

## Chapter 5. Elena's Story

It would be simple for me to allow this tale to digress and then degrade into a scathing denouncement belittling and chastising the Hispanic male. I admit my bias plainly, and if you have not noticed yet you will see soon, again and again, the tortured roots from which my proclivity springs. It is my hope that in being forthright my prejudiced statements may be judged on a balanced scale that takes into account the troubled experiences that birthed them.

My father-in-law once remarked to me, in reference to his tour in Vietnam, that when he first returned he couldn't speak of it at all. Then he could speak with nothing but anger. These many years later, he says, finally, he has acquired the right perspective. I fought no war per se, but I empathize with his statement. When I left Guatemala I swore I would never return—the plane couldn't leave the tarmac fast enough!—and I stubbornly refused to look out the window, hoping only to banish the sight of her from my eyes and mind. I would have woven for you a furious yarn had I dared, at that time, to put pen to paper. But the years pass. I would like to go back now. Tell the land I forgive her, and thank her, too.

Would you believe that on a recent Sunday morning, over a cup of juice, wiping the sleep from my eyes, I found the name of one of the towns where I lived next to the AP byline in the weekend edition? How I gobbled up the words! It was a silly story about some circus dolphins stranded in a tiny pool in a highland town when the man who stole them from the sea ran off and left them behind. “Oh, I know how you feel,” I thought, touching the page of printed words, “you fish out of water, you victims of some villainous man.” But while my heart bled for them, I also had to laugh a bit; only in the Guatemalan mountains do dolphins swim in the village reservoir.

And then it struck me: I have gotten to that place where, looking back on my own experiences, I mostly just want to laugh, too. I can picture it easily: The bad man having run off, a gentle one remaining behind, not knowing any better, slipping a tamale to the marooned mammals. Giggling with glee when they splash him. Running home to his family, throwing back the front door, yelling with delight, “I have caught for us the biggest fish!”

What I am trying to say is that there were a few good men.

A number of them lived in Linda Vista, and here is how I know.

Midway through my mountain sojourn I hiked down to San Marq to replenish my supplies. Toilet paper, peanut butter . . . these things ebb more quickly than you might think. In the tradition of all good alpine travelers, I waved goodbye to everyone along the path out of Linda Vista, shared with them the purpose of my trip, told them I would be back before sundown. Eben shuffled downhill, the empty duffels tied to him with chaffing ropes, prepared to haul back my own goods and the perishables for which every family had pressed into my palm one *quetzal*, fifty *centavos*—"A bag of *azúcar*, 'sugar,' Miss, if it is not too much trouble? With the humblest gratitude might I request a small bit of rice?"—hat in hand, twisting skirt edge between gnarled fingers, passing to me their last few pennies. Eben would return loaded down.

I made good time and visited friends in San Marq, purchased supplies, packed the horse to overflowing. I started back toward the mountain at 2 PM. Barely moved one hundred feet.

"Elena!" a small child screamed, rushing up to me. "Come now, come now! There has occurred a horrible accident! We need you, come!" she sobbed, tugging my dress. Cali ran ahead of us, Eben moored to a tree. The far-off screams crescendoed in piercing decibels as we thundered over the cobblestones back toward San Marq. I galloped to keep pace with the panicked child, who steered me across the back porch of my old house and into the yard of the elderly neighborhood thief. The one who had requisitioned my bed. The old woman lay on the ground next to a roaring fire, wailing an agonal moan. An immense iron cauldron canted, disconnected, from the brace that supported it over the flame. Tipped on its side, the massive pot leaked the last few spoonfuls of boiling corn mush, the rest having coated the woman's bare legs from groin to toes in a hissing, bubbling, cooking mire.

Four other women arrived just as I did, beckoned by the cries.

"Water!" I screamed, and pointed to the *pila* uphill in my former yard. I reached to scoop the steaming soup from the old woman's thighs, but it sent searing pain roaring through my hand, and I reflexively retreated. Yanking the little girl's shirt over her head,

I used the material to swipe off the top layer of ooze. The four women raced back from the *pila*, a tiny half-full plastic bowl of water in their collective eight hands.

I glared at them furiously—this itchy token to vanquish the floodburst of fire?

“*No hay nada*,” they said simultaneously, meekly, “there is nothing else to bring you water in.”

“Help me,” I said, and we grabbed her upper body, dragging her roasting legs over the dirt, stones, sticks, broken glass, to the *pila* where we used our hands and skirts to splash the water onto her burns.

The woman’s whole body quivered, her head lolled, and every few moments through her clenched teeth an anguished groan seeped out.

“Is there a doctor?” I asked one of the four female assistants.

“No, there is you,” she replied.

Stupefied, I bent to examine the injured legs, ballooning with blisters, bleeding a clear viscous cream. “What am I supposed to do?” I asked, peering back up at her.

“You are supposed to fix this,” the first lady said.

“What makes you think I can do that?” I asked, incredulous.

I am a hypochondriac. I had spent my whole life to this point fretting over each earache, searching out and measuring moles. I counted sneezes. Last time I gave blood, before leaving the States, I had to recline, with cold compresses, so as not to faint. My fair skin, blue eyes, red hair, and freckles predispose me to illness; I know this for a fact. I have been told over and over. “You must take care of yourself,” my mother reiterated throughout my youth. “Your body is more delicate than most. You are not like other people.” I embraced the role of the ill, basked in the special status my dainty nature afforded me. In a corner of my heart, I learned to put faith in this weakness, for behind the façade of suburban paradise, attention was meted out less for merit than for shortcomings, as the latter were more rare. I got the most care when I contrived an affliction.

In spite of my hypochondriacal neurosis, I pled ignorance in the face of actual malady.

“What makes you think I can fix her?” I repeated.

“Because you are Elena,” said the second woman.

“Because you are the gringa, *la americana*,” said the third.

“Are you sure there is no doctor?” I asked again.

“Ay, well, there is,” said the fourth. “But *fijese*, I just passed him. He is asleep in the ditch, drunk. I tried to wake him and he spit on me and I could not make him move.”

