

The Road from Cubabi

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Gabriela walked the dirt road with a hard limp. The joint of her left hip was arthritic, and the years of bone grinding against bone had shortened her leg. The intercity bus approached and slowed, rattling on its loose suspension in a whirl of flying dirt and gravel. Its squeaky mechanical doors opened in a racket of loose screws and scraping metal. She had no money to board and she looked up at the driver hopelessly. She had spent the last of her money at the *clínica*, seeing a doctor. She was pregnant again.

The bus driver removed his sweaty captain's cap, wiped his head and neck with a dingy handkerchief, and stared down at her. The rickety school bus was overfull with people and their valises, clucking chickens, old mothers and their children with a few *centavos* worth of caramel on their faces, and men smoking, their hands hanging out the windows with the hot ash between dark, dry fingers. A rush of fermented sweat, perfume, and tobacco greeted her nose with a horrid flourish, reviving her nausea. She could not bring herself to beg as the indifferent eyes of the people watched and their smells assaulted her. She looked back at the driver without any words and the doors scraped shut.

As the bus pulled away, she pinched at her thigh to block the dart of pain running from her hip to her ankle, nostalgic for the days when she and pain were not so intimate. Her leg buckled. Who was this woman walking on a dirt road in the hot June sun on her way to bearing another child that her legs could not carry? The growing disability made her strange to herself. If this was not her, why did it feel so real? She walked on, pain tearing its cruel, familiar cut through her joint and down her muscles.

Dust settled in her hair. The sun burned the skin of her head and cooked the dirt into her scalp. Sweat pasted her purple sack dress against her skin in stiff crinkles, making her body react in goosebumps. She cupped her hand over her forehead as the bus, framed in a cloud of dirt, grew smaller. It looked magical in the distance with the dusty haze and curling heat rising up behind it, its deep yellow a glorious sunset. Above her, the expanse was cloudless, birdless. The sheer blue sky seemed to go on forever, a desert without burrows or shade-making dunes, a great silent nothing that watched her. She could not find God or feel his presence, and she knew that he did not have eyes. If he did, he would have come to her aid. She wanted to shake her fist at him like

the old Indians who continued to curse Spain, but she was sure there was no point in fighting with the air. Just as Spain had left Mexico, God too had left Gabriela and his absence felt as unnatural as the pitted bone inside her decaying joint.

The late afternoon heat pressed her fine hair against the back of her neck and it felt like matted wool. Accordion music played on a car radio in the distance. The dancehall polka mingled with the sound of tires grinding gravel and an old Chevy Bel Air came alongside her. A strange sense of fear and embarrassment came over her when she saw that the car was full of young men in cowboy hats—two in the front and two in the back. They had beers. She felt as stupid and ugly as a lost donkey. She looked straight ahead.

“*Horale*, baby doll, why you walking alone in *este infierno*? It's too hot to be walking in the chaparral. You need a ride?” Each face in the car looked at her with an eager smile.

Gabriela eyed the wheels that could get her home in forty minutes and relieve the weight on her bones. She pinched at the pain, trying to stop its pulsing current, but it lashed down her leg like a cracking whip.

“We saw you limping. What did you do to your foot? Where you going? *A que loca*, get in. We take you, *linda*.”

Gabriela lowered her head toward the front passenger window and forced a polite smile at the driver, trying not to hold his gaze. “Thank you for offering. I live thirty miles up the road with my husband and six children.” She hoped the reference to her family would dispel any thoughts they might have about her sexual attractiveness, though she felt as dry and lifeless as the hot gravel under her feet.

The men looked at each other and the back door opened. Gabriela stood back and looked at the inviting menace. *Un asiento—a seat. No more walking. A breeze*. She was outside the city limits and could see nothing but miles of pain, her leg faltering, and nowhere to sit but in the dirt. The ten inches of battered seat between the men looked voluptuous and she gazed at it with carnal desire.

One of the men stepped out and gestured like a valet to the back seat and the other man patted it. Gabriela abandoned her hesitation and slipped into the space. The door slammed shut and the Bel Air shifted into gear, creating a swift breeze through the open window. She closed her eyes and let the momentum lift her bangs and cool her face. She leaned forward just enough to let the air circulate down her collar into her dress. The young man on her right stared greedily at her lips. He smiled at her, tracing a line from her neck down to her hips with his slanted eyes. The other man ran his forefinger along

the length of her upper arm, stopping to nudge the side of her breast lightly. He tipped the long neck of his beer bottle at her and threw his head back, guzzling his beer. His prickly Adam's apple bobbed up and down beneath his skin like a snake swallowing a rabbit.

