was elected president, they’ve gone crazy. They shoot anyone trying to cross the river.”

“We know. We saw it.”

Efrain shook his head and spat. "It's fucking crazy. Malcolm Price. Man, that guy hates Mexicans."

"No problem," said Facundo with a shrug. "We're Salvadoran."

Ignoring the jest, Efrain said, "Don't expect that to help you."

"So," said Miranda, trying to refocus the conversation, "can you help us?"

"No. But I know a guy that can."



Neither Efrain nor his companions had any interest in leaving the safety of the garage until nightfall. They lolled away the rest of the afternoon drinking beer and watching a soccer match on an old-fashioned vacuum tube television. Efrain introduced them to his two companions, a young man named Mateo, and an older man they called Chaparro because of his short stature. Both men were armed, Mateo with a pistol, Chaparro with an automatic rifle. Neither seemed eager to make small talk, so Miranda contented herself with watching the game.

Efrain sent Mateo to a taqueria for their supper. He waved off Miranda's offer to pay. "The boss pays us well," he said. "You will need your money."

When Mateo returned, Miranda savored her first hot meal in several days. Reluctant to interrupt her chewing, she allowed the warm grease to drip down her chin and drop into a napkin in her lap. She caught Efrain grinning at her and blushed.

With the tacos dispatched, Chaparro stood. "I need to get home. Marta will have my balls in a vise if I'm too late." He picked up his rifle and tugged the door open.

A burst of gunfire caught him in the chest and drove him back into the shop. He fell on his back, blood spewing from countless holes. Five men armed with rifles and pistols charged through the doorway. Miranda dove to the floor as Mateo returned fire with his pistol. A bullet caught him in the head, and he dropped.

Efrain sank into a crouch and, with impressive accuracy, dropped two of the intruders. When the others turned their weapons on him, his pistol was no match for their automatic rifles. His body spasmed as the bullets slammed into him. He fell, dead before he hit the ground.

Expecting to die at any moment, Miranda lay prone with her hands covering her head. She glanced to her left to see Facundo in the same position. She gritted her teeth and whimpered a quick prayer.

Ominous silence descended around them. Footsteps approached. Miranda risked a look up, expecting to see a rifle barrel in her face. Instead, she saw a man holding a pistol at his side. He regarded her with curiosity. Raising the pistol, he said, "Who the fuck are you?"

Moving with caution, Miranda brought herself to her knees and held the man's gaze. "We're not with those men."

The man laughed. "Then what the fuck are you doing here?"

"My friend," she nodded at Facundo, "went to school with one of them. We came here hoping he would help us cross the border." When the man said nothing, she added, "We're from El Salvador."

"Get up," said the man, waving the pistol.

Miranda did as she was told.

"You too."

Facundo climbed to his feet.

"Where did you live in El Salvador?"

Miranda said, "The capital. San Salvador."

The man aimed the pistol at her chest. "What's the name of the main square downtown?"

“Plaza Cívica.”

“No. The person it’s named for.”

Miranda drew a blank, but Facundo said, “Gerardo Barrios. He was president a long time ago.”

Satisfied, the man lowered his weapon. “My father and I are from El Salvador. We were lucky to get out. But why do you want to cross the border? You’re fucking crazy.”

“I used to live in Albuquerque,” said Miranda.

As if that explained everything, the man nodded and said, “Come with us.”

El Dragón

One of the gunmen packed the two wounded men into a white Nissan pickup and drove off. Miranda and Facundo were herded at gunpoint into the back seat of a silver Kia Rio. The man who had interrogated them drove, while one of his companions rode in the front passenger seat.

After several blocks of silence, Miranda said, “What’s your name?”

“You don’t need to know that,” the driver said.

“Where are you taking us.”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

They rode the rest of the way without speaking, arriving at a one-story, red adobe house situated on a corner lot. Metal bars covered the windows. A rolling metal gate blocked access to a patio that appeared to lead to the only door. The driver parked in the street and killed the engine. “Get out.”