So here now is the truth. They needed me to fix her because there was no one else who could. They trusted me to help. They put faith in my education, believed in my skills, and required my strength.

“Bring me a bed sheet—a clean one,” I said, standing.

We fashioned a rickshaw of the sheet and transported her to the Sealy. I rummaged for clean cloth and we wet these shirts, some slacks, and a towel, and draped them over her toasted limbs. I told the women to give her lots of water to drink, showed them how to pat her legs with cool, soapy water three times a day, made them promise to keep her shaded and off her feet. I found the Tylenol she stole from me months ago, and measured the pills into little pain relief piles, instructing the helpers to administer a dose at the sun’s rise, apex, and demise, and then again at the moon’s crest, peak, and disappearance. Explaining the old woman could not be left alone, I cautioned them to check her forehead regularly for fever. When someone manifested a needle, I made them promise not to lance the blisters.

“Show me your feet,” I said to one of the neighbors. “See these blisters?” I asked, pointing to the road-weary boils we all grew on the bottoms of our soles. “It is good and fine to poke holes in these shoe sores. Walking blisters can be burst. But her burn blisters,” I said, releasing the Samaritan’s foot and returning my gaze to the patient, “are not like blisters from walking; the swells she has now are not the popping kind,” I explained. “Her blisters will prevent infection. If you open them, like a door, in will walk the germs.”

Having done all I could, I turned to leave, but not before pulling aside the caregivers.

“When the doctor awakens,” I insisted, “feed him much coffee, and tell him the gringa said to bring to this woman some antibiotics.”

That is how it is I came to leave San Marq so late, and walk home in the dark.

Don't think I didn't know better than to get caught out alone by the night, but that streak of stubbornness propelled me toward home. I did not want to have to unload the supplies and find a place to bed down with horse and dog. I figured, hell, I'd walk fast, we'd make good time. I figured wrong, and dusk descended.

Rumor has it these hills are rampant with haunt, the ephemeral vestiges of spirits wronged and wandering, lost. I heard them in the creak and groan of the saddle sacks; their undead fingers grazed my skin every time Calixta's fur brushed against my shin. A ghostly presence inhabited every shadow just beyond the path, and breathed steely breath down upon me from the gathering clouds. Eben neighed a deep throaty rustling, again and again, tossing his mane beneath the swarthy starlight. We three converged, a huddled silhouette against the encroaching night.

The ghouls of my nightmares threatened us least. With the declining temperature a bevy of wilds materialized from their lairs. I anticipated rattlers, glared into the underbrush without seeing, strained to discern their ominous vibration from that of the wind, of our feet, of my blood bolting rampantly through me. My animals listened, too, their furry ears twitching, their heads spinning to-and-fro in furious apprehension. So fixated on what might sneak upon us, we neglected to notice the pack of vultures until they loomed straight ahead.

They fought us for the road, for the fox dead in the center of their grim circle. Writhing, they threw back their bulbous heads and screeched a horrified death song, these minions of the underworld. Shook at us scabrous talons. Rippled with resentment. The leader, threatened, lurched toward us, unfurling his monstrous wings in a corybantic flailing. I held back the rearing horse, quieted the growling dog, fell back a few paces, and conceded defeat. Our party stepped slowly, deliberately, around the deathly scene.

Of all the menace we tiptoed past this unlucky night, however, it was an encounter with man I feared the most.

Too many female Peace Corps Volunteers get raped—four during the time I lived there. One on a rowboat idle along the Caribbean coast. Two, at gunpoint, while browsing in a crowded town square at midday. Both virgins. Another, in her second assault, was plucked off a public road by a man in a pickup who laughed at her tears and mocked, “What? Did you not like it?” I loved Cali for who she was, but I acquired her

for what she could do for me. I liked that men cowered from her. I counted on her to save my life and she did not disappoint me. There is a reason I took her with me, always.

On this walk, thankfully, her services remained unenlisted as we crept stealthily upon the sleeping village.

I could just barely see my house now, far away on the crest, ringed in fire.

From the path through the *aldea*, my house, visible only by virtue of its incandescence, seemed elevated halfway to heaven, as if the stars lingered there to rest, waving, shivering, against the coal black hue of the surrounding countryside. I counted six . . . seven . . . eight flaming weevils licking the sky with their red-orange tongues. Perhaps this kindling meant to beckon me, a lighthouse savior guiding home our lost, tossed, wayward crew. Or perhaps, instead, my house was burning down.

If so, the pungent aroma of splintering wood and incendiary thatch hitchhiked on the back of an easterly wind and skirted away before we caught up with the breeze, for the night smelled only of the dirt we kicked up beneath our feet, of horse sweat and animal droppings and ripening corn. We meandered along, no purpose in rushing to watch a blaze that cannot be contained. My hand already stung with blistered welts from my attempts to squelch the combustion of the woman's legs earlier in the afternoon. Enough fire for one day. I was tired. Let it burn.

The closer we came, the clearer my vision. The house was not alight—instead, eight burning bushes morphed into eight gigantic glowing candles which finally became eight torches ablaze in the hands of eight waiting men. Eight men circled my home holding fire in the middle of the night.

I am of the opinion that if practiced, one can learn to sense intent, to interpret an energy, either malicious or otherwise, and with honed skill react in foreknowledge of what is to occur. Guatemala started to teach me this. Not that I ever became fully skilled in the use of the power, for my ability to prevent an action based on my sense of it beforehand always lagged. When real evil approached it pressed on me—that is the only way I can describe it. I presaged its advance with the rapid constriction of my pores and a strangling in my chest. I knew enough to be scared, but not always in time to avert assault. Like the time, wandering lost in the capital, when I knew, moments ahead of time, that I would be attacked from behind, and then felt the groping hands; on the bus,

when I actually lunged from my seat to shout a warning, but not in time to avoid the turn and the guerillas waiting in the trees; and worst, the night I slept through the approach of my stalker, only to come awake in time to hear his last few footfalls echo against the patio outside my door before he lunged against it. In matters of true presentiment, I deferred to the dog, who had been waiting in quiet anticipation to lunge into battle with that stalking intruder while I still snored softly in my bed. As a judge of character, I trusted Cali implicitly and acted on her whim, my Geiger counter of safety or threat. She knew the nature of every heart.

