

Chapter Nine

From Puntarenas, I wound up hitching a quick ride south in a pickup to a shipyard in Jacó. On the ferry, I had chatted with a woman—a psychologist from San José, who said I was crazy for trying to hitchhike through Central America. “Have you not heard of the *Mara Salvatrucha*?” she’d said. “It’s a gang. And you’ll end up looking worse than you do now, with your black eye. See if someone in Jacó can get you on a ship to Mexico.”

Rain was falling hard and loud at the shipyard. I chatted with a couple of workers who pointed me to their cranky boss: a tall, fat man with a high-pitched voice and a big, black mustache like a push broom. At first, he walked by me, ignoring the white boy standing alone in the yard, but when I spoke Spanish to him and apologized for the disturbance, he came over.

Rain dripped off our noses.

“Where you from?” he asked.

“Canada. I’m out of money—trying to make it to Mexico. I heard you can help me find a ride on a ship.”

I followed the man, and we found shelter under an awning. “I can try to get you on board a Filipino ship,” he said. “But you’d have to ask the captain. It leaves for Mazatlán in three days.”

“Great. Is there somewhere around here I could pitch my tent?”

“You want to sleep outside for three days?”

“I don’t have a choice. I’m broke.”

And then the look in his eyes changed, and I knew what he was thinking.

“Can’t you call your family for help?”

I shook my head.

“Listen, kid. Don’t get on that ship.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not safe. You don’t want to be stuck on a ship with that crew.”

I imagined floating over the Pacific with no outside contact. What did he know about them? What were they shipping?

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll hitchhike.”

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With sopping wet shoes, I rode the shipyard worker’s bus to the Puntarenas bus station. There, I found a bus idling, with a sign in the front window that read: *Peñas Blancas-Nicaragua Frontera: the Nicaraguan Border*. I approached the driver as he closed the cargo doors.

“*Esta lleno,*” he said. “There’s another bus tomorrow morning.”

“Could I sit on the stairs? I have no money. I’d have to hitchhike. I hear there are gangs.”

He agreed to let me ride in the aisle for free.

Inside the bus packed with tourists, I set my backpack down, sat on it, and changed my wet, stinking socks. I rode for two hours on the muggy bus, plotting my journey to Zacatecas and eating the guayaba cookies I’d packed. I made rules to travel fast and stay out of trouble. Stick to the coast. No hanging around tourist traps. Seek rides at bus stations and gas stations—that way you can chat with people before climbing in their vehicles. And never hitchhike at night.

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Commented [SL1]:

Commented [SL2R1]: Depending on the context, I think this should probably be “shipyard workers’ bus.”

At the *Peñas Blancas* border, I walked forward. The lot was so crowded with cars in the late afternoon that I knew I'd eventually find a lift. For now, anything to take me away from the border frenzy would do.

After entering Nicaragua, I passed vendors calling at me to buy candies, buses beckoning me with air-conditioning, and a row of rigs waiting in a traffic lineup. One of the truckers was a middle-aged man with a fresh haircut and a baby face.

"*Desculpe, vas hacia el Norte?*" I shouted over his rumbling engine.

He tipped his sunglasses down to take a look at me. It must have surprised him to find a white guy down there, talking Spanish. He looked around, seemed satisfied no one watched us, then offered a discreet nod.

My smile broke free, and I ran to the passenger side. Climbing into a rig for the first time in my life thrilled me so much that when I opened the door and pulled myself up, the words "*¡Pura Vida!*" seeped out of my mouth.

The driver was a Honduran named Rufino. We roasted in the cab together, waiting for traffic to move. Photos of his wife and three young children were taped to his dashboard and a blue rosary was wrapped around his gear shift.

"*¿De donde eres?*" he asked.

"Canada."

"Why do you speak Spanish?"

"French is my first language. They're similar."

"What happened to your eye?"

"I got sucker punched."

A sympathetic look as he shook his head.

We inched ahead in traffic. A group of small local children ran after us, shouting for money. Rufino tossed change out the window. Outside my door, another group ran alongside the truck, some of them dragging their shoeless feet in the dirt. I scooped some *colones* from my bag and hurled them through the air. The kids screeched and scurried after the coins. They looked up at me as if I were riding a parade float, and they cried for more, but I had none. I'd made a fool of myself—throwing coins around, pretending to have money.

I rolled the window up and ignored them.

"Roll the window down," Rufino said. "It's too hot."

When we took off, a merciful breeze filled the cab. In the hills, we passed two more children standing on the side of the road, one of them holding up a large, dead iguana. Rufino saw the look on my face and said, "They're selling roadkill. *A comer.*" He chuckled at my disgusted expression.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"Fresnillo, Zacatecas, in Mexico."

"I'm heading to the Honduran border tonight," he said. "But I'm going around the lake and up the mountains. It might be better for you if I drop you off outside Managua in a couple of hours—more traffic in Managua. And you can get to El Salvador faster from there, through León."

"How long till the Honduran border?"

"Around seven hours, but the border will be closed. Makes no sense for you to go that way instead of straight north."

Because I had yet to see a map, I had no idea what he meant, but I knew if he dropped me off in a city at night, I'd have to pay for a room. I figured I'd stick

with Rufino. At least in the mountains, I could easily sleep in my tent somewhere and start fresh at sunrise.

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That night, Rufino stopped at a restaurant and bought us *Gallo Pinto* with eggs.

“I wish I could travel like you,” he said.

“Quit your job and travel.”

He shook his head. “*No puedo.*”

I remembered the photos of his family on his dashboard.

“You’re hitchhiking to Mexico?”

“Yeah, and to the U.S., eventually. I’ll drive a car home from there. I ran out of money.”

“It’s too far! Can’t your parents fly you home?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to go home. It’s minus thirty up there.”

Rufino stopped eating. “I’m trying to understand what minus thirty means—what that would feel like.”

“Your nostril hairs would freeze together, and your truck wouldn’t start unless you plugged it in.”

“You plug your cars?”

Commented [SL3]: Shouldn’t this be “plug in”?

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The truck’s headlights illuminated the narrow mountain road. We hardly spoke. Rufino’s hands squeezed the wheel. Down in the forest valley, a village’s tiny lights flickered, nested and forgotten in the belly of the Earth. When we reached the clouds, we could no longer see where the cliffs ended and the empty

space began, and we rubbernecked our heads toward the windshield, searching for the road. What would it sound like if we slid off the mountain and rolled over and over into the unseen chasm? How long before we tasted blood and everything turned black?

Around 10 p.m., we stopped behind a long row of rigs and cars parked along the mountainside.

“¿*Un Accidente?*” I asked.

“This is the border. They’re all waiting for it to open tomorrow.” He turned the engine off, and the mountain silence took over. “There’s no room for you to sleep in the truck. But, ask the vendors for a room; they’ll rent you something.”

I thanked him, shook his hand, and walked away looking for a place to pitch my tent along the road. Drivers slept in their vehicles as I walked past. Around the bend was the border—nothing more than a gloomy wooden shack and a simple barricade. Up ahead, a generator droned. I came to two ramshackle restaurants and a vendor stand set up on the dirt road under tarps and hanging work lights that illuminated the drizzling rain.

A woman wiped dusty plastic tables under a tarped roof. She wore a white wool sweater and had big, sleepy eyes—looked to be in her late twenties. She smiled at me when I approached. Beside her, three young children sat in the dirt, torturing an injured dung beetle.

“*Buenas noches,*” I said. “Is there anywhere I can camp for the night? I have no money for a room.”

She glanced over her shoulder, to a group of loud men who played cards and drank beer. “*Sĩ*. You can sleep in the back,” she whispered, before leading me through the dark, to a path between the restaurant and a little house.

We approached an eight-by-eight wooden shed, empty and damp with a dirt floor and no light.

“No one will bother you here,” she said and walked away.

I stepped into the shack and unrolled my sleeping bag on the ground. I pulled my ridiculous steak knife out and slid it into my bag, ready to stab at whatever critter came along. Moments later, someone tapped on the door.

“¿*Si*?”

The woman entered and handed me an old piece of foam to sleep on. She lit a votive candle and placed it next to my bag, illuminating the rough, wood-slatted shed.

“Where are you from?”

“Canada.”

“So far from home. I’ve never gone very far.” The longing in her voice was shattered by thunderous laughter from next door. Her expression became worried, and she turned away. One of the men playing cards must have trapped her on this mountain like a mudslide. It was too late for me and too late for her; we should have met many years earlier.

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Roosters screamed.

At dawn, I woke in the gloomy shack bundled up with my bag over my head, lost in a feeling of not knowing who or where I was. Then, as truck engines roared

and headlights beamed through the wall stats, it all came back: I was on a dirt floor in the middle of nowhere, with no money. And I had ditched McKenna.

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After crossing the border, I hitched a ride in a hatchback. The driver was Luis, a Spanish teacher with glasses and black, shoulder-length hair pulled behind his ears. He asked a lot of questions.

“What happened to your eye?” he asked.

“I got hit by a surfboard.”

“How is it you ran out of money?”

“I guess I lost track.”

“Why are you going to Mexico?”

“To work on a book I’m writing,” I said.

“How serendipitous! I’m a writer too—a poet, actually. You know what, I’ll drive you to the bus station in Tegucigalpa.”

“You don’t have to if it’s out of your way. I mean, I can’t afford to take the bus anyway.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I appreciate the company of a fellow writer. We’ll talk shop all the way!”

Luis did all the talking on the way to Tegucigalpa, and when we got there, he bought me lunch and a ticket to San Salvador, El Salvador.

We ate ham and cheese sandwiches at a table outside the station and watched buses come and go in the brown, dusty lot.

Luis stirred his coffee. “Why do you write?”

“I don’t know. Why do you write?”

He lowered his cup. “I write to connect with people. Our work should stir something in others if it’s art.” At the blank look on my face, Luis asked, “Are you following me? Am I speaking too fast?”

“I understand,” I said. “I just don’t write to connect with anyone.”

“How long have you felt like that—like an introvert?”

I didn’t want to tell Luis about the day I became an introvert. I was twelve, and my best friend died in a car crash with his parents. My father took me to the wake—to the endless bouquets and haunting photos of my friend and his dead parents and all the traumatized school kids in their best clothes and everyone sobbing over closed caskets. That night, I went into my parents’ room, crying. My mother hugged me. My father stood and said, as he left the room, “Kiddo, stop crying or we’ll have to send you to a shrink.” I stopped crying and went back to bed.

“I think of writing as my instrument, you see?” Luis said.

But I was distracted by a boy, about fifteen, who had entered the yard. He carried a bucket and a sponge and pulled a hose along as he hobbled, dragging his rubber boots—the toes of which pointed inward. An old man in the yard waved to get my attention when he caught me gawking at the boy. He snuck behind the kid, who kneeled to scrub a bus tire. Then the old man stepped on the boy’s boots, flattening them to the ground. The boy had no feet. The old man laughed at my stunned expression.

“You see that? That’s the stuff I write about.”

Chapter Ten

Waiting in the crowd outside a rusty bus, I overheard three men talking about me in Spanish, making cracks about my yellowing black eye. Each of them carried their belongings in a plastic grocery bag and sat close to me inside the bus. The bigger one in the group leaned over. “America! You *go* Chicago?”

“*Hablo Español*,” I said.

He looked back to his friends and shrugged.

I gave him the spiel—told him I was broke and trying to reach Ignacio’s farm. Then I told them all about Ignacio’s farm and his cows and chickens and twenty acres. And I made sure to tell him all of that in Spanish to discourage them from robbing me.

We wound up chatting for a while and pretty soon, I trusted them. They planned to swim across the Cuilco River into Mexico, hop a train, and ride it to the U.S. border. They talked of meeting a *coyote* in Northern Mexico who would smuggle them into the U.S., so they could work ten-dollar-an-hour construction jobs that Edwin’s cousin had lined up for them in Chicago. Edwin was the group’s leader. He wore his grandmother’s white cardigan, which only covered half his back. “She gave me this to remember her because she thinks she’ll never see me again.”

From San Salvador, I hitchhiked with the guys all day through Santa Lucia, Santa Ana, and Ahuachapán. I secretly recorded their conversations and took notes as they negotiated rides with drivers and haggled food prices with vendors who fed us *pupusas* and fish soups.