Gabriela tightened her arms and legs against her body and looked straight ahead, only to find the man in the front passenger seat staring at her. He pushed back his black felt cowboy hat with its row of shiny conch shells, revealing a large black mole on his sweaty forehead. Speaking in a stern, fatherly voice, he said, "Don't you know it's dangerous to get in cars with strange men?" The driver looked back at her and nodded in agreement, raising his brows, exaggerating his control of the steering wheel.

Gabriela smiled at them respectfully and told a lie. "I believe that God provides. I know your mothers raised you to be good Catholic men, *caballeros*. And I need a ride very badly."

The men all burst into laughter and sucked on their beers. One said, "How do you know we are good Catholic men, *caballeros*? Maybe we are *brujos*, *demonios*, who came up from the bottom of the lake, and we never had mothers. Maybe we want to be paid for our service."

"I do not have money to pay you," Gabriela said firmly, trying not to show alarm, wishing she believed in a God who would save her. The man on her right jerked her head toward him and kissed her abruptly while the other slid his hand up her dress. Sharp buckteeth cut into her lips. She pushed the teeth off her face and jerked away from the snaking hand. "Please, *por Dios!* I am pregnant. Please, stop the car!" she screamed.

The driver slammed on the brakes and said, "*No chingas, no ruedas*. You don't fuck, you don't ride."

Gabriela nodded in agreement. "Yes, yes, of course. I will walk. I have no money to pay you."

The man in the front seat laughed. "*Su Diosito*, your God, has provided. Has he not? God put us on the road to help you and look at how you thank him."

One of the men opened the door, grabbed her by her hair and collar and shoved her out. The other assisted with his foot. Gabriela lay on the ground spitting dirt and pebbles as the men drove off in a hail of dust and expletives. She stood up, surprised at her simple escape, thankful that if there was a God he had blessed her with nothing worse than a little humiliation. The price of the distance the Bel Air had covered had not been that great.

She began to walk and the pain in her hip resumed its vicious course. The scene in the car played over in her mind and she could not stop hearing herself desperately crying out, "I'm pregnant!" *Embarazada*. Stained. The word had

made the car stop. It had scared the men away and it scared her too, but they could run away and she could not. Though the tiny fetus was a mere word, it would soon become pounds of pain, an aching unwanted investment.

Gabriela had never wanted to be pregnant, not even once, let alone seven times—every other year since she was fifteen. She had seen the University in Mexico City when she was thirteen, had watched the beautiful fair-skinned coeds carrying books in their arms—white arms covered with shiny bracelets, tailored sleeves in bright colors, students who listened to learned professors talk about everything: history, art, science, dancing. She wished she could know the things they knew. But she was there to sell the family's homemade clay pottery and *mantillas*, not to dream the grand dreams of the rich, her father had reminded her. He'd grabbed her arm and shaken her. "We have a family to feed. Pay attention. See that lady over there with all that jewelry around her neck? See her rings? Go show her the *mantillas*." He placed a pile of them in Gabriela's arms and pushed her into the street. She approached the lady walking flat on one foot, barely touching the ground with her big toe on the other to straighten her gait.

"Why are you limping, *niña*? *Estás cojo*?" the woman had asked.

"No, *señora*. I am only tired." Gabriela never told people she was born lame, one leg shorter than the other. Deformity, everyone knew, was of the devil. The lady had observed Gabriela's legs and then bought several *mantillas*, out of pity.

Gabriela walked the burning road, pretending to hold books in the crook of her arm, not *mantillas*, pretending she was crossing the city boulevard she remembered so clearly, landscaped with fountains, big green trees and yellow marigolds. She closed her eyes and smelled the cut grass, felt the cool spray of the fountain mist on her face, but the pain would not let her dream live for long. Her leg buckled again. She stopped and looked about for a walking stick, but the blistering sun allowed nothing so big to grow. She walked on squeezing her thigh, knowing that an evening bus would be passing by, and this time she would board it on her knees, begging for the mercy of a free ride.