So on this night, approaching eight men in waiting at the top of a remote mountain, miles and miles from refuge, too far for a scream to matter, I doubted my own calm until Calixta rushed forward and licked the proffered hand of the man at the head of the group.

“*Buenas noches*, Elena, good evening,” Hernando said, removing his worn brown hat and bowing slightly, a fleeting nod of respect. The torches danced, throwing gargantuan shadows onto the walls, and in their reflected glow I recognized this man. In his house I initially sought refuge the first day I hiked, parched and sick, into these hills. His wife, Rosa, squeezed me a fresh glass of lemonade, then another, then another, and watched me, smiling, tender, while I drank the full weekly ration of her family’s sugar. Hernando’s brothers stood with him now, and his brothers-in-law, my landlord, their older sons, and one adolescent boy trying without success to be manly who sat propped against the side of my house, asleep, a thin trail of drool leading from his mouth to his shoulder. He must have been there for hours.

“We hope we have not alarmed you,” Hernando continued, “and we do not want to further trouble you, as you must be tired from your long journey. However, earlier in the day, a child noticed a family of five rattlesnakes crawling up your wall and slipping into your house.”

The landlord, shuffling up behind Hernando, cleared his throat to beg indulgence. “Please pardon me,” he said, his hat clutched in his aged hands like a prayer cloth, his head toward the ground, “but if you will allow me to humbly point out that it was *my* son who noticed this.” With that, he ceremoniously swept his left arm through the air, moving with deft showmanship and fine style, holding his hand suspended in the space

beside him, above the sleeping boy, as if to call attention to his most astounding of prizes. “This son, of mine,” he said, glancing at me, a smile tugging the corner of his lip.

I knew the boy from school, from his crab-for-dinner gift, from his tending of the two pigs near my house. “A fine boy, he is,” I said, and the landlord smiled at me fully.

“You said you would return tonight,” Hernando continued, “and we worried that if you entered without being aware, you might be hurt. So if you will allow us to enter first, we will make sure it is safe, and then we will leave you.”

I removed the padlock and the eight men, with torches and machetes bared, crammed into the little room. They searched, respectfully, and exited. “It is safe,” Hernando said, “the snakes must have crawled back out. We wish you a good night.”

So the eight men with torches returned home, to sleep a precious few hours before rising for their fields, their harvests, their families, their animals, their awesome responsibilities including, of all things, me.

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I once played the guitar. I once played many instruments and I play them no more, which is to say that I played until I conquered and then I ceased. It was the challenge, more than the music, that excited me. I learned and learned until I got good, and then I played and played until I got bored. An all-or-nothing mentality which I think engrained in me early and which I can most precisely correlate to breakfast foods. As a youngster I vexed the world, and particularly my mother, with absurdly persnickety eating habits, so that when she hit on something I tolerated she fed it to me so often that it made me sick. I never ate a bowl of cereal, a fried egg, oatmeal, waffles, or any of the standard morning fare that makes life simple. So when I suddenly announced a craving for pancakes, pancakes appeared on my plate every day until the taste would never leave my mouth and the heretofore delicious pancakes acquired the savory tang of moldy dough. This precipitated a switch to little pizzas individually and laboriously created with handcrafted sauce on toasted English muffins; I ingested so many so frequently that to this day I cannot eat toasted bread. Even milkshakes full of rich ice cream (and,

unbeknownst to me, a raw egg) pleased me only until such time that their regular appearance at the breakfast table became a drain on my appetite.

And so it was with musical instruments, as with so many other things. I played until I felt accomplished and then I stopped and forgot all my skills. This is my manner: I skip from one challenge to the next with a vengeant focus on mastery and a hyper energy which takes such momentum to maintain that it simply cannot be sustained over a longish period of time. My hobbies evolve on a constantly rotating basis so that six months from now I will be enjoying the delight of some newfound diversion which in a year will no longer hold my interest. Careers dull for me after a while. (My mother, who has always wished me to be a writer, gushed with joy when she heard I started this book and envisions a life for me of creative literary pursuit. “Mom,” I keep telling her, already feeling the pull of some other undiscovered accomplishment, “let’s just see if I can finish *this* one.”) I am the consummate jack-of-all-trades.

There was a period, directly coinciding with the start of my life in Guatemala, when I feared this predilection marked me as the bearer of some sort of latent personality flaw. “I am too fickle,” I thought. “Something is wrong with my attention span. I am unable to focus.” But as I aged, not in years necessarily but in experience, and perhaps through a dawning independence sparked in the Guatemalan mountains, I decided—slowly at first, and then more deliberately—to disallow myself, primarily, and then others by proxy, to label my nature as labile. Whose business is it if I do not persevere endlessly; have not the fates always smiled on the creators? Instead of assuming the title of flighty or changeable which the world might have tagged on me, I decided to reframe my tendencies in the most positive light. My capricious craving of change is an enviable character strength. Who cares how well I play the guitar?

Who, indeed.

“Can you play the guitar?” the Catholic priest asked me. We stood beneath the overhang of the schoolhouse, where the entire community of Linda Vista assembled for mass on this most rare and revolutionary of days when the priest visited. A middle-aged man with a gentle face and a tolerant temperament, he journeyed up to the parishioners on the mount twice yearly or so, a sojourn that few other priests had the constitution or

musculature to make. He brought with him his holy implements in a cracked leather case, and a guitar strung on a woven strap across his back.

I opened my mouth to answer him yes, then closed it again, thinking no. Finally, with a coy smile, I replied, “Not really . . .”

“No one here knows how to play,” he said. “But I have faith that someday someone will learn. Show me what you know,” he said, pushing the instrument into my hands. The rest of the townsfolk milled around, closing in and watching carefully. I played a few chords, showed off some fancy finger work. “My prayers have been answered!” he shouted. “I have an accompanist.”