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In the evening, we entered Guatemala, and three young men in a hatchback picked us up. They let the four of us cram into the backseat and took us into the town of Valle Nuevo. I was filled with optimism. Two days on the road, and I was already halfway to Mexico City. At this rate, I'd be in Fresnillo in two days.

The police pulled us over immediately.

Two skinny officers approached the car. I felt safely hidden, between two Hondurans, my backpack laid across our laps. It wasn't me they were after. Edwin knew right away what they wanted. He stepped out, and their muffled conversation was cordial and reminiscent of a drug deal. Edwin handed the officers a few bills, and they let us on our way.

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We were dropped off somewhere outside Valle Nuevo. There were no streetlights along the darkened road into the suburbs—just the smell of burning garbage and the sounds of barking dogs.

A man approached us. He wore a cowboy hat and boots. His name was Gilberto. Their conversation moved so fast I could only make out that Gilberto was also a migrant, from Nicaragua, on his way to San Francisco in three days, and that we could spend the night with him.

Gilberto unlocked a padlock on the metal door of a tin roof cinder-block shack off the road. The door opened to a dark and dingy space with a concrete floor, furnished with nothing but a hammock.

I listened to the guys talking their rapid slang in the darkness and followed none of it for the most part. But I understood when Edwin spoke about the passage from Honduras to America: "My brother tried to make the trip on his own

two years ago, but he got robbed in Veracruz by two cops. That scared the hell out of him—so he turned back.”

Later, we lay on the hard floor by candlelight, using our sweaters for pillows. I left my sleeping bag in my backpack because no one else had one and I didn’t want to make anyone jealous. I sprawled out on the floor in my shorts, with my hood pulled over my head and a T-shirt draped over my legs.

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In the morning, we pooled our money and Gilberto took us to an outdoor restaurant where we devoured a great breakfast of eggs, beans, goat cheese, and coffee. Across the street, a twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy yanked a chicken from its pen. He tied its feet with a string and hung the chicken on a post in the yard. The boy pinched feathers on the chicken’s throat and tore them out. The chicken violently flapped its wings and began screeching. Then, holding a short machete at arm’s length and looking away, the boy slashed at the chicken’s throat. The chicken convulsed, slamming itself against the post, trying to free itself. The cut was too shallow. The boy looked to his father, but he paid no attention to the boy, who then stepped toward the chicken and finally pulled the machete back and chopped at the neck. The knife sank into the post with a solemn, merciful thud. The chicken’s head fell, landing softly into a small pile of old feathers.

I thought of Ignacio’s farm, and wondered if he’d task me with chopping off chicken heads. If I had to, I figured I’d take a hell of a swing with the knife and not let the chickens feel a thing.

After breakfast, we walked north toward a gas station, where we approached an old man filling up his small pickup. He said he could take us as far as Chimaltenango, outside Guatemala City, if we wanted to ride in the box.

We were off again, zipping along the Pan-American Highway and into the mountains of the Sierra Madre. I sat with my back to the cab, a shirt over my head to shade me from the sun, and watched everything go by under enormous skies—all the villages and plantations growing in the lush green hills, and the kids in ragged clothes and diapers, shoeless and playing outside rickety houses. There were bridges and rivers; roadside vendors selling pineapples, mangos, and papayas; and everywhere, ~~the~~ smoke billowed from firepits and garbage heaps. Green hills rose to form mountains and volcanoes, then descended into a wilderness that kept coming until we finally entered Guatemala City with its smog and traffic, countless colourful billboards, and systems of wires strung through the sky like spider webs.

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Outside Chimaltenango, we jumped from the truck and entered a *tienda*, where we pooled our money once again and bought bread, cheese, bananas, and water. I asked the little girl working the counter if I could use their washroom. The girl stepped outside the store and hollered something up the street. Seconds later her younger sister, about ten years old, approached the store, dragging her little flip-flops through the dirt. The girl took my hand and escorted me back to their house.

I followed her through a metal door in a concrete wall that opened to a little courtyard with a kitchen under a corrugated plastic roof, where something

simmered in a giant pot. The girl spoke like an adult as she scuttled to the kitchen.

“Go ahead and use the washroom inside. I have to check the soup.”

I entered the dark, musky house—a small living room with two sofas at one end, and a queen-sized bed at the other. After using the washroom, I spotted something moving in the bedroom, where sunlight beamed through cracks in the closed blinds. An infant lay on the bed. I stepped toward the baby, who stared at the ceiling with a big smile on its face.

“*Hola*,” I whispered. “Why are you all alone?”

Something moved against the wall and startled me—a tiny woman standing with her hands behind her back.

“*Hola*,” I said. “Didn’t see you there. Is that your baby?”

She stepped into the sunlight, smiling. She was a child.

“*Hola*,” I said, again.

“*Hiss my brroder*.”

“Oh, how old is he?”

She shrugged. “*No se*.”

“Where are your parents?”

“They work.”

“Eli!” Edwin shouted from outside. “We have a ride!”

“I have to go,” I said, but didn’t move. I couldn’t believe these children—who changed diapers, cooked soup, ran a corner store—had welcomed a strange man into their home.

“*Adiós*,” she said, with such sincerity that it broke my heart. I handed the girl twenty *quetzales*. “For you and your sisters.”

Outside, Edwin and the guys spoke with another old man in a beat-up pickup truck. “He can give us a ride to El Carmen!”

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In El Carmen, we paid for a single room. We’d arrived at the Mexican border. They would leave me tomorrow, off to find the Cuilco River and then to Tapachula, where they’d hop on their train, and who knows what would happen after that.

We let Edwin have the bed, and the rest of us sat on the floor drinking beer—I had insisted on buying, to thank them for leading me this far. As we slouched and sipped, Edwin said, “I’m ashamed to tell you, Eli, but when we first met you on the bus, I thought of robbing you.”

I laughed. “I know.”

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In the morning, the guys walked with me toward the border, down a street crowded with pedestrians and taxis—a dead end, for them. They hugged me and patted me on the back and wished me luck. I looked at them, holding nothing but their plastic bags, knowing they would soon be knee-deep in muddy riverbanks, and understood they wouldn’t make it—that they’d be arrested, or else fall off a train and die. I dropped my bag and pulled out my grey hoodie and handed it to Edwin. “You want this?”

“¡Claro! ¡Gracias!” He hugged me again.

“I wish you’d just go home,” I said. “Give your grandmother back her cardigan... but I guess it’s too stretched out now, anyway.”

He smiled. “*Št*, Eli. It’s too far gone now.”

Chapter Eleven

In Mexico, I exchanged all the *quetzales* and American dollars I had for *pesos*, then withdrew four hundred pesos from an ATM. After paying two hundred pesos for the tourist visa, I had eighty dollars to my name. I proceeded to hike down a winding jungle road.

I passed a huge, dried-up iguana on the asphalt, its guts splattered and sizzling in the sun. A rusty pickup came by—happy ranchera blaring its trumpets. An old man sat in the cab with two young boys. I hadn't stuck my thumb out, but he pulled over for me anyway, pointed to his empty cargo box, and drove me into Tuxtla Chico.

In town, I sat in a narrow restaurant with yellow walls and white tiles that smelled of bleach. With a floor-fan pointed right at me, I drank coffee and ate scrambled eggs and chorizo with tortillas and fresh salsa. I devoured my meal so fast that the woman gave me more eggs and tortillas for free. Not a bad start, I thought. If I could stick to spending money on meals, I should make it to Zacatecas with enough plenty of time to find Ignacio.

But, preparing to hit the road again, I got nervous and got to thinking that maybe I should have stayed behind and worked at *Las Olas* with McKenna. Maybe McKenna had gone crazy, but at least he had the sense to stay employed. Then I remembered the story he told me of the noose he'd tied, and what flashed through my mind, as I lugged my backpack away from the restaurant, was the sight of McKenna on the porch in Santa Theresa, hanging from his neck.

There was an internet café up the street. I emailed McKenna's older brother James, whom I hardly knew.

McKenna's not doing well in Costa Rica. I was down there with him, but I've left. He's taking all sorts of pills now, drinking every day, and doing blow... He's talked about hanging himself. He recently tied a noose. I wanted to give your family the chance to reach out to him and help. I'd hate for something to happen.

Writing him felt like the responsible thing to do, but the moment I sent the message, I realized McKenna would never forgive me for telling his brother such things, and that our friendship was truly over.

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I scored a series of rides in *combis*—minivans that shuttle people between towns, with designated stops along the highway. The drivers charged ten pesos for hour-long rides. From the coast, I'd be halfway to Fresnillo, Zacatecas—a straight run north with beaches, places to camp, and even resorts, where I began to think I'd look for work.

Riding with locals, I headed straight for the Pacific, through Tapachula, Feliciano Renauld, and Los Toritos. Sometimes they crammed ten of us in the vans, and on every ride, someone wanted to talk with me. I loved to small talk in familiar, Mexican Spanish. “¿De donde eres, güero?” they'd ask. And, “¿Donde aprendiste Español?” they needed to know. And we yakked about food and the weather and everyday things.

When we stopped to pick up passengers outside Los Toritos, I stepped out to buy a ham and cheese sandwich. A middle-aged white guy approached. He had a

scruffy grey beard, ratty hair, dirty jeans, and a torn ~~T~~-shirt, and carried a backpack one-quarter the size of mine—a schoolbag, really.

“Hey, man. Buy me a sandwich?” His unfriendly eyes weren’t asking.

“I can’t. I’m broke,” I said.

He followed me into the *combi*, and they slid the door shut. Because the scruffy guy sat across from me on the sideways benches, he had to watch me eat.

For a second, I considered giving him half, but he kept eyeballing me like he would fight me for the sandwich, so I wolfed the whole thing.

“¿Eres Eli?” an old *campesino* asked me.

He’d been sitting quietly ~~sat~~ in the back, in his straw hat.

“Sí,” I said. “How did you know my name?”

He grinned under his grey mustache. “¿Veniste de Costa Rica, verdad?”

“How did you know that?”

The old man chuckled.

We pulled over at a military checkpoint.

“Señor, how did you know my name?”

The old man stepped out and walked away as the *Federales*, armed with machine guns, asked for our papers. I handed my passport over and watched the old *campesino* wander down the highway. But what was I going to do, chase after the old man up the road and demand to know why he knew things about me? The *Federales* handed back my passport, then asked for the scruffy guy’s papers.

He launched a protest. “No need *passaporte*. I’m Americano. Americano.”

Three more agents came to the door and they ordered him to step out.

Outside, they surrounded the man, slid our door shut, and instructed our driver to

move along. I couldn't make out the heated argument outside. As we pulled away, everyone in the *combi* looked back, including the driver. The man tried to free himself, but the *Federales* slammed him to the ground.

I regretted not buying the guy a sandwich. Maybe a judge had thrown him out of California.

We hit the road, and I turned to the pregnant woman who sat beside me.

"Señora, how did that old man know my name?"

"*Es un shaman.*"

"A shaman? Should I have followed him?"

She shrugged. "*No sé.*"

I'd let the moment slip away. I decided I wouldn't let that happen again, that from now on, I would seize my chances.

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After dark, we stopped at a bus station in Pochutla. The driver told me there were no more *combis* from here. It was too late to wander around with my big backpack searching for a place to camp, so I decided to ride an overnight bus to Acapulco. There'd be plenty of cars to hitch a ride from in the morning.

In the bright fluorescent station, I bought a ticket for two hundred and fifty pesos.

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Weary eyes were all around me as I squeezed through the aisle with my big backpack to the quieter seats in the back. I curled up for the night and thought, the next time I go to sleep, I might just be in a warm bed on Ignacio's farm.

Across the aisle from me, an elderly woman sat with her face hidden under a dark shawl. She held a rosary and recited prayers over and over. I imagined her shadowy mumbles begged her God to watch over me when I hitchhiked.

