

Parada

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PATRICIA STOPS A MOMENT TO SWIPE SWEAT FROM HER FOREHEAD and slow her breathing. She picks up a large stick at the base of the steps, doesn't see any dogs yet. Usually they hang around the light pink and toffee-coloured houses where the residents leave food scraps in chipped pottery bowls outside the gates. Food only, never shelter, because there are always too many stray dogs. She looks up the stairs—no banister, the cement sides crumbling away, decomposing to rock, sand, and scrub. Beyond the top, a path curls through the hills to San Miguel Language School where she studies Spanish.

In the public school next to the stairs, the children distract her with their songs, their sentences of music, light As and muscular Os. She imagines their minds sleepy, tummies satiated with *comida*—rice and *enchiladas*—their bodies tired from playing kick the can through the alleys. Patricia climbs the steps, one at a time, while the children flow back through school doors, their black hair and blue blazers flapping in a refreshing breeze. She doesn't lift her chin until she hears the throaty growls. They are at the top of the stairs, her wonderful pack of *perros*. The tips of their ears, their eyes, dusty noses, and fanatic grins come into focus—gums pulled back, necks distended. She remembers what happened two weeks ago and holds her stick at ready, arm heavy with nerves, hand still bandaged. The dogs have caught her off guard before and it won't happen again. Their ears and tails are down now, twitchy divining rods. She looks hard into their eyes and moves forward.

She is used to the presence of cougars in the Olympic mountains of Washington State where she lives. But cougars are alone and wary. It was rare to hear of a cougar attack and when she did, she could reason that the victim was walking in too remote an area. These dogs that move in packs are more threatening to her. They are here every day, toothy and menacing. She stamps her stick in the dirt and growls loudly, her exertion in the bald afternoon sun making her sweat. The dogs pace across the mouth of her intended path until she swings her stick out, hoping to appear unpredictable and threatening like a madwoman. When they push their tails earthbound and slink away, she turns to follow them with her eyes so they will know she means to follow through. They retreat down the hill, running and falling chest-first through dry brush. At the bottom, they crowd a dripping faucet and use

up their aggression on one another, biting backs, growling, playing the game of lunge and retreat.

She continues along the dirt path and then stops to look back at the valley and beyond to the shoulders of the Sierra de Guanajuato Mountains rising from behind the town of paved riverbeds. Blocks of turquoise, pink, and sienna buildings jostle for space. Content that the dogs are not following her she marvels, as she walks, at how little there is in the hills of Guanajuato. Cactus, scrub, a few single cows and geckos. Not enough to distract her from sandals that bite into her heels, calves that burn, a mouth pasty with the aftertaste of the spiced chicken and rice Mrs. Mendoza served for lunch. She has such low tolerance for spices, comes from Irish stock. Potatoes are boiled free of fresh chilies, paprika, and cumin. At lunch, the Mendozas stared at her two store-bought bottles of water but said nothing as they sipped from their glasses.

She tilts her head away from the piles of sun-dried dog turd, speaks Spanish to the mesquite: *estar enfermo*. That's sick, isn't it? *Cansar*. That's tired? Probably all wrong, should try harder to remember sick and tired. She'll ask about these verbs when she gets to the school. She'll ask about conjugation. If she ever moves to California or Texas, which she might someday, she could use them at work.

Ahead on the path, rippling in the waves of heat, is the small figure of a child and a stooped man wearing a hat shaped like a stetson. Patricia pulls her tank top down over her belly. She has lost weight since she arrived here a month ago, but not enough to change the pull of gravity. Middle age is middle age. She is supposed to be entering her earth goddess years. Be damned if she should be hung up about anything.

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THIS COULD BE AN OPPORTUNITY. As Manuel approaches the woman, he watches carefully, guesses she's American. As they get closer to one another, he's sure. Her body assumes the width of the path with arms that swing too wide, shoulders back, chest and elbows pushed out like some sort of conquistador. She didn't walk like Teresita used to, God rest her soul. On this white woman's face is the half-cocked grin, the assumption that everybody likes her. She's plump and tugs at her clothing. That is the other thing that convinces him. Foreigners expose their awful lumpy legs to the world by wearing incomplete trousers, or shorts, as they call them. The leg is not a beautiful thing unless covered. Manuel remembers his Teresita's calf exposed beneath her skirt, the flick of it in the lantern light, enough to make him ache. The white woman pushes strands of red hair back on her

head, the long braid down her back the only feature a little familiar to him.

His granddaughter, Gracia, is ahead of him on the path, turning over rocks to find ants and beetles underneath. The woman is getting closer with her long stride and insolent smile. She passes Gracia and turns her head to watch a moment, but his granddaughter doesn't look up.

"Hola," she nods to him.