Miranda and Facundo exited the vehicle. The man patted the gun at his waist and said, “Don’t ask anybody their name. Don’t talk in there unless somebody asks you a question.”

He rolled the gate open and beckoned them toward the house. As she entered the grounds, Miranda noted a short picket fence atop the wall surrounding the patio. With only a single crosspiece, it looked like

a neat row of white crosses, reminding her of the military cemetery in Santa Fe.

Ten minutes later they sat at a dining room table with the driver and his boss. With his salt-and-pepper hair and beard, the boss looked older than the driver by at least 20 years. The contents of Miranda and Facundo's backpacks lay strewn on the table, clothes, various food items, and a paperback book, *El Corazón de Victoria*, that Miranda had mindlessly picked up as she fled her house in San Salvador. Next to the paperback was a stack of American dollars, which represented all the money Miranda and Facundo had with them for their panicked flight to America.

"You can call me 'Dragón,'" the man said, leering at Miranda.

Miranda squirmed. His expression reminded her of a creepy college professor she had taken a class from in San Salvador. "I'm Miranda. This is Facundo."

He picked up the paperback and studied the cover. Tossing it aside, he said, "My sister reads shit like this." He refocused on Miranda. "My son tells me you want to go to America."

"Yes."

"Why not stay here? We could find work for you."

Miranda took care in choosing her next words. She did not want to anger this man. "I grew up in Albuquerque. It feels like home."

Dragón nodded. He looked at Facundo. "And you?"

"I'm with her."

"Okay." He sorted the bills into two equal stacks. "I will take only half. You can keep the rest."

"What?" The word came out louder than Miranda intended. "I mean, that's all the money we have."

"And I am only taking half. A discount for my fellow Salvadorans. And don't forget, I'm also letting you live."

Miranda kept quiet. The man was right. Their lives were in his hands.

Dragón raised a finger. “Also, this is a better deal than you realize.”

“And why is that,” said Miranda, still fuming.

“Because I know someone who can get you across.”



The man who had driven them earlier bade them squeeze into the back seat of the Rio once again. They clutched their refilled backpacks in their laps. Dragón and the other man stayed behind.

They rode through narrow streets of cinderblock houses and shuttered shops. Other than an occasional lighted window, the city was dead. Miranda shook off her nervousness and, in as pleasant a tone as she could muster, said, “Is the man we’re going to see a friend of your boss?”

“He’s my father, not my boss.” His voice was flat.

“So, it’s your father’s friend?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“What is he, then?”

The man glanced over his shoulder. “You ask too many questions.”

Fifteen minutes later, the driver parked in front of a windowless brick building. He led Miranda and Facundo up onto a raised platform to reach the door. A mournful Vicente Fernández ballad serenaded them from the other side. Miranda recognized the singer’s voice, as he had been popular with some of her high school friends in Albuquerque.

The noise and life inside the building contrasted starkly with the emptiness of the street. The music streamed from an ancient jukebox by the door. A bar ran the length of one wall, along which sat half a

dozen men. The four booths along the opposite wall were packed with animated men and women talking and drinking. Three men played pool at a table with a torn and lumpy felt surface. Nearby, a drunken couple swayed out of rhythm with the music.

The driver led Miranda and Facundo to the bar. He said something to the bartender, who fetched a bottle of tequila and set it in front of him. The driver nodded at Facundo and said, "Pay him."

Facundo laid a ten-dollar bill on the bar.

"Fifty," said the bartender.

"Twenty," the driver said.

The bartender nodded and Facundo gave him another ten. The driver snatched the bottle and, without speaking, headed around the bar toward a back room. Miranda and Facundo followed.

They reached a closed door. The driver rapped on it. A voice from within said, "Get the fuck out of here. I'm busy."

The driver said, "It's Cheo. El Dragón's son."

A bustle of activity reached their ears. The door opened and a heavily made-up woman buttoning her blouse charged past them and disappeared. A middle-aged man with days-old stubble and an overhanging gut rose from behind a desk. He zipped up his fly and looked at the driver. "Hey, Cheo."