Part Three

Chapter Twelve

The bus pulled into the terminal at 6 a.m. I walked across gleaming floors, under the corrugated metal roof of the station. I bought a bag of orange juice and found a map on a wall. But there was no Pan-American Highway or even the Pacific Ocean on the map because it was a map of Oaxaca City, not Acapulco. Now I knew why I'd woken to someone tapping my leg in the night. "*¿A donde vas?*" The man had whispered. "Why'd you wake me up?" I had grumbled. "Leave me alone."

Nearby, a young Mexican woman sat on a bench. I'd seen her walking off my bus. She wore a faded poncho, red and white and too big for her, with sleeves that dangled far below her hands. There was something about her style, a wonderful sense of rootlessness about her.

"Excuse me," I said. "Where are we?"

Her smile unveiled a mouth full of braces, and she pointed to the giant letters above the entrance, giant letters spelled it out for me: *¡Bienvenidos a Oaxaca!*

"Are you lost?"

"*¡No mames!*" I said, flashing a little Mexican slang. "I thought I was on the bus to Acapulco."

“You missed the connection.”

A man’s voice called out, “Zuríaa?”

“Over here. ”

A tall, Mexican guy approached us, holding a thin-body semi-acoustic guitar. He looked about thirty, wearing a white Gypsy shirt. His black hair, parted in the middle, drooped over his face—the long, bony face of the Aztecs.

I readied myself to leave—to buy another ticket to Acapulco—frustrated by the thought that I’d arrive in Fresnillo with even less money, if any money at all.

“Oye,” the young woman said to the guy. “He missed his connection.”

He spoke to me in a raspy voice that sounded like a Mexican Tom Waits.

“Where were you going?”

I hesitated before mumbling, “Acapulco. But I’m not staying there. I’m not going to a resort or anything like that. I’m hitchhiking to my friend’s place in Fresnillo, Zacatecas.”

“*Chido*,” he said. “My name’s Antonio. This is Zuríaa.”

Antonio and I shook hands.

Zuríaa said, “You sound Mexican.”

“Can you play bongos?” Antonio asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Zuríaa can’t hold a beat. You want to come with us? We’ll be street busking here for a while, before going to Veracruz for *Carnaval*.”

“I have no money,” I said.

“Neither do we. We’ll make good money. Zuríaa will sell the jewellery she makes, too. We can split everything three ways.”

"I could stay until I've got enough money to take a bus to Zacatecas."

"Great," Antonio said. "After Veracruz, we're heading to San Luis Potosí and Real de Catorce—that will get you close to Zacatecas." He held up his guitar, showing me the baseball-sized hole on the edge of its face "We'll just have to repair my *lyra*, first."

I'd never heard anyone call a guitar a *lyra* before.

"My ex-wife did that," he said.

"Because of me," Zuriaa said.

Then on and on they went, reliving some story I couldn't quite piece together because of their Mexico City slang, as I followed them into town in search of breakfast.

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Walking the cobbled streets outside the *Palacio de Gobierno*, I remembered my first day in Oaxaca City, two weeks after my mother's stroke. I was in an artisan shop on the second floor alone with the owner, when everything shook as if a truck had driven into the building. Pottery fell off the shelves, bursting and scattering across the tiles, and then a crack ripped through the concrete wall like a bolt of lightning. Then came the feeling—the dizzying feeling of death—as the 7.4 earthquake rattled on. My consciousness zoomed out the window—to a flock of little grey birds fleeing from the trees, and I thought of my mother in her hospital room, piecing together kids' puzzles and spelling words with block letters.

"Don't cancel your trip to Mexico for me," she said. "I'll be out in a couple of days. I've got my sisters and your sister to help me... I'm not going anywhere."

I didn't believe her.

“I plan on sticking around for a while,” she said. “Stir shit around a little bit.”

It was such an odd thing for her to say, that I burst into laughter. Then she laughed. Then I pretended to laugh, but I was crying.

The earthquake had torn chunks of concrete off buildings and killed eighteen people. Now everything was repaired. My mother was once again in far-away winter, reading books by her electric fireplace, while I was back in Oaxaca City, still trying to be a writer.

•

I sat with Antonio and Zuriaa at a plastic table on the sidewalk, where an old lady sold food out the front door of her home—the smell of warm tortillas wafting out of her window. Zuriaa bought us three *memelas*—fat tortillas smeared with refried beans and goat cheese, hot sauce, and lime juice. A golden church sat in the background. Mountains rested in the hazy distance.

Antonio had a sort of slow, thoughtful delivery, a spellbinding voice suitable for narrating a book. He said he’d been traveling for five years, busking for change all over Northern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. I could have listened to his stories for hours, but he pulled his faded old bongos out of a sack attached to Zuriaa’s backpack and handed them over. “We’ll be playing on the buses after breakfast.”

I lay the bongos across my lap, feeling the beaten skins with my trembling hands. “Shouldn’t we repair your guitar before we play?”

Antonio strummed a chord. “It still works okay.”

I hadn't played music in front of people in a couple of years—not since a party where I had a panic attack halfway through plucking Pink Floyd's *Is There Anybody Out There* and made a fool of myself.

A local bus came crawling through morning traffic, coughing black smoke, its doors and windows open.

"Let's play on that bus," Antonio said.

We stood and put our bags on.

"Why are you sweating so much, *güero*?" Zuriaa asked.

"Did you eat more of the hot salsa?" Antonio asked.

"Yeah, I think so," I said, even though I hadn't.

Antonio held his guitar in the air and charged after the bus, "*Vamonos*." The driver nodded and let us on for free; he knew we only wanted to busk.

On the bus full of morning commuters, we stood in the aisle and leaned on the backrests. After finding space for himself and his guitar, Antonio strummed a popular song from *El Tri*—a song so corny I cringed when he belted out the lyrics. I hunched over with the bongos between my legs and played along—not too loud—hoping to disappear by blending into the bland tune.

Zuriaa, meanwhile, threaded her way down the aisle, asking passengers for change, charming them with her innocent eyes. During the second song, she stood beside me, dumped a handful of coins in her satchel, and nudged me with her hip. "Move your body, *güero*."

"What?"

"Dance! You're so stiff."

"I hate dancing."

She giggled. “Wow, your face is so red. You really can’t handle hot salsa, can you?” She pulled out her disposable camera and took a photo of me.

After the song, Antonio thanked the passengers, and we jumped off and waited for the next bus to take us in the opposite direction.

Zuriaa counted the change. “Twenty.”

Antonio said, “Eli, you seemed unmotivated.”

“He hates dancing,” Zuriaa said.

“I didn’t know those songs,” I said, worried they’d throw me out of the band already.

“That’s the crap we have to play for people,” Antonio said. “Popular music pays more. But it does get boring. Maybe we need to get high. Do you smoke *mota*?”

We rode the next bus to the park, where Zuriaa pulled out a *tubo*: weed packaged in rolled-up newspaper, twisted at both ends like a Tootsie Roll.

We got stoned and sauntered back to the road, cutting through a market with tables displaying clothes, toys, meats, fruits, and vegetables under tarps held up by wooden poles cemented into old buckets. Everything on the streets unfolded slowly now, as we passed every colour of Oaxacan life: young men sitting on curbs with nothing to do; old people pushing makeshift trolleys carrying crates of fruits; and a woman seated on a pink, plastic stool breastfeeding, on the sidewalk. We stopped to watch an old man mixing concrete with a shovel—just a pile of sand and cement on the street that he then splattered onto the broken stairs outside his home.

When we reached a busy street, Antonio stuck his guitar in the air for bus drivers to see, and with my nerves numbed, we hustled for two or three more hours, hopping on and off, never straying too far from the *zócalo*, but playing the same two songs every ten minutes for a new busload of ears. But it was only the music of Zuriaa dumping change into her little, brown satchel that mattered to me.

•

We crossed a pedestrian bridge into San Juanito, a quiet neighborhood fifteen minutes outside of Oaxaca. For fifty pesos a day, Antonio rented an unfurnished room on the second floor of a dilapidated complex. Our room smelled like bleach and sewage. A partial wall concealed a grimy toilet with no seat and no water. To flush it, we'd have to use an old bucket and a hose from the communal balcony. Peeling green paint covered the concrete walls.

We sat on the red floor tiles, which were cracked and faded like everything else in San Juanito.

"We'll have to score mushrooms in Veracruz," Antonio said. "I feel ready for that now."

"Oh yeah... Too bad Faustina's gone," Zuriaa said, in a sarcastic tone.

Antonio swiped a hand at her, then stood to inspect two wires protruding from an open outlet box in the wall.

"Who's Faustina?" I asked.

"Don't touch those!" Zuriaa shouted.

Antonio flicked the wires with his finger. "She's a traveller. And she owes me some shrooms."

"Antonio had a crush on her."

“*Before* you and I got together... I crossed paths with Faustina on the Pacific after my wife left me. We shared tension—attraction—but it’s over now.”

Antonio fetched the little stereo they travelled with. He tried to hook its plug to the wires, through the holes in the prongs.

Zuríaa leaned over for a better look. “Is that safe?”

“Yes, I know what I’m doing.”

“If you knew what you were doing, you wouldn’t be doing that.”

I slugged from the bottle and grabbed ~~themy~~ recorder out of my bag. “You guys mind if I record you? I’m a writer.”

“¡*Qué chido!*” Antonio shouted. “I noticed you’re always in your notepad. You can write about everything that’ll happen to us. *La vibra* brought us together for a reason. You’ll see... All the *viajeros* wind up drifting down the same path. That’s why I know Faustina will be in Veracruz and Real de Catorce.” He succeeded in hooking both wires to the stereo plug, and the stereo’s red light came on. He hit play and danced to Manu Chao’s *Merry Blues*.

“Eli, write this in your book: One night I ate shrooms with Faustina and we swam in the ocean... After a while, we stared in opposite directions—she spaced out watching the sky, and I zoned out on the ocean. Then the waves stopped. I saw a black hole out there, sucking the water like a drain. And Faustina said she could see a hole in the sky, drawing up the clouds... They were portals! She heard voices coming from the sky!”

“Voices?” This reminded me of New Year’s Eve, when I thought I’d gone crazy in Santa Theresa murdering ants and hearing a woman’s voice. But I didn’t want to think about that while I was high—it might bring it all back.

•

For two weeks, we followed the same schedule. In the morning, we got stoned on our walk into Oaxaca, then played the buses for an hour, pulling in enough change for breakfast and coffee. Then we'd play again and earn enough for lunch. Then we'd get high again, and play again for enough money to bring dinner home—often chicken and fresh tortillas with diced onions, salsa, cilantro, and lime, and a couple of *caguamas*. We weren't saving any money, but we fell asleep drunk and stoned every night. It was a good life for a while, and I had stashed the rest of my money in a sock at the bottom of my backpack, with no intentions of pulling it out. Antonio often reminded us of all the money we'd make in Veracruz.

•

The communal balcony overlooked a loud, busy courtyard weaved with clotheslines made of old rope and shoe-strings. It was a place where dogs barked, children shouted, firecrackers popped, and the sad thud of a deflated soccer ball beat against a cinderblock wall.

One morning, I washed on the balcony with the bucket and cold water from the garden hose. A brown dog, thin and weak-looking, tied day and night to the balcony railing, kept a vigilant eye on me.

"Buenos días," I said.

A woman stepped onto the balcony in her pajamas. "Don't talk to him." She began sweeping up some dried turds, when the dog gnashed at her. She yelped and jumped back, then jabbed the dog in the head with the butt-end of her broom, shouting, *"¡Hijo de puta!"*

“¡Señora!” I yelled, my wet hair dripping. “Leave it alone!”

Swiping hair from her flustered face, the woman composed herself. “I have to. My husband hates when it barks.”

“It barks because it’s chained all day. You ever think of taking it for walks?”

She turned red, dropped her broom, and shrank down the hall like a child sent to her room.

•

In the *zócalo* one morning, Antonio went off in search of breakfast, while Zuriaa and I sat in the shade under a tree. She spread a tie-dyed sheet on the ground and displayed her handmade jewellery. She hadn’t sold anything in Oaxaca, and I doubted she’d ever sold anything at all, because the jewellery—beads, leather, twisted wires, and cheap stones—looked like things a child would make in art class.

She took the bongos from me and started tapping them timidly, not finding any sort of rhythm, but letting loose anyway, thumping and thrashing at random.