If she had not carried so many children, her hip would not have become arthritic so soon. It made her hate her husband, Daniel, almost as much as she hated herself for letting him touch her. She hated herself for feeling her poverty so desperately that making love with him seemed the only way to escape it. His body felt like royal satin on her skin and his black eyes promised excitement. Her good sense eloped with his touches. He would come home from picking *chiles*, onions, cotton, pecans around Hatch and Mesilla, in *Nuevo Méjico*, and open a fine bottle of tequila his *patrón* had given him because he was a good

foreman. He and Gabriela would toast to the new radio he had bought in *los Estados* or slow dance around the ball of *dólares* on the table that would buy the sacks of beans and rice for the winter. He would give her a new dress. They would light a candle and get drunk. Soon she would be pregnant again. Daniel was never home when she was pregnant. Her pregnancies occurred outside of his back-and-forth migrations around crops in Texas, New Mexico, and California. He seemed to come out of the north just to stud, then disappear. He'd come back in time to kiss the head of each newborn baby.

He had become mythical to her, this husband, this lawbreaker and provider that traversed the border and her body as if they were no barriers. Her poverty was somehow not his—he simply visited it and added to it every time he made love to her—but he never brought home enough money to alleviate it. The reunions with Daniel had always felt like escape, rescue, but the rolls of American dollars on the table had begun to look like payments rather than support. Her own husband had begun to treat her as a prostitute.

She knew that he had women on the other side and probably children too; he was too young and beautiful not to. He came home too well-fed to be lonely, too full of smiles to be suffering. When she looked at his filled-out face where once his bones had been visible, she wished she too could fly north to the fountain of wealth and comfort. The air in America had to be healthful. The thought of Daniel's fattened cheeks made her angry.

How could she carry another one of his babies? Carrying her own weight was intensely agonizing. The future seemed to hold nothing but pain. The joy of birth would eclipse the hardship for only a brief moment. How could she take care of the other children if she could not walk? She pictured her oldest child Diana, just twelve years old, taking over the cooking, cleaning, the washing of diapers, doing her mother's work and getting old before her time. She had always believed that a child conceived had a right to life, knew this beyond any doubts when her body was younger and stronger, but she did not know this with certainty anymore. She rubbed at the gritty dust on her face; the power of life had taken her choices away. She had gone to Cubabi to seek an abortion, but shame would not let her form the words. Years of tradition held her lips firmly pressed against each other. Instead of speaking her desire, telling the doctor what she wanted, she let him verify the pregnancy and give her a bottle of vitamins.

The old *tías* and *parteras* told stories of God's punishment for the sin of abortion. No decent Catholic doctor would perform the abomination. No normal human being would invite the demonic consequences, and so the towns around the chaparral were full of stories about dead mothers and

dead babies in haunted alleys. They said it was no coincidence that the rise in sightings of unearthly night creatures, the *chupacabras*, coincided with the loosening up of morals that had led to the rise in abortions. If you survived the abortion, they said, the child's cry would carry in your ears for the rest of your life. And you would forever turn, as if called. Guilt would grow like a cancer and eat your heart from the inside out. You would go crazy. That was what they said. If it was not a cousin's fearful whispering in your ear, it was a mother saying it in harsh words to shame you, or a grandmother's *consejo*, her loving advice to heed the will of God. If you died, you would eternally walk the stench-filled alleys with the rats. There would be no exculpation, *ninguna disculpa*, not even a stop in purgatory to hope for the indulgence bought with the masses, prayers, and candles of loved ones. Hell would be your home. That was what they said, but Gabriela wondered how there could be a hell if there was no God. She was glad that her grandmother had not lived to see how she had lost her faith. The sun sat heavily just above the horizon, a bright counterweight to her dark thoughts.

Gabriela knew that the last bus should be coming along soon, but the dimming light told her that the bus would be late or not pass at all. Her heart beat faster. She turned to the road behind her and a gust of wind that seemed to come from nowhere blew in her face. A searing screech broke the desert silence and she looked up to see an *águila* circling above her head. She sat down to relieve her leg, watching the large eagle. An unfortunate creature, making for its nighttime burrow, must have moved too suddenly out in the open and would pay dearly for its mistake. Somewhere in the sandy landscape covered with small weeds and low brush, a lizard, rodent, or snake had been spotted. The bird wheeled about in the sky. Its broad wingspan stretched across a wind current in a fluid glide. It raised its pinions and flapped downwards in a shot then turned its talons outward, inches from the ground, snagging a small rabbit. The little creature's legs jerked and pedaled as it rose into the sky, no doubt utterly bewildered at the wondrous sight of earth below, the eagle's claws hooked into its skin as a magnificent panorama unfurled, a sight it could never have seen from the ground. The eagle's sharp eyes and talons were much too precise for her to believe that death had no reason, the rabbit's last view too vivid and magical.