He intended for me to provide the musical portion of the mass!

“Father,” I stammered, “it has been a very long time since I played.” The irony here is, I last played at a Catholic mass. I learned at age seven, so as to participate with my mother in the radical new Sunday service officiated not by organ, but by strings. An activist guitar group of eight adults and one seven-year-old child. I played until we were not Catholic anymore.

“However,” I conceded now, inspired to greatness by the priest’s look of glee, “if you give me the sheet music, I’m sure I can fumble through.”

“There are no sheets of music,” he said. “You must play from your heart.”

“I don’t know any songs by heart,” I insisted. This wasn’t precisely true because I knew three, but they were all inspired by seven-year-old sentiments and entirely inappropriate for church.

“Let the spirit guide you,” he stated calmly, anointing my head with his hand.

The assembled participants all took their seats, in the grass, on the concrete breezeway, squeezed into child-sized desks. The priest arranged his vestments, and cued me to initiate the processional. The entire gathering took a collective deep breath, prepared to explode in pent-up song. For this reason, of my three memorized choices, I dispensed with the idea of playing “Yankee Doodle.” No one but I knew the words. And so, limited in scope to two options, and determined to save the holier “Silent Night” for the recessional (to carry us through the upcoming six month spiritual drought), the priest strode into the schoolhouse grounds to the harmonic cross-cultural strains of “Happy Birthday.”

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear—” Here everyone paused a moment before chiming in with a discordant mélange of names: “God, Jesus, Father.” One sweet spirit even sang out, “Elena,” which I thought was a kind tribute to my ceremonial contribution. “—garble garble garble, happy birthday to you.”

The priest proceeded nonplussed, as though birthday celebrations regularly coincide with the start of mass.

He wasn't too far along, though, before he began to lambaste the Evangelicals and lost my good favor. Here is the thing, which I must be honest and disclose: I am not much of an Evangelical fan myself. So that you will appreciate this, I will share some history. As I hinted earlier, I grew up Catholic, but my family (or I should say, my mother, and then—begrudgingly at first but wholeheartedly in the final tally—my father, too) left the Catholic Church to become born-again amid great commotion and ruffling of family allegiances which would remain disturbed for many years. That my sisters, and I in particular, never fully embraced but instead rebelled impulsively against this paradigm shift caused prolonged agitation in our household. Frankly, I suspect we would have revolted against Catholic dogma too as we aged, believing as we do that spirituality is an inclusive and individual process, but it is easier to oppose the religion which expects one to raise her hands, speak in tongues, and be slain in the spirit before a possessed crowd during the most insecure and troubling of teenage years. The fervor of the Evangelicals has always made me nervous.

But the fervor of American Evangelicals pales profoundly in comparison to the enraged spiritualism of their Guatemalan counterparts. Spurred on by missionaries who, I know, originate most frequently from my own country, these modern-day Christians are intent on saving souls through a warlike fixation on the acquisition of spirits. This attempted conversion is perpetrated most commonly through nighttime religious services broadcast publicly to the interested and disinterested alike through a complex system of strategically placed loudspeakers. Linda Vista, thank God, lacked electricity, and we were all therefore spared these attempts at our loyalties. But elsewhere, in every town cursed with electric power, the setting of the sun commenced a litany of prayers, pleas, and threats which crackled over the rooftop sound system with a virtually indecipherable

roar. For at least three hours every night, and sometimes, not infrequently, during all-night vigils, the Evangelical congregations screamed upon their neighbors a woeful stream of vituperations. They wailed in sorrowful lamentation. Screeched with unbridled joy. Shouted the love of God across unstable microphone wires that vacillated with their own shrill feedback. Pled for the sinners' hearts with a high-pitched, ear splitting shriek.

One night, suffering from flu and fever, besieged already by a headache, I retired early to bed. Suddenly, through my window—I swear!, right through my very own window!—the nightly Evangelical ministry started in. (Clearly, this incident occurred after I moved from Linda Vista, but I jump ahead to make my point.) I leapt from my bed alarmed, accosted by the proximity of the ruckus and decibel of the noise which caused my head to throb in time with the attendant trumpet accompaniment. Someone had installed a speaker on my roof. Without thinking, I charged out of the house in my pajamas, my hair a Medusa-like tangle, and rushed around the corner to the church. I cannot over dramatize the impression I must have made, flinging open the big wooden doors with a crash, barreling down the center aisle with red swollen eyes, insane hair, in my bedclothes, trailed by my stomping and growling dog.

To say you could hear a pin drop would be to imply that things had not quieted down sufficiently. The trumpeter froze wide-eyed, his lips a perfect circle around the mouthpiece, and the singer's tongue protruded from her mouth in an unfinished C minor. The audience arrested their enthusiastic swaying with arms still in the air, on a collective inhale, and forgot to breathe back out. But for my furious footfalls and the click of Cali's toenails on the floor, the room stood shocked by its own silence.

I stormed the pulpit and thrust my arm forward to point in the face of the preacher.

"I am going out of my mind!" I shouted. "I am very sick, and you are making me crazy!" (In hindsight, I know they all misunderstood and took me, literally, to be sick in the mind and going nuts.) "If I cannot get a decent night's sleep, I will die!" I screamed, exaggerating for effect, "and if I die, I will come back and haunt all of you!" With this I swung my arm around and pointed at the assembled believers, who gasped in even more air so that they all looked ready to hyperventilate. They may be God's soldiers now, but

they are Guatemalans first, and superstition therefore courses through their hearts in more plentiful measure than blood and plasma. “I just want some sleep,” I muttered over and over as I retreated for home.

While not my most culturally sensitive moment, my lunacy did result in the desired outcome and the entire town slept peacefully for one night. Of course, the feud reinitiated the following evening (although the speaker had by then disappeared from my roof), this ongoing polemic between Catholics and Evangelicals.