I cringed, looking around at the many pedestrians observing us. “What are you doing?”

She smiled and carried on. “What?”

People were pointing at her and laughing. “Is this a joke?”

She shook her head, moved her body stupidly. “Why do you get embarrassed all the time?”

“I don’t—listen, I have to tell you something. I saw a woman beat a little dog this morning.”

“What?”

“With a broom on the balcony. They keep the dog chained there.”

She finally stopped playing. “And?”

“I mean, the dog was innocent.”

“Oh, you love dogs?”

“No, I’m allergic. That’s not the point.”

And just as Antonio returned with *tamales*, someone shouted Zuriaa’s name from across the *zócalo*. Zuriaa ran to him.

“¡Chingao!” Antonio muttered, shaking his head. “That’s Púas, her ex.”

Zuriaa hugged Púas for a long time before she grabbed his hand and brought him over. He was a handsome guy in his early twenties, clean-cut, wiry build—better looking than Antonio. She introduced us and did not leave his side.

Púas said he had travelled from their hometown of Toluca to find Zuriaa.

“¿Habla español el güero?” he asked the others.

“Sí,” I said.

Zuriaa pointed at me like I was a specimen. “He’s from Canada, but he sounds Mexican.”

Púas sat beside me. “I’ve always wanted to go to Canada. I’m saving twelve thousand pesos to buy a fake American passport.” He picked up Antonio’s guitar and strummed it like a child. I grabbed the bongos before Zuriaa thought about it.

Antonio stood and seized his guitar. “I’m taking my *lyra* for repairs now.”

•

Back in the room, Antonio strummed a pink classical guitar, a loaner from the repair shop, while Púas and Zuriaa sat on her sleeping bag together. Zuriaa was busy sorting through a bag of jewellery parts Púas had brought for her, and

Antonio kept a sideways eye on them. As far as I could tell, he had simply been a placeholder for Púas. Now he was like me—just another guy in the room.

Antonio tried to get Púas' attention. "Did you notice the dent in my guitar? My wife did that on the Pacific—my *ex*-wife. She picked up the heaviest rock she could lift—just caught the edge."

"I'm sure she had a good reason," Púas said.

His comment cast a pall of silence over the room, until someone knocked on our door. In walked a middle-aged, stocky Mexican man with a face like a cinder block. He wore a wrinkled gray suit and spoke in a gruff voice. "Hello, Antonio. You remember me?"

"Of course, I do. Come in."

"I heard the music. Glad you came back to San Juanito."

Antonio introduced us. "Miguel, this is my *banda*, Zuriaa, Púas, and Eli. He's Canadian. *Banda*, this is Miguel. I met him last year. He lives in the complex."

Zuriaa rolled up Púas' bag for Miguel to sit on.

"Where's your wife?" Miguel asked.

"She's in Mexico City, filing for divorce."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Antonio said. "We're both better off... alone."

Miguel slapped his hands together. "Well then, we should celebrate."

Antonio stood. "I agree. Zuriaa, do we have any change for a *caguama*?"

I'd seen Zuriaa stash some money in her backpack, but she stood and dug her hands in her pant pockets now, searching for change, and pretending there was nothing else. "I'm sure we have enough for one."

Miguel put up his hand. “It’s on me.”

Hours later, a drunken Miguel had his jacket off, tie loosened, and shirt unbuttoned. Then he took a couple of hits off a joint, and his brain went wild. “I know what it’s like on the road,” he said. “I’ll have to hit the ol’ highway again for work next week, in the U.S.”

“What part of the U.S.?” Púas asked.

“All over. For research.”

“What type of research?” Zuriaa asked, examining a bracelet she’d made from wooden beads and knotted leather.

Miguel hesitated. “Umm, it’s for my work.”

“Which is?”

“Anthropology.”

Zuriaa lit up. “Hey! I’m studying anthropology.”

Miguel sighed. “I’m not sure you’d be up for it, sweetheart. It’s hard work—a lot of travel involved.”

Zuriaa replied, “We camped on the Pacific for an entire month, and we hitchhiked here. And we’re going to Veracruz and then Real de Catorce, so...”

Miguel snorted and looked to the rest of us for support. He found none. “You’ll never make it. I’ve hitchhiked across the States and all over Mexico for my work, you know.”

I knew he was lying, but I didn’t bother saying anything, since everyone seemed content to let him ramble on. Zuriaa pointed to the joint Miguel had stopped smoking. “Hey, that’s not a microphone.”

We laughed, but Miguel lobbed the joint at her feet and snapped, singling me out, “What the fuck are you laughing at, *güero*?”

“I’m laughing at Zuriaa’s joke.” I looked at Antonio for help. He turned away.

Miguel leaned in closer, raking me with bloodshot eyes. “Her *joke*, huh?”

“*Sí*, I laughed at her joke.” I tried to stay calm and keep eye contact, as one might stare down a cougar.

After several awkward seconds, Miguel grinned.

“You forgot what I said?” Zuriaa asked.

He smirked, before slackening and reaching for a *caguama*.

“Shit, that’s some good weed, Antonio... You know, maybe I’ll hitch to Peru from here—oh, damn. I can’t. Not with my briefcase. I’ll need it for meetings.”

“So, you’re an anthropologist and you live in a dump like this?” Zuriaa asked. Púas tapped her leg as if to tell her to stop.

Miguel ignored her and turned to me again. “*Güero*, you’ve seen nothing in your life until you’ve seen Macchu Picchu.”

“I went there six years ago.”

Miguel grabbed Antonio’s arm. “Of course, he did!” he shouted. “These damned *gringos* travel the world, don’t they, Antonio?”

Antonio disregarded him and fiddled with his guitar. “Leave me out of it.”

Miguel continued, “They bomb and steal from Third-World countries and then we cater to them when they visit our ruins!”

I tried to speak calmly as I peeled the label off the empty *caguama*, but I was thinking of throwing the bottle in his face. “Listen, I’m broke. I can’t even afford to go home.”

“Without money, a *gringo* cannot be in Mexico, not legally. So, what are you doing with us then, huh?”

“Oh, leave him alone!” Zuriaa shouted.

“No. I want to see his passport. Now! Why are you here? You’re running away? What are you running from, *güero*? What are you running from? I’ll bet it’s your family.”

“Go fuck yourself!” I shouted, then lobbed the empty *caguama* in his lap. It rolled to the floor and made a pathetic clanking noise.

“Alright!” Púas shouted and stood. “Let’s calm down.” He opened the door. “Eli, come with me.”

•

Púas and I leaned on the balcony rail, breathing in the cool, sobering air.

“What’s that shit about my family?” I said. “I’d like to smash a *caguama* over his head and take his wallet.”

Púas put up his fist. “Don’t worry about that guy. If he gets in your face again, I’ll rough him up. I’m a boxer.”

“A *boxer*?”

He looked like one, too—clean-cut like a boxer from a black-and-white, 1940’s photograph.

“That’s why they call me *El Púas*.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Osvaldo Villafuerte. Have you heard of *El Púas*?”

“No. Are you as good as he was?”

“I trained with the Mexican Olympic team two years ago, till I got arrested.”

The door swung open, and Miguel, with his jacket on, came out of the room.

“Careful around my dog,” he said. “It bites.” He turned down the hallway and we watched him stumble to his room.

“Let’s let his dog loose,” I said. “Walk him to a taco stand and feed him *chorizo* and *carne asada*.”

“What are you talking about?”

It didn’t matter. The dog looked up at me with feral eyes, as if to say, if you so much as reached for my chain, I’ll bite off your fingers.

•

The next morning, we hid in the shade of a concrete patio at a family restaurant in San Juanito, eating fava bean soup and tortilla chips—the only thing we could afford. Seated across from me at the head of the table, Zuriaa beaded another crappy bracelet, and Antonio and Púas sat on either side of us. A white kitten with cruddy eyes rubbed itself against my legs. It purred when I petted it with my feet. I didn’t tell the others about the cat. They wouldn’t have cared.

“We can leave for Veracruz tomorrow,” Antonio said. “If my guitar’s ready.”

“I need Zuriaa to come to Mexico City with me today,” Púas said.

Antonio lowered his shades to better read Púas’s expression. “What do you mean?”

“We can meet you in Veracruz.”

“What for?” Antonio asked.

Púas set his coffee down. “I called my aunt yesterday—told her I got my girlfriend pregnant.”

Antonio dropped his fork. “Are you pregnant?”

“Of course not.” Zuriaa wrung her wet hair, letting it drip onto the ground.

“I asked my aunt for five thousand pesos for an abortion,” Púas said. “I’m meeting her at the Mexico City bus terminal tonight. It’d be better if Zuriaa came along. My aunt’s a lawyer—she trusts nobody, not even me. We should also bring our backpacks, to make it believable.”

I couldn’t make any sense of his plan, but Antonio looked intrigued, and asked, “Why do you need your backpacks?”

“I told her Zuriaa lives in Guadalajara and we’re going to a clinic there. Otherwise, my aunt would drive us to a clinic in Mexico City, or have us stay at her house.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought this through,” Antonio said. Then he made a slicing gesture with his right hand across his left palm. “You gonna chip in with ~~these~~ five thousand pesos?”

“Of course,” Púas said.

•

After breakfast, we saw Púas and Zuriaa off at the bus station and picked up Antonio’s guitar, now glossy and black. Antonio and I played the buses and hung around the *zócalo* all day. In the evening, we entered an old *cantina*—a dark hole in the wall with saloon-style doors. We got drunk on *caguamas* and tequila shots and shouted over the music.

“We’ll leave for Veracruz in the morning!” he said. “Púas will come back with five thousand pesos. Five thousand pesos! You see, I’m sensing this fusion happening in Veracruz, between all the *bandas* from all over Mexico! We’ll meet Faustina there. We’ll eat some shrooms. Then we’ll go South—Villahermosa, Chiapas, Guatemala!”

“What about Real de Catorce?” I asked.

“We’ll get there eventually. But don’t worry about Fresnillo—after Veracruz, and all the money we’ll make there, you won’t want to go to Fresnillo. And even if you did, we’ll make enough money you could fly there!”

I was suddenly optimistic, excited about everything he was saying. When Harold Ainslee’s notes would come back, I could work on revisions on the road, while on a grand tour of Mexico and Central America. Maybe we’d even make it all the way back down to Costa Rica and play music at *Las Olas*! I could check on McKenna, see how he’s doing. Maybe I could even talk him into joining us on the road. How great would it be to have him around? He was a hell of a guitar player, after all.

They threw us out of the bar around 3 a.m. We stumbled back to San Juanito through the crooked side-streets, and crossed the empty market lot where dogs feasted from a pile of plastic garbage bags—a gloomy setting in the middle of the night, somewhere you’d expect to get stabbed. Antonio shouted and rambled on, and I held up my tape recorder, chasing after him like a tenacious reporter. “Do you realize, my wife has sucked the life out of me for months? You see? She threw an anchor into me to drag herself along. But now I have to lead you to Veracruz and down to Guatemala, Belize—”

“Belize?”

He wasn’t listening. “I need my strength! I need to tear my wife’s anchor from me. I need a shaman. I need a voodoo doll to stab in the eyes. I have to save myself or we’ll be killed!”

“*Killed?* What are you talking about?”

“A horrible car crash on the highway. Bad luck. Bad timing, you see? Life’s all about timing. How else did you end up missing your bus connection? You could have ended up in Acapulco. You could be home by now, freezing your ass off... Eli! You’ll never forget me, Eli! Ahhhh! You’ll never forget my raspy voice!”

Chapter Thirteen

In the Veracruz *zócalo*, *Plaza de Armas*, Antonio and I found shade by a cluster of palm trees. From Oaxaca, we’d hitched a ride with a trucker who dropped us off outside the city in a neighborhood called El Tejar. We’d walked a couple of hours from there and smoked two joints, so by the time we’d entered the city, we were too worn out to busk.

Antonio slept on the ground, his sunglasses on and his guitar across his chest, while I sprawled out on a concrete planter. I dreamed I stood in the shadows of a pine forest. A flood of muddy water rushed in—sweeping up the leaves, tearing out the moss, snapping branches and uprooting trees. Somewhere, a dam had burst, and it came for me.