A sturdy stick a few yards away caught her attention and she pulled herself to it with the palms of her hands and her strong leg, dragging the stiff leg behind her. She lay on her back, her knees apart, thinking about her fetus, a little soul she could send to the sky just like the little rabbit, and the stick in her hand felt as sure as an eagle's talon. Sparing a child the horrors of life would be no crime.

She weighed the stick in her hand, wondering what kind of thrust was needed to dislodge the child. How do you hurt that which your own body has made without hurting yourself? It was easier for her to think of it as a procedural question rather than a religious one in which she should consider the wishes of an invisible presence who had done nothing for her, one in which dead relatives could dictate. Like the eagle's talon, the stick would hook into her body and she would become the rabbit looking down at the earth below, the magical end of her pain—and the beginning of Diana's. What she wanted more than her own freedom was Diana's. She wanted Diana to read books, to know things, to tell stories that mattered, stories with endings that made sense.

Due west, the sun dropped decisively into the black pocket of land where her home lay. As she sat her leg stiffened. It refused to move when she tried to get up, and she knew she would not be able to finish the walk. The evening bus had somehow missed its scheduled run and now she had no chance to be home for the night. She knew Diana would stay put, take care of the younger children and remain calm, for she had told her little girl that it was possible she might not get a ride home and would have to walk the long distance, late into the night.

The silence of the desert seemed too big, the cooling purplish air too eerie. With her leg locked up and no way to get home, she felt lost in the wide open space that had always been so familiar to her. She had lived in the chaparral all her life, traveled the trail from Cubabi many times, and thought she knew the quiet and meandering vicinity well. She often watched the evening star join the sky so imperceptibly that it seemed to have appeared right when she blinked. She would sit outside her mud brick home, turning her ear to the desert silence after her children had fallen asleep. The chaparral was so quiet at night you could hear your heart beat, as though the sounds of life pulsing through your body had found their altar. Yet, as the light left the land, the road became strange, and the night sky she knew so well became fearful. She found herself wishing to be forgiven by a God she imagined angry at her disbelief. She curled into a ball to ease the ache in her back, drawing her legs and arms into her sack dress. The prenatal vitamins in her pocket tumbled over each other, making the gravelly sound of a rattle.

As she lay with her ear to the ground, she heard a light rhythmic hum. She listened to a hypnotic wheeling and hoof beat. It could have been that she dreamed the inner workings of a mechanical earth. The echoing sound grew louder and she could feel the ground vibrating underneath her. She sat up and looked down the road. A bobbing light grew in the darkness. Gabriela stood up and hobbled toward the road, pinching at her stiff leg. An old

horse with a deeply arched back clopped hard against the ground with heavy hooves, hooves tired with work. Very few people traveled by horse and wagon anymore and Gabriela stared at the curiosity. Lamplight swung back and forth illuminating and then quitting the images of two solemn faces, one old and hunched, the other young and alert. The old one's eyes seemed to search deep into the darkness all around him. The young face with wide eyes made her think she might be seeing a vision of Santo Niño, the traveling Christ child so often encountered on the lonely roads of *Méjico*. As the wagon approached, she stepped into the roadway and waved her arms. She quickly stepped back, afraid that they would trample her as they would a ghostly apparition. The man on the buckboard pulled back on the reins, speaking to his horse as the lamp stopped swinging. *¡So, yegua! Tranquilo.* The horse reared back and stopped short its nervous pull against the reins, calmed by the old man's voice. The old man crossed himself. *“Bendito sea Dios.”* His companion, a boy of about six, spoke with nothing but his erect spine and his eyes wide as clay pots.

“Please do not be afraid,” Gabriela shouted. “I am not a ghost. I am not a robber. I am a woman. I missed the intercity bus this afternoon. I am stranded. Please let me ride with you.”

The man leaned forward, verifying her form in the dim light. *“¿Sí, cómo no?”* The hard edges of his face returned to their wrinkled softness and the boy settled into a slouch that said he was no longer afraid. The old man climbed off the buckboard with a stiffness in his legs that Gabriela recognized. Pain showed through his set jaw as he approached her. He grasped Gabriela's arm and walked her to the wagon. In a firm voice, the old man looked up at the boy and ordered him to fetch a blanket. *“La manta, joven,”* he said in a breath full of mint leaf tobacco.

The boy reached behind the buckboard and retrieved a blanket of red, purple, blue, and green stripes. He tossed it to the old man. The old man put the blanket around her shoulders with bony knuckles and sideways fingers. Gabriela smelled earth and hay. The white creases in the man's dark brown skin glowed in the lamplight. They were the gnarled hands of Mexican fathers who worked the defiant dry land, hands that mixed and laid cement without the use of machines, hands burnt by the tannic acids and caustic limes of hard life in the Sonoran desert. Fatherly in the old way, he spoke gruffly to the boy, but looked at him with endless patience and tender mercy.