He nods in return and smirks at her familiarity, her lack of a proper greeting. As their hips align, he reaches behind her, takes the flesh of her buttocks in one hand and pinches.

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IN SHOCK, PATRICIA REPLAYS WHAT JUST HAPPENED, tries to reconcile it with this old man whose smile looked benign, his eyes soft, brown, and honest. Her first instinct is to run after him and swat him with her stick as if he were part of the pack of roving dogs, but like a sprite, he scampers further along the path, catches up to the small girl and takes her hand. They disappear around a bend and are gone. How could she attack an old man holding the hand of a little girl? Heat overwhelms all parts of her body. Her eyes fill and the flies gather as they do to any solitary form, especially those slick with sweat. She fumbles for her pack of tissues, drops her stick, and swats at the flies that threaten to sting with her free open palm. She picks up rocks and flings them at the cacti, which snap apart when hit. They bleed clear and watery.

Her fit is witnessed by a solitary cow, flesh hanging off scapulas and ribs, a cow more interested in nosing around the scrub than her crazy antics. She'll lodge a complaint at the language school; focus on figuring it out in Spanish so she can get her point across faster. She quickens her pace, scanning the horizon for any other figures walking the path, but there are none.

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SAN MIGUEL LANGUAGE SCHOOL looks more like a villa perched on a hillside over the town of Guanajuato than a school. It has three or four modest classrooms, tiered courtyards with impeccable gardens, and an office with computers and a small library. Often classes are held outside in the shade during searing afternoons, and the teachers' thin voices have to compete with the sound of church bells, barking dogs, and car horns rising from the valley. Patricia walks past a class in session and sees three students doing an ad libbed encounter in Spanish, using their arms more than their voices, and laughing at their inability to express themselves. The office is always cool, on the lower level of a building under the shade

of pink trumpet trees and morning glory branches. She looks for Veronica, the administrator and daughter-in-law of the owners of the school. She is being groomed to take over as matriarch. Patricia staggers into the office on numb legs and is grateful that the chair in front of Veronica's desk is vacant. She falls into it and Veronica turns in surprise from a filing cabinet.

Her fingers tear the tissue in her hand. "*En el sendero, on the path, un viejo hombre, abuelo a lo major* I think," she is rambling and there are too many mistakes and gaps in her panicked Spanish, "well because there was a *niña*, well he pinched—" She holds her fingers up and scissors the air, crablike, "—my *trasero*." She rotates her hip in the chair, pats the back of her thigh, tries to think further in Spanish but gives up.

Veronica stares at her. "And? Anything else?"

"Well, no."

Veronica puts her hand over her mouth and looks away for a minute. She starts stacking files but can't hide the rising colour in her cheekbones, the accentuation of laugh lines at the corner of her eyes. "What would you like me to do?" she asks.

"Well, I want to make this known to somebody. It isn't right. I want to make a complaint, I guess."

"All he did was pinch your bottom, right?"

"Yes. But, I think that warrants some kind of action."

"Okay. What did he look like, this man?"

"Well, he was probably in his sixties or seventies. He had a little girl with him, maybe about five years old. He wore a cowboy hat, an old green and black checkered jacket, brown pants, I think."

"Did it look like he had one eye shut all the time?"

Patricia relives the moment she said hello—his smile she thought so harmless, in retrospect, seems sinister. "Yes, he did. I remember only one eye open. Yes."

"Okay." She picks up the phone and dials. "*Buenos tardes, es Veronica a San Miguel.*" Veronica rambles on in Spanish gaining speed and volume so that Patricia can only pick out the odd words that she knows and her name "*Si. Una mujer, Patricia Hanley. . .*"

Patricia panics that she's gone too far. She feels like a child again who's done something wrong but can't understand what it is or why it's wrong, like the time she tried to save the headless chicken. She chased it round and round in what they called the killing pen. She'd been told to stay put, but couldn't bear to watch the bird run like a dimwit to its death, and was determined to catch and fix it, put

its head back where it belonged. When her father caught her, he cuffed her for getting blood on good clothes, feathers and mud stuck to her fingers.

But this is not the farmyard and she is no longer a child. Perhaps this encounter shook her because the man came from behind her, stealthy, unexpected.

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MANUEL LEADS GARCIA UP THE STEPS TO THE POLICE STATION on the main street of town. This building is one of the most spacious. Few of them have a grand staircase, so high up from the noise on the road. He loves to visit his son and nephew here because it is a cool rest from the sun.

"Papa will be so happy to see you before we go home for lunch," Manuel tells his granddaughter, but he has other things on his mind.