•

I woke to pounding drums. Four black men played congas nearby. Three large black women, clad in green and yellow dresses, bounced their huge hips and sang with powerful church-bell voices that rang across the *zócalo*. A large crowd encircled them, rounding into the long shadows of the cathedral.

“It’s called *Punta*. They’re Hondurans.” Antonio spoke with his eyes closed, but wouldn’t sit up for the performance.

After every song, the crowd dumped change into a young Mexican woman’s sack. She was shoeless and had short black hair that looked like she’d cut it herself. She wore a frayed jean-shorts and a black, sun-bleached Zapatista t-shirt, snug on her lean body. She danced with the Hondurans with unfettered zeal, her eyes closed, and an enormous smile on her pretty face. Her sack looked heavy. She must have had a thousand pesos in there.

“This woman’s cute,” I said.

Antonio sat up and looked. He yanked off his sunglasses. “It’s her... *¡Oye!* Faustina!”

Faustina stopped dancing and pranced through the crowd, skipping toward us on her tiptoes. Antonio stood and made a move to hug her, but she backed off and wiped the sweat from her chest.

“Sorry, I’m too hot. How have you been?” she asked in a nasally, but somehow sexy, voice.

“*Bien, bien*. I knew we’d see you here... We went to Oaxaca. Hey, we’re looking for mushrooms. Oh, this is Eli. He’s from Canada. I bought bongos. We’re going to Guatemala, then the desert...”

As Antonio rambled, I watched Faustina’s eyes stray back to the Hondurans.

“Listen, cool seeing you,” she said. “But I have to dance. I’m working with them.”

She hopped away. He’d come all this way for Faustina, but she’d already found a better *banda*. The Hondurans were pulling in real money, putting on a real show.

Faustina stopped. She spun back around, dug into a teeny pocket on her skirt and lobbed something to Antonio before skipping back to the drummers. Antonio missed the catch. He picked the ball of newspaper off the ground and unraveled it slowly. A smirk appeared on his face, as if he’d discovered a love note. He pinched something from the paper and handed me two fat stems and a mushroom cap.

•

Twenty minutes later, the drug hit my empty stomach. Everything came in waves—the lights, the heat, the wind glittering through the clamor of children and dogs, trumpets and whistles—everything surging and colliding, then waning in a collective deep breath before another vibrant exhalation.

As the crowd began to dissipate from the *zócalo*, Faustina hung around, chatting with the Hondurans fifty feet from us, one of whom was teaching Faustina how to spin fire poi. She spun the fuel-soaked wick around—the fire producing mesmerizing swirls.

“We should join these guys,” I said. “Looks like they’ll make a lot of money.”

Antonio scoffed. “No. They’re nothing but a circus act!”

I lay my head on the concrete, hid behind my sunglasses, and observed my brain somehow processing Antonio's language better than I ever had. I turned on my recorder, while he babbled on about Faustina

He'd probably left his wife for her, I thought. That's what happened. He left his wife for Faustina, settled for Zuriaa, then Zuriaa ditched him for Púas, and now he had nothing.

"Look at her flirting with those guys," he said. "She thinks she's queen of the bees! She must have fallen into a portal. Remember the story about the holes in the ocean and the sky? You can get trapped in them."

•

The mushroom trip peaked close to sunset, just as Zuriaa and Púas appeared, smiling and brimming with joy. He wore a new duckbill hat and ran around snapping photos of women with a new disposable camera. She carried a bag of tamales and apple sodas to share with us. Antonio and I didn't eat, and we didn't mention Faustina or the mushrooms.

"How did it go?" Antonio asked.

"I saw my mom!" Zuriaa said.

"Your mother?"

"Yeah, he took me to see my mother."

"What are you talking about?" Antonio asked.

Zuriaa ignored the question. "Check out these beads and stuff Púas bought me." She showed us the steel wire, cat's-eye beads, and dried coconut shells.

"What a *pendeja*!" Antonio stood in a huff and snatched his backpack off the ground.

“What?” Zuriaa looked up, thinking Antonio was talking to her—but he was watching Faustina walk away with the Hondurans.

He spoke only to me. “Fuck it. You know what? My old friends always ask me how I stay slim, why I look this young... And I tell them it's because I keep moving. I keep rolling, you see?” He swung his backpack onto his back. “Non-attachment. I have a new mantra: *Om ah hung vajra guru pema siddhi hung...* Say it ten million times and you'll turn into fucking light! Hurry *banda*, let's set up camp on the beach. Can you hear the crowd? I think the parade's starting.” He grabbed his guitar and walked away.

I picked up the recorder to turn it off, but the batteries had died.

•

The crowd had gathered by the Gulf of Mexico at the *Gran Plaza del Malecón*—with its cargo ships, souvenir stands, mariachis, and balloons, and swooping seagulls shitting all over the place. Along Boulevard Manuel Ávila Camacho, two rows of bleachers stretched out farther than we could see. Ahead of the coming parade, hundreds of people, in search of empty seats, swarmed toward us like zombies.

Antonio pointed to the mob. “We'll have to walk through them to reach the beach.” He moved forward, alone, like a man about to walk off a bridge. The horde swallowed him. Púas leaped into the frenzy. Zuriaa followed.

Down the street, the *zócalo* sat in relative calmness—its children chasing pigeons, and smiling lovers at sidewalk cafés, lounging under oversized umbrellas.

Zuriaa shouted, “Are you coming, *güero*? I don’t see them.” Her face emerged from the mob, like a lighthouse in the fog. I hugged the bongos and moved forward.

•

Everyone shouted and sweated and stepped over one another—children clung to their parents through the wafting stink of booze and gunpowder. I struggled to keep up with Zuriaa, who called for Antonio and Púas, then I quickly lost sight of everyone. Fireworks fizzled and went off in the distance. Some idiot threw a firecracker at my feet and it went off like a bomb, it seemed, at the precise moment the mushrooms peaked. I froze, dripping sweat and falling apart. I felt everyone coming at me from every corner. I felt my backpack being pulled sideways and caught a guy with his hand on my bag. I gave him a dirty look and he vanished. Finally, I spotted Antonio and Zuriaa. They seemed to be arguing, their arms flailing in the angry dusk.

“Púas!” I shouted when I saw him in the crowd.

We walked together.

“Your tent’s falling off,” he shouted over the noise, as he reached under my backpack and pulled my tent out with ease. “Someone cut one of your straps!”

“*Hijo!* I saw the fucker,” I said, looking back.

“Let’s not get into it now,” he said, tucking my tent under his arm.

“Did you see your aunt?” I asked.

He smirked. “I don’t have an aunt in Mexico City. I took Zuriaa to see her mom, in Toluca. Zuriaa left her dad’s place in Guadalajara two months ago. Last

week, her mom gave me three thousand pesos to track her down. She said she'd pay another two thousand if I took her home."

"Why'd you guys come back?"

"Zuriaa promised to go back to school soon. She wants to travel first." He laughed. "But the old lady gave me another two thousand pesos, just to keep an eye on her!" He wrapped his arm around my neck. "Let's ditch these guys, *güero*."

"What?"

"I've got enough money. We'll take a bus to Fresnillo. And when you cross back into the U.S., I'll find a way to cross over. You can smuggle me into Canada when you deliver the car!"

"Are you serious?"

"Púas!" Antonio shouted from a distance.

Púas followed Antonio deeper into the crowd, and I tried to make sense of everything he'd said.

"Eli!" Zuriaa shouted. She stood on the bleachers, smiling from within the horde, waving me over.

"I lost the guys," I said.

"Antonio took Púas to buy some weed."

We squeezed through a narrow passage between the stands, and onto the boardwalk.

"¡Chingao!" She shouted. We came upon two paramedics attending to a man who had fallen from the top bleacher. He lay unconscious in front of us, breathing

rapidly, his hair soaking in a small pool of blood. His Mexican-flag baseball cap had settled upright on the boardwalk.

We had to step over his legs, and I said, “That’s a lot of blood.”

Zuriaa let out a big laugh. “That’s his beer, *idiot!*” She jumped from the boardwalk onto the beach.

With each step through the cool sand, the noise faded and the mushroom trip began its descent. We dumped our bags by the water, kicked our shoes off, and sat watching the Gulf’s tiny waves twirl in.

In the distance, the crowd cheered.

Zuriaa tilted her head back to look upside down at the boardwalk and bleachers. “The parade’s coming.”

She sat up, turned to me, and asked, “Were you afraid back there, *güero*? You looked afraid.”

“I hate crowds.”

“What? *Crowds*? How are you going to be a writer if you’re afraid of crowds? How will you do readings?” She cracked up, unable to contain her amusement.

She was right. I would fail as a writer. I knew that. She wouldn’t stop laughing, so I said, “Does it feel strange you dated Púas, then Antonio, and now Púas again, and they’re both here?”

She howled even harder, rolled over, and pounded the sand. “Oh, *güero*, you’re so *ingenue*.”

I’d never heard that word.

“My love for one man doesn’t diminish my love for another... I could love you too, *güero*. How tall are you, a hundred and eighty?”

“I don’t know, not in centimeters,” I said.

“I’ve always had tall boyfriends. I wonder why.”

“Because you’re short.”

She ignored me and stood and pointed to a campfire burning down the beach.

“Hey, let’s set up camp there.”

•

I recognized Faustina’s short haircut right away. She sat on a log by the fire with a couple with dreadlocks and congas at their feet, and invited us to join them. When Faustina asked about Antonio, Zuriaa coolly said we’d lost him, and then she went off to pitch her tent. I sat beside Faustina, took my shoes off, and dug my feet into the soft sand. She had little feet, with pretty brown toes. Her friendly eyes made her easy to talk to. She had perfect teeth. But when she wasn’t smiling, she looked terribly preoccupied. Soon, music battered our eardrums as the parade rolled by fifty feet away. I shared our cold *tamales* with Faustina and her friends, and they got me stoned. I forgot all about Antonio. Faustina and I sat close, closer than we needed to, but somehow, it made sense, like everything was established without the necessary chase. When they ran out of beer, Faustina stood to go find more. I went along.

On the boardwalk, Faustina ran to a vendor and bought a novelty-sized plastic mug filled with draft beer. She took a sip and handed it to me. “Here. You need to catch up!” I drank while she scanned the seats for a way to get through.

Commented [SL4]: Is this correct?

“The liquor store’s on the other side.” She pointed to the buildings across the street. “¡Oye!” She called up to two men standing on plastic chairs set up on the boardwalk. The men looked down to her, and without hesitation, pulled her up over the backs of their chairs. She **climbed** the next row and vanished.

Commented [SL5]: Do you mean “climbed over”?

The men reached down, and I clasped the giant beer mug with both hands, as they pulled me up by my elbows and armpits. Everything dazzled: the colourful floats, camera flashes, costumes, music, marimbas, drums... It felt incredible to be a part of whatever these people were celebrating.

Several rows ahead, Faustina climbed over chairs, tapping shoulders, and everyone made way for her. It pained me to see her move away. “I need to follow her,” I shouted. Everyone understood and cleared a path for me, helping me climb over their chairs with my enormous beer in hand.

By the time I reached the last row, Faustina darted alongside the floats. I tried to hurry but slipped on a chair and spilled half my beer down a woman's back.

I shouted, “¡Lo siento!” But she only cared about dancing with her friends.

I tossed the mug to the street and ran to where Faustina danced near the passing floats.

The parade slowed, and Faustina bolted for a space between two floats. “Run!” she shouted. I ran after her, but feather-clad dancers blocked us from pushing our way through. The floats rolled again. We moved with the performers, caught between the floats, surrounded by choreography. “Blend in!” she shouted. “Dance!” She danced, and I jumped around and pretended to dance until I finally was dancing. We laughed. I fell in love. I thought of kissing her, but two policemen on the sidewalk pointed at us.

“We should move,” she said.

I pushed through the dancers, and Faustina followed.

Across the street, we crawled under the bleachers to the sidewalk, then walked a couple of blocks along rows of palm trees, until we found a liquor store. Faustina bought a bottle of tequila.

We crossed the street after the parade passed. A group of women on the bleachers called out, “¡Güero!”