“This is my grandson, Frankie.” The old man spit his spent tobacco juice over the side of the wagon. “I am too old to raise children,” he said. He snapped the reins and the old horse resumed its rhythmic clopping upon the dark road.

Gabriela smiled over her shoulder at the boy who had given her his place on the buckboard. He sat on a crate behind his grandfather with his arms around the old man's neck, squinting against the darkness, absently rubbing the white stubble on the old man's cheeks with his small hand. How like a soft little rabbit the boy was, Gabriela thought.

"My daughter left this one with me to find a better life in the United States. That was five years ago," the old man said. "Maybe she's dead. Maybe she doesn't want to come home." The little boy hugged the old man's neck tighter and laid his head on his shoulder.

Gabriela did not know why, but she felt utterly drawn to the little boy and curious about the depth of his silence. "I too have lost a loved one to the North," she replied. "A husband, the father of my children."

The old man looked straight ahead. He held the reins loosely in his hands as he leaned forward on the edge of his seat. "How did you come to be alone in the desert so late at night, Gabriela? Are you not afraid?" he asked without looking at her.

"How did you know my name?" She pulled the wool blanket more tightly across her chest.

The old man smiled. "When we stopped, did you not say, 'I am not a ghost. I am not a robber. I am Gabriela?'"

Gabriela's head had ached all day and she could not remember exactly what she had said, but it sounded right and she shrugged at the cold, strange feeling her name had roused in her. She answered his question with a lie. "No, I am not afraid. Where there is no God there is also no evil to be afraid of." She could not tell him that she had been on her way to obtain an abortion, that she had been in a car with men, or that she had come to fear the road and the night where once she had felt only peace.

The old man smiled at her words. "Boldly spoken. An atheist, are you? *Atea?*" he asked. He continued to look straight ahead, but Gabriela felt as though he were looking directly at her just the same, as though multiple eyes inhabited the circumference of his head, one eye studying her with sadness, another with amusement, another shrewd and cold, accusing her of plotting murder.

Gabriela felt stung at being called an atheist, but she did not answer the man. It was not the way her elders had taught her and she felt ashamed. Despite one's bad luck, to announce such nonbelief was to show bad manners, to disgrace the generations that had raised you, and to invite more bad luck. She knew her grandmother would have been heartbroken to hear her speak so shamelessly—not only heartbroken, but afraid of summoning *Satanás*. An atheist was not truly what she wanted to be.

The intense heat of the afternoon sun had stayed with her. Her forehead beaded with sweat and her stomach ached. The trip passed quickly and yet slowly. Gabriela felt as though she were dreaming as they passed through a land of moving shades peering out of the darkness, smoky wisps of flowing robes, and light voices coming out of unearthly corridors. The ghosts of past travelers on the road from Cubabi murmured, "It is not the loss of blood that makes us die. It is the loss of hope." She wondered if her two companions had heard the faint words, and she looked at them. Their grave figures seemed to undulate in her blurred vision as they sat quietly looking forward.

The wagon arrived in front of her home. Diana must have heard it approaching. She stood in the doorway peering out into the night as the weak candlelight of their one-room home glowed softly behind her. Gabriela could not understand the unsettled feeling that had grown inside her. She felt compelled to say, "I am not an atheist."

The old man stopped the wagon. "I didn't think so," he said. "Anyone as angry at God as you are is a great believer." He lowered himself from the wagon and reached to help her down. A bolt of pain shot through her abdomen and a surge of pressure pounded in her head as she took his hand.

"Thank you, sir. I am indebted to you. You are an angel."

She looked up at the little boy to say goodbye and saw that he was crying. The look on his face made her want to take him in her arms. She did not know how it was that she loved him so deeply, but she was sure that she did, and she was sad to see him go.

"I hope your mother will return to you someday, little one," she said.

The little boy rubbed his eyes and shook his head from side to side as if to say, "No."

Diana ran to her mother calling, "Mamá, mamá."

The old man mounted his wagon in silence. Gabriela turned to her daughter and held her tightly. Her belly cramped, and she felt wet. She knew the baby she had planned to kill had been taken from her. She turned to look at the wagon pulling away as her stomach tightened and blood ran down her legs. The sound of wagon wheels crushing the gravel of the road filled the night, and she could no longer see the little boy's figure in the darkness. ☹