I think the most distasteful thing about the Christian religions is the utter disdain they display toward one another. This is not by virtue of their beliefs, which are, by circumstantial necessity, of a shockingly similar variation. It seems at times to be motivated by little more than body count, with the greatest prestige, tithes, and heavenly position going to the organization that fills the most pews. Yet in tiny towns like Linda Vista, I hardly understood the need for infighting, and the Catholic priest shocked me when he used his whole homily as an invective to criticize the Evangelical movement.

I leaned toward Rosa, Hernando’s wife, who sat beside me (the woman of the delicious and lifesaving lemonade), and whispered my surprise.

“Ah yes,” she whispered back. “Catholics hate Evangelicals.”

“How do *you* feel about Evangelicals?” I asked.

“I am an Evangelical,” she replied quietly.

“I thought you were a Catholic—you are about to take Catholic communion,” I stammered.

“I am a Catholic.”

“But you just said you were an Evangelical,” I murmured.

“I am an Evangelical.”

“This is not making any sense to me,” I said in hushed tones, one eyebrow raised.

“Well yes, I can see that,” she said. “I am a Catholic *and* an Evangelical.”

“That’s not possible,” I insisted.

“Anything is possible,” she demurred. “I am a Catholic when the Catholics are in town, and I am an Evangelical when the Evangelicals are in town. The way I figure it, the difference isn’t with God, it’s with the people here on Earth who practice the religions.

And so since there's only one God, the same God for both Catholics and Evangelicals, I don't think it matters whom I go to church with, just so long as I go."

Nothing nearly so sensible got said the whole rest of the day.

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Rosa enjoyed my company and I hers, and though our lives veered in diametrically different directions, there are things we have in common. We stand at the same height, although she more plump and I more gaunt, and our hair, though of different colors, hangs to the same length. Our complexions are both smooth. We bite our nails. Born in the same month, we share an astrological sign, which she knows nothing of and I do not believe in. Rosa is only a year older than I.

She has six children.

Her house resembles mine, a kitchen hut and a sleeping hut, but hers is smaller and also has a porch. From the end of this porch she watches for me, for she can see my door if she tiptoes and leans slightly forward, and every morning without fail when I awaken and step into the day, the first thing I hear carried on the newborn breeze over the *aldea*, the schoolhouse, the cornfield, the path, the rocks, is her joyous voice greeting me: "*Buenos días* Elena, good morning!" Always she has prepared for me the Guatemalan breakfast staple which I gladly accept and look forward to: scrambled eggs, black beans, tortilla. What I do not finish for breakfast she rewarms and serves me for lunch, so that in this way she ensures my return to her home after school, which starts around nine and ends around noon.

I like to look upon her as I stroll toward her home, for I feel we share a sensibility. She is always sweeping the tamped earth that makes her floor, her porch, her patio; or she is potting a discovered flowering plant in a chipped cup or concave rock; or she is watering the natural greenery that flourishes around her house so that it stays green and lush and nice to look upon; or she is straightening the sticks and rag dolls with which her children play, sorting them into a pile on the end of the porch, so her yard is smooth and bare and free of debris. Rosa and I appreciate beauty. Even in the most difficult of

circumstances, we take what little there is and arrange it in the most flattering of manners.

Not everyone is so inclined, and this more than anything made my adaptation to Guatemala difficult. Of all the adjustments, both mental and physical, which must be made daily if one is to acclimate to a foreign land and culture, I believe I coped with the most profound conformations the easiest. I muddled through the language, and adopted the customs of respect and decorum which facilitate immersion. I made friends. In my mind I held fast to a quote from Elizabeth King: “I find that it is not the circumstances in which we are placed, but the spirit in which we meet them which constitutes our comfort,” and I refrained from focusing on the privations which no native noticed. Few immigrants fared better.

But I could never reconcile myself to the minimal level of cleanliness and the absolute indifference countless Guatemalans demonstrate toward their surroundings. Many live in what can only be described as rank squalor, and try as I might not to judge, I remain baffled by these conditions. While I do not pretend to know what it is to be raised in an atmosphere of deprivation and hardship, I do not accept the liberals’ excuse of imprinted indigence. There are people who have so little yet keep everything neat, organized, and cleansed, while others more materially blessed live in filth, worse than pigs (an animal which makes efforts, after all, to be clean). I have visited whole villages where the residents dump trash into ditches along the roads, allowing it to overtake the pathways, an invitation to animals to root and fight viciously over the scraps alongside children who play covered in muck, while everyone behaves as if oblivious to the stench and disorder. I have visited other towns where the populous burns their garbage, sweeps their walks, and grows red, purple, magenta bougainvillea over their walls in a profusion of pink-hued perfume. More often, however, the two opposites bump up right next to each other, the cared-for home flanked by the distressed, so that group mentality cannot be said to account for the difference, proving in my mind that cleanliness is an attitude, not an economic or social condition. There are people with simple dirty faces, a hygienic shortcoming that cannot be avoided when one’s floors, walls, and roads are built from the earth; than there are people additionally smeared with meal residue and snot who attract

flies and are covered in lice. Once, at my wit's end, I picked maggots with my stubby fingernails from a little boy's nose where they feasted on a crust of many days' mucus.

This child, a student of mine, was related, I believe, to the three teens who gave me the most trouble. They lived downtown, which is to say in the five or six houses which occupied the lower elevation of Linda Vista, separated along a boundary invisible to me but distinctly clear to the residents of uptown, including Rosa, who could point to a space in the air there and say, "Here is where everything changes." And she was right, for while all the cornfields intermixed out there in the hills and the men labored side by side, their children attending the same school, social visits never broached this line, for downtown was dirty and the reputation bad. The proverbial train tracks threw down their signal flags even here, and warned, "Do Not Cross."

I had no reason to know these boys, too old for school and living on the opposite side of the *aldea* from me, but they came and found me. I saw them lingering sometimes on the path below my house, and when I waved hello they simply stared back at me with sullen, silent faces. The sense they gave me always made me call for the dog and they would walk on. Sometimes I felt watched, which I attributed only to my own paranoia, until I found them one day with their eyes on me when they should not have been.