I walked away, but Faustina stopped. “Hey, go talk to them!” She pointed at one of the women. “Look at this one. She’s pretty.”

I approached the tall Mexican woman and introduced myself. A group of men behind her had observed our small talk, and they chanted for us to kiss, “¡Beso! ¡Beso!” I turned to Faustina, and she joined in the chant, “¡Beso! ¡Beso! ¡Beso!”. I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. Then the guys at the back began to chant, “¡Puto! ¡Puto! ¡Puto!” Before the entire bleacher section jumped in, I leaned in and kissed the woman on the mouth. Everyone cheered, including Faustina, who then spoke into my ear, “I was starting to think you were gay.”

•

We sat at the fire a while, drinking tequila out of plastic cups. Zuriaa had come out, and he kept scanning the boulevard and beach for Púas and Antonio. Through my drunken fog, I’d begun to feel guilty about flirting with Faustina. It wasn’t clear to me whether Antonio actually had a thing for her, but if he did, stealing her from him probably wouldn’t be a good idea. After all, I needed him to help me get to Fresnillo—unless Púas was serious about us taking off to Fresnillo and beyond.

I got nervous when I spotted Antonio's dark figure in the distance moving toward us. He was lugging his backpack and dragging his guitar across the sand like a child pulling a toy through a sandbox. Zuriaa and I went to him.

He sobbed. "It's shit! It's all shit!"

"What's wrong?" Zuriaa asked.

"They stabbed Púas."

Zuriaa and I stopped walking, but Antonio wiped his tears away and kept moving.

I felt my guts want to empty themselves. "Where is he?"

"Who knows. I got lost."

"Where were you?" Zuriaa asked.

"We got lost!" He arrived at the fire, dropped his bag, sat beside Faustina, and introduced himself to her friends.

Zuriaa approached him, her hands resting heavily on her hips. "Why are you introducing yourself? Antonio, where's Púas?"

Everyone waited silently.

"We followed a Colombian guy. He led us into an alleyway somewhere. Then six guys jumped us. One of them had a knife. He stabbed Púas. The last thing I remember is Púas screaming, 'Run! Run!'"

Zuriaa's voice quivered. "Should we find a cop?"

Antonio shook his head. "I'd rather not spend the night talking with cops. I'm still messed up on those shrooms Faustina gave us—those were great, by the way, thank you."

Zuriaa threw her arms in the air and started sobbing. "What mushrooms?"

For a moment, I thought Zuriaa was more upset about the mushrooms than Púas. Then she stormed to her tent and cried, “Why’d you leave him?”

He didn’t flinch. Instead, he lit half a joint, took a couple of hauls, and handed it over to me. Faustina tossed the rest of her drink in the coals, and then she and her friends said goodnight and went to their tents.

I took a drag and handed the joint back. “When did you find weed?”

Antonio smoked and stared into the fire. “At one point, a guy held my guitar in the air, ready to trash it, but the Colombian guy said, ‘No, not the guitar. It’s his *chamba*... He must play guitar or something.’”

“They saved your guitar, but they killed Púas?”

No answer. His story made no sense to me.

“Did you score from the Colombian *before* he stabbed Púas?” I asked.

He didn’t answer.

And instead of talking about what had happened, or what might happen next, Antonio moved away to set up his tent and he crawled inside. I was convinced Púas was still out there, that Antonio had given him the slip. Then I remembered Púas had my tent, my four-hundred-dollar North Face tent, the only thing in my bag worth pawning.

I drank from Faustina’s tequila bottle and watched the fire dwindle. I got drunk with the hope that Púas would find me and we’d leave, or that Faustina might come out and let me share her tent, but the clouds slithered in to choke out the stars one by one, and she never came out. I rested my head on the beach. Then the ground spun... I dug my hand into the sand and held on.

•

I woke in the morning to whistling winds and panicked voices. I crawled from out of my sleeping bag—my mouth dry mouth and my head pounding. Sand whipped my face. Antonio stood alone on the beach, jamming his tent in his backpack.

“What's going on?”

“*¡Un huracán!*” he shouted.

A thick wall loomed over the shivering water of the Gulf—black clouds like ashes coughed from a volcano. We shielded our faces from the lashing wind and sand.

“*Pinche güero*, you almost slept through a hurricane!” It was Faustina. She had walked over from the boardwalk with her backpack. She handed me her water bottle.

I called to Antonio as he walked off the beach. “Where’s Zuriaa?”

“She’s gone,” he said.

“I talked to her this morning,” Faustina said. “Before she left.”

“Where did she go?”

“She wanted to travel alone for a bit. Then she’s going home—back to school. She looked pretty sad. I mean, obviously with what happened to your other friend.”

I waited for Antonio to walk away far enough so that he couldn’t hear us. “He wasn’t killed,” I said. “He’s got money. He’s probably on his way to Toluca by now.”

She grabbed my arm. “Why do you say that?”

“Antonio’s story makes no sense. Can I join your group?”

“They went home to Chiapas,” she said. “I have to head back to Guadalajara eventually; that’s kind of on the way to Fresnillo. Can I travel with you?”

I tried to conceal my smile.

We carried our backpacks off the beach as the rain came. Colourful garbage lay scattered all over the boardwalk—countless plastic cups, cans and plates blowing in the wind like dead autumn leaves.

“*Vamonos*,” Antonio said, walking ahead. “The hurricane’s coming.”

By the time we entered the *zócalo*, people said the hurricane alert had been downgraded to a tropical storm. We were soaked and starving. Antonio still had some weed, and the three of us spent the day smoking joints in a storefront alcove, sheltered from the storm. I hunched over my notepad and wrote about the craziness of Veracruz, and Faustina. Antonio didn’t say anything about her and I clearly hitting it off, so I began to wonder if I’d imagined his infatuation over her—maybe he didn’t care about her at all. He didn’t seem to care about where Púas might be, or my tent... I’d come all this way for Antonio’s bullshit fusion of *bandas*, and I didn’t have a peso to show for it—and now I’d lost my goddamned tent.

I hoped every moving shadow was Púas, carrying my tent and coming to beat the hell out of Antonio, but he never came.

•

We woke in the night to Antonio leaning over us.

“This is Victor,” he said. “He’s taking us to sleep at his house.” Victor was around thirty years old, and he wore a black raincoat with the hood pulled over his

head. He had a cookie-cutter face—flat and forgettable, like a mannequin, with painted brown eyes, a carved grin, and short hair, parted to the side.

The thought of sleeping under a roof got us up fast, and we followed Victor through the pelting rain. I walked with Faustina. Antonio and Victor walked ahead of us.

“How far do you live?” Antonio asked.

I couldn’t understand Victor’s mumbling.

A few blocks later, Antonio asked again.

“Five minutes away,” he said.

“Victor, you said that fifteen minutes ago,” Antonio said.

“My name’s not Victor. It’s Alfredo.”

I wanted to stop, to stay away from this lunatic, to take our chances anywhere else, but Faustina and Antonio walked on, so I followed.

More than five minutes had passed when we came to an intersection where the street flowed like a creek.

“We have to take a bus from here,” Alfredo said.

“I thought you lived five minutes away?” I asked.

We backed away and huddled, leaving Alfredo waiting at a bus stop.

Antonio whispered, “I think he has multiple personalities or something. He keeps changing his name.”

Faustina shivered. “I don’t give a shit what his name is. I’m freezing. My shoes are soaked. I need to sleep inside tonight.”

The promise of sleeping in a house with Faustina filled me with courage. “He’s not dangerous. There are three of us. We’ll be fine.”

•

An overcrowded bus finally pulled over. Victor, Faustina, and I squeezed in as much as we could, standing on the stairs, but Antonio only had one foot in the doorway when the bus began to move. The driver couldn't see him holding onto the handle with one hand, guitar in the other, hopping alongside the bus and trying to jump on.

"Wait!" I shouted. The weight of Antonio's bag pulled him down.

"*¡Para!*" I shouted.

Faustina shrieked, "He fell under the bus!"

Everyone on the bus lurched to the windows and screamed for the driver to stop. Victor, or whatever his name was, stood expressionless.

The driver slammed his brakes, and we all jumped off. Thinking we'd find Antonio's head crushed like a watermelon, his body twitching, his guitar splintered like kindling, I reached for Faustina to pull her away, and shouted, "Don't look!"

But half a block back, Antonio was limping toward us in the rain, inspecting his guitar.

"Did you get run over?" Faustina asked.

"No, it missed me—not like you'd care."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," she said.

He ignored her. "I cracked my guitar again," he said. It had broken in the same spot where his wife had bashed a hole.

"Your CD player's ruined, too," I said. Antonio had strapped it to the back of his backpack, and now the thing had cracked and had buttons missing.

“Throw it away,” he said. “I’m throwing all my broken pieces away starting tonight.”

I detached the CD player and tossed it by a tree.

Victor approached. “My house is close to here. We can walk, if you still want to go.”

Faustina snapped, “Where the fuck do you live, man?”

Victor pointed to an intersection. “I promise. You see those traffic lights? Seven blocks from there.”

We walked through deserted streets, navigating around dirty puddles as the rain slowed, until we finally arrived at a row of townhouses.

Alfredo unlocked the door and lead us into a darkened hallway. “You guys have to be quiet,” he whispered, flicking on the lights of a living room containing nothing but two old sofas and a small tube television on an end table.

We dumped our backpacks on the floor and peeled off our wet layers. Antonio pointed to a pair of women’s loafers. “You live with someone?” he asked.

“No, I live with my sister.” Alfredo removed his raincoat and shoes. “She’s at work. She’s a police officer.”

I slumped beside Faustina on the sofa. Antonio tuned his guitar on the sofa facing us. Alfredo paced through the house, from the living room to the kitchen and back, mumbling to himself.

I found a lanyard hanging on the banister—Alfredo’s work I.D. His name wasn’t Alfredo or Victor. It was Ismael. He worked in a pharmacy.

When he walked upstairs, I whispered, “I don’t trust him. I think he’s gotten into some pills.”

Antonio chuckled. “Maybe he’ll share some.”

Faustina didn’t look amused. “If he’s on medication, he probably needs it.”

Ismael called downstairs, “The girl can sleep upstairs tonight, in the spare room.”

Faustina and I said, “*No, gracias.*”

“It’s okay,” I said. “We’ll all sleep in the living room.”

•

After a cool shower upstairs, I found a can of shaving cream under the sink, so I pulled out the dull, rusty blade from my bag. Halfway through shaving, I heard Antonio talking to Faustina downstairs, so I opened the door a crack.

“Let’s get rid of him,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“Because he’s not a traveller like you and me. He doesn’t know what it’s like to be drawn to the road, to be homesick, even when you’re home.”

Through the mirror, I spotted Ismael watching me from the hallway. I opened the door. “Do you need the washroom?”

He raised his hand and showed me his pocket-sized Bible. “This is my God. He speaks to me.”

“I’m going to finish shaving.” I shut the door and locked it.

•

At the sight of my freshly-shaved face, Faustina smiled and grabbed my chin and said, “Now you look like a *güero*.” So, I figured she hadn’t agreed to

Antonio's plan of ditching me. Antonio made a joint-smoking gesture to us and we nodded. He called up the stairs, "Victor? I mean, Alfredo? We're going to smoke a joint outside, all right?"

No response from Ismael.

We slipped on our wet shoes.

Ismael came rushing down the stairs. He pushed his way through us to close the door Antonio had opened. "My neighbor will see you. He's a cop. Smoke that inside."

"Your sister won't care?" Faustina asked.

"No."

"Isn't she a cop?" I asked.

He chortled. "My *sister, a cop?*"

Antonio and I exchanged dubious glances as we followed Ismael upstairs into a bedroom. The street lamp lit the room, with only a bare queen mattress on the floor. We sat on the mattress, and Ismael left us, shutting the door.

From the hallway, Ismael muttered, "Leave the window closed, so my neighbor won't smell it."

"Sure thing." I pointed to the crack under the door, to the unmoving shadows of his feet, and whispered, "He's listening."

Antonio sparked the joint. "Do you think we should offer him a toke?"

I whispered, "Maybe he'd act normal."

The door opened a crack, and a shaft of light sliced into the room. Ismael peered at us from the hallway.