His handsome son, strong and tall, sits alone in the police station at a desk behind the counter that serves the public, the receiver of the phone cradled on his shoulder. He frowns at Manuel but when he sees Gracia his face relaxes and he beams as she runs to his side. He puts her on his lap, scribbles on a pad of paper, and asks questions. Manuel approaches like a boy expecting reprimands, tries to peek around his son's uniformed shoulder to see what he is writing but Carlos shoos him away.

Manuel stretches his shoulders back, pushes his hands into his lower back. The ceiling fan whirrs above them, witness to many things in this room—children thieving, men beating wives, tourists demanding special treatment—all complaints received by policemen underpaid and in fear of losing their jobs, counting on more of this sort of thing coming through their door. Carlos is not the boss man here. He is young and will be the first to go if there are layoffs.

Manuel flinches when the receiver is slammed down.

"Papa!" Carlos puts his daughter on his chair as he stands and comes around the counter. "Why do you do these things?"

"What?" Manuel shrugs.

"Why do you harass these foreign women and embarrass me like this?"

"You need the work, huh? You need this job."

"*This* doesn't help me." Carlos faces him head on, lifting and dropping his hands, so close Manuel wants to reach out for him, reclaim his adult son who now has three children of his own to distract him. "This makes it worse for me. And it doesn't help Alfonso either. If you keep this up you'll get a seedy reputation." Manuel smells coffee and cigarettes on his son's breath, recognizes the fire in his eyes, exhaustion across his brow.

Carlos drops his arms and lowers his voice. "Is it because Mama is gone? Is this why you do these things?"

Outside, church bells peal through the air. Over loudspeakers it is announced the pilgrims' procession of the Virgin Mary will begin. The sound of trumpets and taped mariachi music fills the room when his nephew charges through the door, louder and fatter than anyone else on the police force. His breathing is heavy and sweat trickles from under his hat. Just inside the door he stops, pulls a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, and wipes his forehead.

Manuel musters a quick smile, raises his hands to his son's shoulders and says quietly, "You *need* this job." Carlos glares in return.

Alfonso nods a hello to his Uncle Manuel and addresses his cousin, "I *am* a good Catholic, really I am, but these parades are a pain in the ass. We have to go, Carlos. They need traffic control. The cab drivers are threatening to brawl over who can drive at the front of the line with the Madonna on the hood."

"We'll solve this problem, later," Carlos says to Manuel.

When did their roles reverse, Manuel wonders?

"Where are you going, Papa?" Gracia calls and runs to her father as he puts his hat on. He picks her up and she wraps her tiny bare legs around his waist.

"We have to go out to supervise the procession. You and grandfather go home for lunch, huh?" He pinches her cheek, kisses her forehead, and returns her to the floor beside Manuel.

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PATRICIA DOESN'T THINK IT NECESSARY TO GO ALL THE WAY INTO TOWN to meet the police officer who took her complaint, but Veronica insists an introduction is important.

"It'll be hard to find parking," Veronica purses her lips. "We'll have to walk a few blocks." She fits the small van in a space that appears no longer than the vehicle itself.

The two women weave around the clots of people lining the streets, spilling off the narrow sidewalks onto the road. A line of green and white cabs appears stalled but the drivers are content to honk their horns as an embellishment to the music from their speakers. Red and white paper flower wreaths are fastened to the frames of the taxis like ruffles on a dress. The drivers' families wave at the people and throw candy out the windows.

They stop walking and Veronica leans toward Patricia's ear, holds a hand around her mouth to funnel her voice. "I don't think there will be anyone at the police station right now. They're probably out here trying to control the crowds and traffic. I'll look for them from here."

Patricia nods, distracted by the events of the parade. Nothing is in order. Children run out like flocks of gulls to collect candies on the street. Others are motioned over to the open windows of the cabs and handed fistfuls. They remind her of herself as a child feeding the animals in the barn, feeding the chickens and all for what?

“I want to cancel my complaint.” She yells over the bedlam of the street. She understands completely for the first time, this is not her world. She is a visitor here.

“What?” Veronica squints and leans toward her. An ambulance siren wails as it fights a surge of people.

“My complaint. I want to cancel. I don’t think he meant any harm.”

People are moving back, stepping on toes, jostling shoulders to let an old man past. It is the same old man from the hill path, who pinched her. He pushes people and runs now in the same direction as the ambulance, his hands held high, shaking the air, a look of disbelief on his face.

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CARLOS HAS TOLD THEM TO GO HOME FOR LUNCH. But Manuel wants to surprise his daughter-in-law with fresh bread and cake. Maybe he and Gracia can also stop at the church and light a candle for his Teresita. He feels good about his family, proud that he can still contribute. His nephew was right, all of them are good Catholics, but just as important, they are human beings working hard in this world to make a better future. Manuel’s good feelings vanish and suddenly he is confused. He wanders the crowd desperate to remember where he might find something warm he has lost. He has dropped her hand.