I did not have a latrine or a place to bathe. The landlord kept promising to dig me a pit, but it never happened, so I dug a hole for my own feces, shoveled it in, buried it beneath a tree. I urinated in a designated spot set back from my home and bathed fast with a sponge and a bucket of accumulated rainwater behind the back wall. All timed carefully so no one would see. Until the day they did.

I squatted, Cali beside me, for she relieved herself alongside me as she did everything else, when with much commotion and a bone-jarring bounce a boy fell from his camouflage in a tree twenty feet above and behind me. His brothers leapt from the limbs and dragged him away, so that by the time I turned a startled pirouette I saw only the back of their heads and shoulders bounding over the bluff, but I recognized them by the crud in their hair, their soiled shirts, and the fact that the three always moved together. How often did they hide there and watch? How much did their voyeuring eyes see and what might they return for and when?

I began to worry, and then Rosa came to call.

This is unusual because for all of our visits, she never came to me, I went to her. Something was up.

“I do not want to alarm you,” she said, “but I think you should know that we heard a rumor—” which must have been more than just a rumor, for she would not have come based only on conjecture “—that those three nasty boys from the awful family downtown had plans to break into your house. They boasted that on the night of the new moon they would climb over your wall and slip beneath the roof to rape you.”

This did not surprise me, and I slept prepared for such an attack with a butcher knife beneath my pillow, a machete below my bed and Cali locked inside with me, but to hear that the plans had actually been laid sent a shiver along my skin.

“But do not worry,” Rosa continued. “I think we have fixed this problem. I spoke to my two sisters first, and then we three talked to our husbands and sent them to talk to the boys and their parents, which is where they are right now. They are telling them this: My sisters and I consider you now to be a sister, so that we are not three but four. And if you are a sister to us, then you are family to our husbands, as if you were one of their own wives. Our men will say, ‘Since the gringa is our family, like a wife, anything done to her will be avenged by us. So if you go through with your disgusting plan, know this—we will kill you.’ So I think you will now be safe, but I wanted to tell you so that if there is any more problem you will report it to me, and I will tell my husband. I will lend him to you to protect you, since you have no man of your own to guard you.”

To thank them, for she was right, the boys never bothered me again nor appeared anywhere near my home as far as I knew, I took the remaining film in my camera and photographed the three sisters and their families. While the indigenous do not like to have their pictures made, thinking that in so doing you steal their souls, the Ladinos love the attention. On my next excursion out of town I developed the film, enlarged the prints, fashioned frames from twigs which I lashed together. Rosa called my attention to the picture on each of my visits, saying proudly, “Look, look at my lovely family!” and she hung it from a nail on the porch wall during the day and transferred it inside with them at night.

So it is that the image moved in and out with her baby, her youngest, a one-year-old, who passed his days suspended naked in a hammock. During the day he swayed on the porch and at night hung in their sleeping room.

I have heard it said that many Guatemalan youngsters learn to walk later than their U.S. and European counterparts because of the delayed balance effected by this pendant first year. Equilibrium distorts after a year of suspension. However, these dangling bottoms allow excrement to seep out of baby bodies and drip through the hammock's rope to land upon the ground, obliterating the need for impractical diapers. Once toddlers learn to walk, but before they learn to control their bowels, they totter naked around the premises so their waste fertilizes the ground instead of soiling clothing. So Rosa had two perpetually naked children and while she scooped up what she could of their poop she obviously had no control over retrieval of urine. A dark patch of well-watered earth hovered below the infant's hammock and also littered the property, so that the mother always knew where her two-year-old played by the puddle in the yard.

Rosa's three other children, a three-, four-, and five-year-old, darted always underfoot when I visited, so curious and excited by my presence, while her sixth child threatened to burst momentarily from Rosa's expansive belly. One or two always hung from her swollen breasts, while a third often waited in line for milk. Despite our age equity, I thought, the gulf that divides us could not be more vast:

I wore braces when she married.

She still struggled to write her name when I graduated from college.

I pledged a sorority while she birthed her first child.

She learned to till fields while I prepped for graduate school boards.

I studied investment strategies as she struggled to feed eight with food enough for four.

She settled down forever as I took off to travel far, far away.

Nevertheless, our lives crossed, and against formidable odds a friendship forged.

\* \* \*

Rosa shocked me one day with a cavalier comment: “*Fijese*, my sister’s baby died this morning.”

*Fijese*, as you may have already conjectured, is the chosen vernacular for bearing bad news. As I understood it, keeping in mind that I lacked a lifetime’s understanding of its subtle nuances, *fijese* combined calamity with an aspect of fate so as to abdicate the speaker from all responsibility for righting the wrong. Its definition stretched from sorrow to slander, with a gamut of meanings:

“I am so profoundly sorry . . .”

“Ha, ha, ha hahaha . . .”

“Too bad for you . . .”

“Now’s my chance to stick it to you, gringa . . .”

“Prepare yourself for the most horrible news you have ever heard . . .”

“Prepare yourself for a line of absolute bullshit . . .”

Just prepare yourself. Anticipate a letdown. Grab onto something strong to hold you up, steel your nerves, call on a saint. *Fijese* is the Guatemalan’s way of asking, “Are you sitting down?” and can appropriately preface any of these comments:

“What a shame you walked twelve hours to get here. Even though the sign says ‘Open’ we closed early for a party and cannot help you until tomorrow.”

“You know the money you loaned me, which I was going to pay back this week? Well, I don’t have it and probably never will.”

“I don’t know where you will sleep now that I have stolen your bed.” (Remember that one?)