Antonio held up the joint. "Want a toke, *hermano?*"

“*No, gracias.*”

As we passed the joint around, Ismael tiptoed into the room and stood beside the bed, looking down at us. I watched his hands, making sure he didn’t reach behind him or into his pockets.

“I had a brother who looked like you,” he said.

Faustina furrowed her brow. “Like who, the *güero*?”

Antonio tried to stifle his laughter. “Was your brother white?”

Ismael ignored their questions and kept his gaze on me.

“He had blue eyes and tattoos, too. He died because of drugs. He went crazy.”

“I’m not going crazy,” I said.

Faustina asked, “Will having us over upset your sister?”

Ismael straightened himself. “No. I’ll tell her you’re my cousins.”

Antonio burst into laughter. “Do you think she’ll believe that? Hey, sister, I’d like you to meet *my* cousins... And this one’s Canadian!”

Ismael maintained his blank expression. “I’m going to bed.” His arms hung motionless to his sides when he walked out of the room.

•

In the living room, Antonio lay on the sofa. I let Faustina have the second couch. I rolled my sleeping bag on the floor and scribbled in my pad.

“I want to leave,” Faustina whispered. “This guy scares me.”

Antonio rolled over, turning his back to us. “We’re as safe in here as we are outside. But there’s a terrible vibe in this city. It attacked me the moment we arrived. We’ll head south in the morning, to Chiapas.”

I knew my hunger and frustration would keep me up. I dug into my bag, pulled a two-hundred-peso bill out of my sock, and then whispered to Faustina, “You want to walk outside? It stopped raining.”

•

It was 2 a.m. No one else out—not even the dogs. At an OXXO, I bought two ham and cheese sandwiches, a bag of *Taquis*, and a *Pacífico caguama*. We sat on the curb outside the house and feasted.

“Are you planning to go south with Antonio?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “How about you?”

“Me? I don’t even know him.”

“Didn’t you spend time together on the Pacific?” I asked.

“He was around, yeah. But, it’s not like we’re friends.”

“Well, he’s not my friend either,” I said. “I have to find Púas in Toluca. He has my tent.”

She squeezed my arm. “Let’s hitchhike tomorrow!”

“Okay.”

•

After exchanging the empty *caguama* for a full one, we got stoned on Faustina’s hash pipe and wandered the streets, high and full of energy because we had a plan. We strolled through the neighborhood as if we knew our way around.

Faustina said, “I write too, you know. I write notes and leave them in places for strangers to find.”

“Like where?”

“On a bus, for example.”

“What kind of notes?”

Faustina got up and squatted between two parked cars. “Yesterday I left a note in the women’s washroom in the *zócalo*. I wrote about when I was twelve and got hit by a car. I almost died. I was hospitalized for three months and had a tube coming out of my lungs to drain the fluid. And I remember inflating balloons to exercise. By the time I left the hospital, I’d filled the room with colourful balloons.”

I wrote her story in my notepad and watched her urine snake through the cobble cracks and down to a rain puddle, like the fluid from her drowning lungs. “You came back from the dead.”

“Yep, I guess I’m like Jesus,” she said, pulling her pants up. We started walking again and she took the bottle from me first, then my notepad. “Can I see?” She sifted through pages of scrambled thoughts written out of order, upside-down. “Let’s find a note for you to leave. Is this English?” sShe asked. “Did you write all of this? It looks like a bunch of people wrote in here.”

I took back my notepad and tore out the first legible page. “Here. It’s a poem.”

She stopped walking. “Leave it here.” She pointed to a small shrine someone had hung outside their house off the sidewalk—a weathered, wooden frame containing a flaking statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe and three burned out candles. I folded the poem, reluctant to leave my only copy. But I trusted Faustina, and thought of it as an offering.

“No. Read it to me first,” she said.

Commented [SL6]: I’m not sure how clear this is.

I tried to translate. *“Through the failed sky, man sucked down lightning and shattered the world’s heart. And in the earth deceased, where the jaw of order put out the nightlight, bones search for flesh.”*

“¡Hijo!” She pulled me away. “It’s so dark. You can’t leave that here.”

I jammed the poem in my pocket. “Write something new,” she said. “Write about when you were a kid or something, like my balloon story.”

I sleepwalked away from Faustina, deeper into the night, and away from the void of my forgotten youth. “I can’t think of any stories.”

Faustina caught up to me and asked, “You don’t remember your childhood?”
“No.”

•

In the morning, I woke alone on the living room floor. For a second, I thought Antonio and Faustina had left me with Ismael, but then Antonio poked his head out from the doorway. “We’re leaving,” he said. “You coming?” He was stuffing his sleeping bag in his backpack, unaware that the night before, when Faustina and I had come back into the house, we’d rooted through the side pockets of his backpack. We’d found two *tubos* of weed, and I’d jammed them in my backpack. We’d talked of slinking off before Antonio woke, but now what?

I shoved my sleeping bag into my backpack, as Faustina came downstairs with wet hair, dressed and ready to go. She squeezed past Ismael, who sat quietly at the foot of the stairs, looking forlorn watching us pack up.

When we all had our shoes on and stood at the door, Antonio said, “Okay, Victor—Alfredo, we’re off.

Ismael stood. “Please stay. I’ll die without you guys.”

Faustina looked flustered, and turned away from Ismael, while I yanked the door open. The three of us shuffled out to the yard. Ismael followed us, barefoot. A vacuous smile spread across his wooden face. "If you go, I'll die." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a TV remote. He aimed the remote at the clouds, squinting.

"We have to go," Faustina said, tugging at my shirt.

We looked back to see Ismael still standing there, pointing his remote at a distorted grey sky.

•

We took a bus to the *zócalo*, then retraced our steps to the parade.

"Let's go smoke a joint at the beach," Antonio said.

Faustina and I eyed each other, slowing our pace as we reached parade street, still cluttered with garbage. We'd have to ditch Antonio before he figured out that we'd ripped him off, but I was carrying his bongos and didn't want to take those too. I wondered if I could slip his weed back into his pocket when we got to the beach. Faustina wandered off to find a place to pee.

"Are you writing about me?" he asked.

"What?"

"In your notepads. Do you write about me?"

"Yeah. I'm immortalizing you."

He smiled. "How long would your book be?"

"I don't know. About two hundred pages?"

Antonio shook his head. "That's too long! If I wrote a book, it would be eighty pages long."

What the hell did he know about writing books, I thought.

“We’ll head to Villahermosa today,” he said. “I have an aunt there. We can regroup for a week, play the *zócalo*.” Then he whispered, “When we get rid of this chick, we’ll move on to Chiapas.”

“Why would we get rid of her?”

“She’s not a real traveller—not like us. Listen, after Guatemala, we’ll go up to *Real de Catorce* and eat peyote. But we’d have to detour to Mexico City first, to visit my son.”

“Your *son*?”

“Yes. He’s three. We named him Williamsii, after the cactus.”

As Antonio babbled about all the adventures we’d have, I couldn’t stop thinking about his son, fatherless in Mexico City. And his wife, who he’d abandoned, like he’d abandoned Púas. And how he’d tried to abandon me, and now Faustina. All of a sudden, I understood why his wife had smashed his guitar with a rock.

We came to a group of men and women sitting at the foot of the bleachers. They’d been up all night and were still singing and playing guitar, stinking of stale cigarette smoke and booze. We drank rum and flat Coke with them and smoked from their soapstone pipe.

Faustina and I sat together in the bleachers and watched the spectacle, as Antonio dropped his backpack and joined the music. He strummed a joyful song on his guitar—one I’d never heard him play. I hadn’t seen him this happy in weeks. I understood his happiness. That feeling of leaving was in his bones again.

That feeling of leaving was in my bones too, and it was time for me to go. It was time to find Púas.

I got excited and said to Faustina, “*Vamonos.*”

She nodded.

We slinked, unnoticed down the seats and up the beach like spiders.

I left the bongos on the bleachers.

Chapter Fourteen

We caught a ride out of town from a speeding Suburban that dropped us off along highway 140. We smoked a joint and walked for three hours in search of another ride. Sweat soaked our shirts and pooled under our backpacks.

We approached an old, rusty farm truck parked on the shoulder. The farmer let us sit in the back, with big sacks of beans under a blue tarp.

As I sat beside Faustina, both of us bathing in the heavenly blue light, I thought of kissing her. Then the truck started to move.

“Hey, you think that Victor guy will hurt himself?” she asked.

“Ismael? I don’t know. I’d rather forget about that *loco.*”

She pulled away from me. “Ugh, don’t say that word. It’s offensive. He’s mentally ill... Sorry, I’m sensitive about that stuff cause my mom once put me in an institution.”

She sat there peeking through the slatted wood walls, at the mountains rolling by like a blurred slide show of her past, and I wondered if she’d rather be out on

the road now than stuck in here with me—someone who never knew what to say when people needed something to be said.

“Eli, do you think you write to distance yourself from this life? Like, maybe making sense of it in writing helps you avoid fixing anything in real life?”

“Maybe I’ll make sense of it all later, but for now, I think I write to remember.”

She nodded solemnly. “I think I write to forget.”

•

Outside Córdoba, we hiked up a steep hill into a village, where we asked the locals about places to camp. It was getting dark, when someone suggested we ask the Pentecostal church for refuge.

The church was on the main floor of a two-storey duplex that sat on a residential dirt residential. We bought fresh bread next door and ate on the church’s lawn, waiting for the evening service to end. There were no curtains in the picture window, allowing us to see inside the narrow, white room where twenty people sat on white plastic folding chairs, listening to the preacher’s muffled voice.

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“Do you believe in God?” Faustina asked.

“I don’t know. If there is a god, I wish it wasn’t a secret.”

•

After the service, we moved to the front door. As the church-goers made their way out, they shook hands with a man in black who had greasy, black hair and pitted acne scars all over his face. Once everyone had gathered their children and headed toward their cars, we approached him.

Faustina unleashed her smile. “Excuse me, *señor*. We’re passing through town, and wondering if you could help us find a place to spend the night.”

He looked us over. “*Un momento*.” He went inside and returned a minute later with a white-haired old man, someone I assumed was a pastor. He took a long look at us and simply nodded to the man in black, then walked away.

“Everything’s fine,” the man in black said. “Come inside.”

We followed him into the dusty church, and he closed the door. “Please, have a seat.” We sat in the chairs, and he sat on the piano bench, facing us. The piano behind him looked tortured, with peeled veneer and grubby white keys. He brought his hands together. “We’re happy to help. God’s will brought you here.”

I offered no reaction, but Faustina said politely, “*Gracias, señor*.”

He went on, “The Bible says we are never meant to feel at home because we are not home at all. God instilled that feeling in us, so we want to look for that further something... do you deny it?” In our uncomfortable silence, he waited for an answer. “There’s an empty room upstairs where you can stay, but this is a house of God.” He leaned in. “And since you are guests in His house, it’s important you abstain from... certain activities.” He looked straight at me now. “You understand very little Spanish, correct?” he asked.

“No. I understand everything.”

He turned to Faustina. “Are you boyfriend and girlfriend?”

Faustina shook her head. The man looked back at me.

“Why would that matter?” I asked.

He stood abruptly and walked to the door. "I can see you two are exhausted. I'll leave you to rest. There's an empty room upstairs." Before he left, he added, "Please leave this door unlocked."

We watched him walk down the street, his darkness melding with the night.

"Did you get a pedophile vibe off him?" I asked.

Faustina burst out laughing. "What? You're ridiculous!"

I locked the deadbolt.

•

Upstairs, we found the room cluttered with boxes and garbage bags. After pushing things aside, we rolled out our sleeping bags, sending dust bunnies sailing across the filthy tiles. Then I turned the light off and we lay in our bags, eighteen inches from each other, surrounded by boxes. We stared at the ceiling in awkward silence.

"You think God would disapprove of us smoking in here?" Faustina asked.

"My grandmother used to say if I didn't behave, baby Jesus would come down from Heaven to eat my toes."

"There's only one way to find out." She fetched a fat roach from her bag and lit it.

We exhaled out the window. "What if there is a God, but no afterlife?" I asked.