Cheo handed over the tequila and nudged Miranda and Facundo forward. "They have a favor to ask." He left.

The man gestured at two battered chairs. "Have a seat." He returned to his place behind the desk. "I'm listening."

Miranda said, "We need to get across the border."

The man gave a mirthless laugh, exuding a stink of booze and cigar smoke. "Sure. It's your funeral."

Miranda disliked him already. If he were that callous, could he be trusted to follow through on any promises he made? “So, you can help us?”

He opened the tequila bottle, took a long pull, and banged it onto the desk. “For the right price.”

Thank you

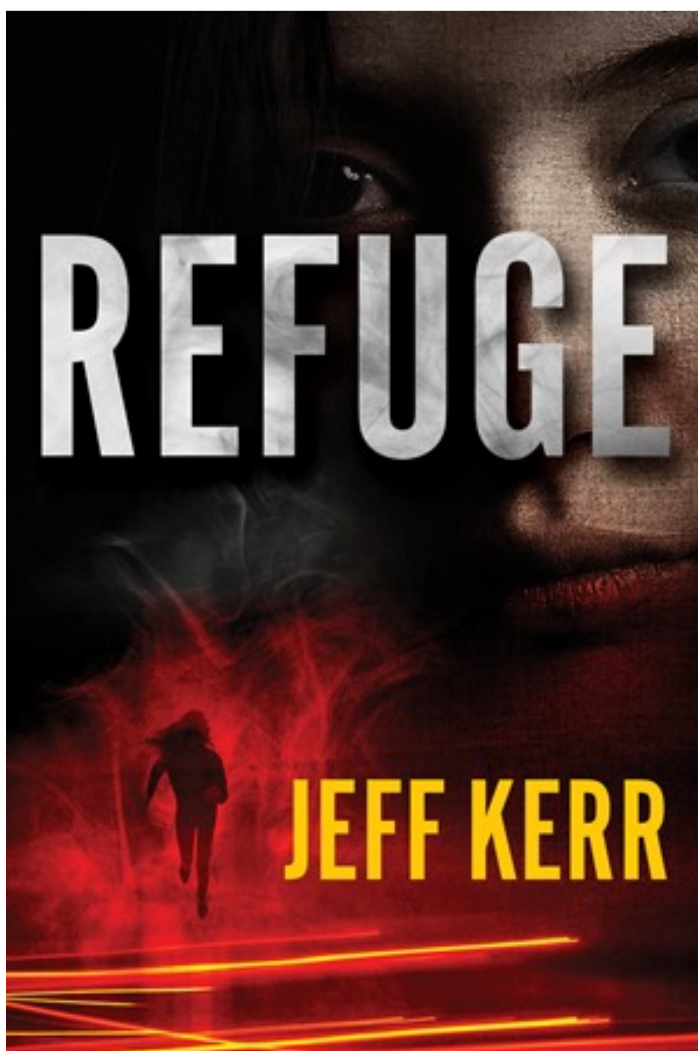
For reading *End of the Line*, a prequel to the upcoming thriller *Refuge*. Want a sneak peak at the book's first chapter? You can download it here.

Ready to read *Refuge*? The book will launch July 17, 2023.

Pre-order here!

To learn more about my books, visit my website at www.jeffreykerrauthor.com. While you're there, sign up for my email list and you'll be among the first to know when *Refuge* is released!

If you'd like to join my advance reader team and receive a free copy of the book prior to its release, send me a note at jeffkerr@jeffreykerrauthor.com. All I would ask in return is that you post an honest review on the platform(s) of your choice.



About Jeff Kerr

I am an author in Austin, Texas. I began writing some twenty-odd years ago and don't plan on stopping anytime soon. When not working on the next story, I can be found floating a river or battling cedar on my small slice of Texas Hill Country land.

Drop me a line at jeffkerr@jeffreykerrauthor.com. I'll write back!

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/jkerr50>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/jkerr50/>

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Non-fiction

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The Republic of Austin

Seat of Empire: The Embattled Birth of Austin, Texas

Fiction

Lamar's Folly

The Republic of Jack