As much as I loathed and feared the sound of the word, I did with time become fluent in its use. Said with a fawning smile and a tilt of the head, it equaled a flirtatious beseeching of forgiveness, as in: “*Fijese*, remember the truck you lent me to move my belongings to Linda Vista? Well, the axle broke and it’s stranded at the top of the mountain.” Said with a droop-eyed look of mirth, it excused etiquette breaches as an act of goodwill: “*Fijese*, I have developed a terrible allergy to cows and if I eat these brains—which appear to be deliciously prepared!—I will get itchy bumps all over my body that are contagious and since I would hate to infect you I must sadly abstain from partaking of your meal.” You can see where the catch phrase could be used to my

advantage, too, as the recipient's only response is a slow, obliging, understanding nod. So sad for you.

Much as the word wore many hats and proved utile in a profuse number of instances, it seemed a bit supercilious to describe the death of an actual person with such nonchalance.

"Oh my God," I replied to the news of the baby's death. "How horrible!"

"Yes, it is," Rosa said, sighing, and I saw real sadness in her eyes for her sister and her niece, and she looked for a moment about to cry. But then the mood passed and she shrugged. "It is also good."

Rosa's sister's twelve-week-old baby, her eleventh, never flourished. While no one fully expected the baby to live, we all hoped for the best. Or so I thought.

"It is good that the baby won't suffer anymore," I agreed.

"Hmm?" she asked.

"You just said it was good that the baby died," I said, "and I finished your sentence: so that it would not suffer anymore."

"That's not what I meant," she said.

"Then what did you mean?" I asked.

"I meant that it is a good thing this one died. They already have ten children and she's getting too old to have any more, and if it hadn't died they might not have had an angel."

"What are we talking about?" I asked her, something I found myself asking frequently.

"They almost didn't have an angel!" she said.

"Rosa, explain this to me more clearly, please. I have no idea what you're talking about."

So she explained: Every family needs an angel to intervene for them with God. Without an angel there is no one to pray to, no one to ensure the rains fall and land on your crops, no one to hear your confession of sins or grant you God's forgiveness.

Dead babies become angels.

In a country where infant mortality is exceeded only by illiteracy, where malnutrition dries a mother's milk and dysentery sucks at the guts, babies die like leaves

drop in autumn. Transient gifts. Ephemeral beings. To forestall sorrow and prepare for the worst, these little ones are treated as evanescents—no names, no dreams, no attachment. They will be fed and bathed and clothed and treated with the general kindness afforded a visiting seraph until their robust growth indicates they have chosen to stay of this world. Only the ones older than three months can be loved and christened, or the parents might die over and over from grief for their departing newborns. So the myth of the angels must have begun to ease the repeated sorrow of death. But at some point the coping method became less a defense mechanism and more of a goal. When I asked, Rosa admitted ruefully that her family did not yet have its own angel. “But don’t worry,” she assured me. “We have plenty of time yet. I am still young; we will have more babies.”

I accompanied Rosa to the child’s funeral, a small affair. Hernando did not go; he had to tend his own field and that of his brother-in-law, so that the other family could take the free time to bury their baby. I stood back a little way from the mourners as they dropped the infant into a hole halfway between the house and the edge of their field. A rough-hewn handmade coffin enclosed the limpid body, so little wood, which if I overheard correctly used to be a slat supporting the parents’ bed and blankets. With only a table, some chairs, a bed or two in everyone’s home, spare wood is hard to come by. I wonder: Now every night, when they sleep, and the cotton bolster dips into the divot where the coffin wood used to lend its support, how will they keep from thinking of the baby decaying in the yard?

No one cried but it is not to say they did not grieve. Angel or no, whose heart is so hard that it does not crack when, shovel in hand, the dirt hits the box of hopes and dreams and covers it over until its very existence is in doubt? The mother, she is the one, when the men go back to their work and routines, and the siblings run off to play, who will carry with her the child who died. Some say it is in gray hairs, wrinkles, or an affect of depressed perseverance. But I see it in Rosa’s sister, in a deft movement few could have noticed, a slight of hand as she turned from the grave. She grazed her belly with her fingertips, as if to wonder, was it here?, and if her womb answered back, which I hope it did, with a twitch or a spasm, then I believe she will always touch herself there and in

doing so she will not think, “I have ten children and an angel,” but say to herself, “I had eleven babies.”

No one cried, which is only to say they bore their loss privately.

No one cried because this moment came years overdue.

No one cried because, to fight off the tears, they repeated again and again that ten healthy children is a miracle. Really, we are blessed.

\* \* \*

I wedged myself into a slatted chair in the corner of Rosa’s kitchen. I curled my feet onto the seat beneath me and tried to balance on the unforgiving wood, sandwiched between two children fighting for my lap and a chicken pecking for crumbs beneath the table. (Give me a rat to dangle my toes in front of, send a bat to swoop upon me, I will not care. But good God, these chickens with their violent beaks and gouging toenails, banish them all!) “Maybe you should put the chicken outside,” I whispered to the son, and he thought about it, but then shook his head, no. So instead I positioned him in front of me, and he thought he sat on my lap for favor which made him happy, but actually he functioned as a barrier between me and the bird. We three, the boy on my lap and the boy beside me, shared a cold tortilla, but the crisp blackened edges had begun to peel and the corn flavor ceded to the scent of mold. I kept an eye on the fresh tortillas roasting on the *comal* in the opposite corner.

Two mangy hounds, one missing a large portion of a floppy ear and the other with no tail, fought over a bone in the middle of the room, too close, I thought, to the toddler crawling naked across the floor, but Rosa watched unperturbed. She also let her children play with sticks and never thought to fear for their eyes. I, in contrast, learned a lifestyle preoccupied with precaution, carrying the scissors pointy end down, shielding my eyes from errant BBs, and walking slowly around the rims of pools. Once when I saw her son running with a knife and I yelled for her to grab it quick, before he fell and gored himself, she laughed at my concern and said, “Don’t worry, he’ll be fine.” She allowed her kids to eat food that fell on the ground, and they lived.