Faustina looked up at me. "I guess we just have to make the most of this life." I knew we'd be rolling around on the floor soon.

“After Toluca, you could come stay at my place,” she said. “My parents have a guest house. You’d have the days to yourself... to write. I’ll be busy with school.”

“Oh, what are you studying?”

“Everything. I’m finishing high school.”

“*High school?* Wait—how old are you?”

It must have been the look on my face that caused her to blush. “Eighteen. Why? How old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” I said.

She threw her head back and laughed. “I thought you were, like, twenty. How old did you think *I* was?”

“I’d have guessed... twenty-two?”

She chuckled. “Maybe my year in the institution aged me.”

“A *year?*”

A loud thud came from downstairs, stirring my bowels.

“What was that?” she whispered. “You locked the door, right?”

“Yeah.”

Another thud. The doorknob rattled downstairs.

Faustina’s eyes opened wide. “Someone’s trying to get in.”

I slipped on my shoes. “It’s nothing. Could be next door.”

“Where’re you going?”

“Nowhere. But I want to be ready.”

We sat on our sleeping bags with our shoes on, waiting for someone to break in. Our hearts pounded in the stillness. Faustina eventually fell asleep, but I lay awake for hours with my shoes on. What if the priest called the cops?

•

In the morning, we walked down a highway. There was no shoulder, so we hugged the rockface and trampled over dried weeds, trying not to get clipped by traffic. When we found a shoulder where cars could pull over, we dumped our bags on the slope and got stoned.

Eighteen years old. What was she doing out here? Had she run away from home, like Zuriaa? I couldn't wait to get her home.

A couple of rides took us into Puebla. We got there late, so we searched for a place to camp and came across a house for sale in an empty, fenced-in lot with overgrown weeds. We climbed over the eight-foot fence. Behind the house, we found enough a concrete patch with just enough space to pitch Faustina's tent. We tossed our bags inside and headed to the *zócalo*.

While Faustina went into a pharmacy, I checked my email at a café. Harold Ainslee had sent his notes on my novel along with an editorial letter. *"I'm rather fond of your protagonist, and the little, random encounters on the farm, which evoke his rootlessness, but we never have any sense of what the story is. Your hero neither acts nor even wants. You need to ask yourself why, somewhere inside, there is fear and resistance to what he needs, why he'd rather intoxicate himself than feel vulnerable."*

“Ever get high on this?” Faustina had poked her head over my shoulder and I scrambled to close my email, worried she might understand enough English to know my writing had failed.

She held a brown bottle of cough syrup.

•

We sat on our sleeping bags and smoked a joint, sheltered from the rain now pattering the tent walls. We took turns sipping the purple cough syrup until we drank half the bottle, and then I finished the rest and we settled in for some sort of ride. I welcomed anything to rip from my head the understanding that my book was in shambles.

Soon, my thoughts became anesthetized, my body lying in a peaceful warmth I thought would carry me into sleep. But a crackling thunder cued a heavy downpour and the smell of rain filled the tent. As I started to zip the flaps closed, we saw the deluge flooding the yard already. “This will get worse,” Faustina said.

She slipped her shoes on and made a frantic run for the house, the rain soaking her before she found an open window and crawled inside. I gathered our things and made a run for the house. Faustina opened the front door. “Welcome home!”

For some reason, the empty two-bedroom house had a hammock strung over the living room floor.

Faustina lay on the floor and looked comfortable on our dirty sleeping bags and pillows made from our sweaters. She closed her eyes. I took the hammock. Then, over and over again, came a slipping sensation—a slipping out of consciousness.

Slipping.

Slipping.

Slipping.

Words stumbled out of me, “I feel something. You want the hammock?”

Faustina snored and slobbered on my sweater.

My heart pounded. My body vibrated. Then my legs began trembling.

“What the hell, man—relax,” I whispered. “It’s okay, it’s okay. It’s not a seizure, you’ll be okay... Stop talking to yourself. She’ll hear you...I know!” I was hearing myself speak, with no control over my words. I stepped outside, and leaned against the house, sheltered from the heavy rain. Suddenly, I was not there. I knew where I was, and who I was, but I was not at the house; I was inside my head, watching this happen to someone else. I whispered, “Come back... You’re alright. Come back.” I swung my arms around, jumped up and down, rubbed my arms, and smacked my legs, hoping to warm up, to feel connected to my body again, but nothing worked. Then I stretched my arms up to the sky and a knife slashed at me, slicing my chest. I jumped back, grabbing myself. “What was that?” Nothing had happened. Yet the blade came at me again, cutting me open. “Stop thinking of that. Stop thinking of that!” An image flashed through my head: a rotten mouth with missing and decrepit teeth. “You sonofabitch. No more drugs. No more!” I jumped up and down, determined to continue doing so until I fell into myself again.

I tired after a minute and sat on the wet concrete. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. The vibrations throughout my body merged, rising up my spine into a low, rumbling noise that seemed to shoot out the top of my head and

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hovered over me in the sky—then, in space. My breath slowed, the trembling faded, and I proceeded to bask in the familiar warmth and stillness of the cough syrup high. After a minute or so, I was calm, but the loud rumbling continued. I tilted my head up and opened my eyes. It was a jet, flying somewhere over the clouds.

I stepped back inside the house wanting to tell Faustina about what had happened to me. I wondered how many times she'd gotten trashed on cough syrup. Maybe her mother checked her into an institution because she'd caught Faustina doing jumping jacks in the yard, out of her skull on cough syrup.

A noise came from the kitchen. I approached the odd squeaking and spotted a giant rat on the stove. Without hesitating, I grabbed a can of insecticide from the counter and hurled it across the room, missing the rat and shattering the window behind the stove.

The shrill of broken glass woke Faustina and she shouted, "What was that?"

"A rat. I took care of it."

I lay in the hammock again, understanding that in the morning we'd have to run.

•

The next day, Faustina found me sweeping outside and picking shards out of the *lavadero*.

"Did you break the window?" Her voice had a tone I'd never heard from her—the tone of a scolding babysitter.

"I was trying to hit the rat."

She hurried outside to tear down her tent.

We lugged our backpacks to the plaza and ate breakfast on the sidewalk—stale *conchas* and a box of orange juice from a corner store.

Faustina said, “Eli, I need to head back toward Guadalajara today. My dad sent me money to take a bus home.”

I felt immediate relief, knowing I wouldn’t have to keep hitchhiking with her—to feel responsible or guilty of anything.

We walked to the bus station and split the weed. Then, we hugged and said goodbye.

“You should visit me if you come through Guadalajara,” she said.

“Okay. Maybe Púas will come, too.”

But she must have known I was lying, or she must have grown tired of me, because she never gave me her address.

Chapter Fifteen

For two hours, I sat in an air-conditioned internet cafe reading Harold Ainslee’s notes. It was a hack job—a lazy bludgeoning. Ripping up my manuscript as callously as he had, I began to wonder if Harold Ainslee even knew what he was talking about. I had never read his writing, after all. So, I ran a search for his book, *Scream in Peace*, and found an excerpt of the first chapter. From the opening paragraph, I was bored to tears—sentence after sentence describing Victorian wallpaper and magnolia-motif upholstery. I didn’t bother responding to his notes.

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I thought of my former co-worker Paul Orr, a fine-art auctioneer. We'd worked together at a Toronto auction house before I left for the farm. He was a personal friend of Bella Chevalier, a seasoned literary agent in Canada. I remembered talking to Paul about my writing, and he said he could get my manuscript into Bella's hands one day.

I emailed Paul—told him about my trip, and all about the book and my rotten editor, Harold Ainslee. I asked if Paul could help me get my manuscript to Bella.

Then, full of renewed life and confidence, I walked north towards highway 150, ready to find Púas.

I had five hundred pesos in my pocket.

•

In the afternoon, I stopped at a gas station. A British couple pulled up in a hatchback. While the attendant filled their tank, I approached the driver and eyed his empty backseat. "Hey there, if you guys are heading north, would you mind giving me a lift? I'm heading to my friend Púas' house in Toluca."

The driver hesitated to answer and then turned to his wife, who was smiling politely at me. He whispered something to her, and it stopped her smiling. Then he turned to me. "We'd rather not."

I stepped aside to let him pay the attendant. "You'd rather not?"

"That's right." He started his car and drove away.

The gas attendant came to me. "He rejected you? He's your countryman. *Tu paisano.*"

"Not exactly."

•

A beat-up transport had pulled up, hissing and rattling and clanking to a stop. The truck looked held together with good luck; the front bumper was cracked and duct-taped to the grill. Out came a Mexican driver, around my age, with torn jeans and a black eye.

I met him by the fuel pumps and asked, “You heading north?”

“*Sí. Hasta Toluca.*”

“Could you give me a lift?”

“Of course.”

His name was Raimundo. I quickly noticed Raimundo had a twitch—his whole body would jolt, as though he was having a hiccup, but he would simultaneously exhale sharply through his nose.

He had a lengthy private chat with a gas station attendant. Soon after, a mechanic came out with a giant tire iron and pried a spare tire from the truck.

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“I sold it for five hundred pesos. I’ll tell my boss it fell off.”

“*Fell off?*”

He simply nodded and twitched and went back to his transaction.

With the money, Raimundo bought us *tortas* and *horchatas* and we ate outside the station at a row of dusty plastic tables with other hungry men.

Raimundo reached into his breast pocket and pulled out some loose pills, dropping two on the table when he twitched.

“What are they?”

“*Hielo.*”

“¿*Hielo?*”

“Anfetaminas. You want some?”

We hit the road wired and leaning over the dashboard with our speeding heads.

“Feels like we’re firefighters!” Raimundo said.

But it felt like the truck was on fire as it howled and shrieked and slowed to a dying crawl uphill. I smelled something burning, then I smelled the rain before it came down hard, dousing the windows like firehoses.

“This stretch of road is dangerous,” he said. *“Sometimes, at night, they’ll have a woman stand on the road. If you pull over for her, men will run out from the woods with machetes.”*

I stared out into the darkness, scanning for men with machetes, and fearing the sudden appearance of a lone woman, but there was nothing out there except for visions of having my throat hacked.

•

We entered Mexico City around 3 a.m. The police stopped us on a deserted street, pulling over ahead of the truck.

Raimundo stepped out and approached the driver’s side of the car. How many more pills did he have in the truck, I wondered. And what other drugs? How long before his weird spasms prompted them to search the truck? If they found anything, he could pin it on me. Maybe that’s why he picked me up, to be his patsy. I thought of jumping out of the truck and running down an alley, but moments later, Raimundo returned and started the truck up again.

The cops drove away.

“What did they want?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, *nothing*?”

“They just checked up.”

He shuddered several times in a row, and I knew he’d lied. Then two blocks later, we approached the same police car, parked on the center median, perpendicular to the truck. Raimundo stopped again.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

He slid out of the truck and walked to the car. He leaned on the driver’s door. The cop in the passenger seat pulled out a searchlight and shined it at me, blinding me. I closed my eyes and thought of slipping my sunglasses on, but didn’t want to look like a smartass, so I just sat there, squeezing my eyes shut like an idiot.

The searchlight eventually turned off, releasing me, and Raimundo’s door opened. The cops drove away.

“What did they want?”

“Nothing.” He fired the truck up once more and jammed it into gear.

“What did they say?”

“Not much, checking things out.”

His caginess irritated me now. “Did you pay them off?”

Raimundo shook his head.

“Were they asking about me?”

Nothing.

Moments later, we turned onto an onramp and Raimundo slammed his breaks. The ramp was closed.

“Ah, shit.” He slapped his steering wheel. “I forgot they closed this.”

The setup was obvious. He'd driven me somewhere secluded so the cops could drag me out of the truck, whack me over the head with their batons, and rob me. I searched in the mirror for the cop car. My heart raced. I grabbed my backpack and opened the door.

"What the hell are you doing? Close the door so I can back out of here!"

Raimundo started to reverse, so I closed the door, and between spasms, he eased the truck back onto the road. My eyes jumped from Raimundo to the mirror and all around us, searching for the cops, but nothing happened.

Raimundo drove us to Toluca, into his neighborhood. He pulled up in front of his home, said goodnight, and let me sleep in the sleeper.