There is a saying: With absolute poverty comes absolute freedom. At its most elemental, perhaps this statement begs the question: Have you ever actually seen someone eviscerated by scissors? Shoot out his eye? Can convention and decorum and fear of death prevent the child who runs near water from drowning? Rosa did not waste her time on this and other stupid stuff; her full, hard life denied her the opportunity to worry over outlandish possibilities, and her children were no worse for the cuts, bumps, or scratches that life dishes out. She did not turn the handles to the back of the stove; the fading singe on her five-year-old's hand would remind him sufficiently not to touch the hot *comal*. The boy on my lap wore a gash above his eye that would heal.

The brawling dogs ignored the little girl.

With one hand Rosa washed her new infant in a plastic bucket on the edge of the raised adobe hearth, while with her other hand she flipped our tortillas. I removed the plate that covered the bowl of yesterday's beans. With one hand I flicked away the flies over the food, while with the other I peeled three oranges. The earthen walls that rose from the ground surrounded us on all sides and blocked the sun. We lunched together in the unnatural dusk of noon.

"Have you thought of a name for the baby?" I asked.

Rosa turned and smiled a full broad smile, her eyes alight with rebellion. She did not heed advice. She named all her babies too early and enjoyed doing so. "I have named him Fernando," she said, and hugged him to her breast.

Sitting, she chose the fattest tortilla and set it aside on a plate with the largest portion of beans for her husband who walked through the door. Sweat drizzled from his hairline in rivulets over his cheeks. With a shrug of his shoulder and a swipe of his forearm he erased the perspiration from his face before bending to kiss Rosa on the top of her head. "*Gracias, buen provecho,*" he said, wishing us all good digestion as manners dictate, but speaking in essence only to his wife. His workman's hands grazed her face as they embraced, and his fingers, dark from the fields and smeared with soil, softly stroked the edge of her ear. A tender, private caress. I lowered my eyes.

Of all the Guatemalan couples I ever met, Rosa and Hernando are the only ones I understood to be lovers. Not that the rest didn't have sex, for the astounding number of children attested to this fact. But husbands do not generally nuzzle wives. No one

threads their fingers around another's palm on the streets or in the houses. The man does his job and the wife hers, and if they exchange a glance between them it more frequently looks like a glaring indictment of, "You're not planning on bringing that bloody carcass into my kitchen, are you?" or "Is there nothing you can do to keep that baby from screaming in my ear?" than a weighted, longing, lustful stare.

Guatemalans are a stoic people; not overly demonstrative with their affections, and rock solid in their delineation of roles. I bucked many, many standards. I rode a horse. I lived alone. It confused and perhaps disturbed them that at twenty-three I had no husband, wanted no children. When I decided to move to Linda Vista to temporarily assume his role, the male teacher scoffed at the suggestion. "This is a stupid idea you have," he said. "You will never be able to do it. No woman can live in those mountains," as if dozens of women didn't already live there, but what he meant was what all Guatemalans, male and female alike, meant, for I heard this sentiment often: that none of those women could have done it either without their husbands to care for them, which having lived there I do not believe is true. But what everyone begrudgingly excused in me with a roll of the eyes and a flip of the hand, as if to say, "These *americanos* are impossible to understand," they disavowed in their own women.

Women knew their place. Men worked very hard, either toiling in a field, a shop, or other business endeavors, and they earned the right to play as hard and drink and eat and relax. Women worked just as hard in other ways, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, an Ozzie and Harriet lifestyle, you may think, of traditional standards and role assumption. But whether it was the nature of the work, so taxing and exhausting—I know I hardly felt amorous at the end of my own day—or whether these separate tasks kept them so focused in opposite directions, I hardly ever saw couples converge. The shopkeeper and his wife worked alongside each other behind a small counter, he doing the selling and she the cooking and serving, but they never bumped into each other, not once in the course of the day, in such a tiny space. The mayor and his wife dined together every night, at opposite ends of the table, and if they passed a plate between them he held one end and she grabbed the other side, so that in the course of the evening they never touched. In over two years, never did I see anyone but Rosa and Hernando embrace.

While I cannot know the libidinous leanings of a country, the salacious undertakings which, in spite of outward appearances, may unfold behind closed doors, it is not difficult for me to imagine these sexual unions resulting in nothing more than perfunctory couplings for obligatory purposes of breeding. But Rosa and Hernando at least are partners in more than propagation. He lingered over her hair as he finished his kiss. She turned imperceptibly and grazed his chest with her cheek. They danced a slow love song of subtle practiced motions. The children chuckled, I blushed. He pulled up a chair, and sat so close his knees must have touched hers secretly beneath the table.

“Congratulations. I hear you have named the baby,” I said.

“Yes,” Hernando answered, stealing a few quick bites of food before heading again for the fields. “We have named him for his strong and very handsome father,” he said laughing, with a puffed-out chest, amused at his jest. “We have christened him Hernando.”

Rosa stroked her husband’s hand, grinning at his humor.

I sipped my lemonade, confused for a minute, until I realized I must have misheard Rosa earlier. “I misunderstood you before,” I said to her, spooning more beans onto a son’s plate. “Here I’ve been thinking you said the baby’s name was Fernando.”

“I did,” she replied. “His name is Fernando.”

“But . . . what . . .” I stammered, “Hernando, didn’t you just say you named him after yourself?”

“Yes, I did. His name is Hernando,” Hernando reiterated and spit a hard piece of bean onto the ground. A little boy belched.

“Fernando,” Rosa said again, emphatically, with a wide toothy grin and a kiss to the babe’s head.

They continued to cuddle and I stopped asking. Full, I threw the remains of my second tortilla beneath the table, where the chicken fought valiantly for a moment before losing it to a dog. Finally Hernando said by way of explanation: “Rosa doesn’t like the name I gave the baby, so she named it something else.” Although he tried to be serious, to feign a sarcastic admonition of her insurrection, he couldn’t help but smile. He moved too slowly to hide it behind his hand, and she caught sight of it, giggled, and boxed him softly upside the head.

They stood and performed the woman's work of clearing the table together. He does not care about the baby's name or his right, as a man, to make that decision. He married a woman he loves and always will. He cares only for his wife's amusement.

This is their joke on the rest of the world.

Fernando it is.