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Matilde Ros Leaves the Jungle

Susana Beatriz Camacho Vivar

University of Texas at El Paso, susucamacho@gmail.com

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MATILDE ROS LEAVES THE JUNGLE

SUSANA B. CAMACHO VIVAR

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Lex Williford, M.F.A.

Sasha Pimentel, M.F.A.

Maryse Jayasuriya, Ph.D.

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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by

Susana B. Camacho Vivar

2016

Dedication

Para mi hermana María Belén, por su valentía, pero sobretodo, por su alegría.

MATILDE ROS LEAVES THE JUNGLE

by

SUSANA B. CAMACHO VIVAR, B.A., MSc

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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I owe my deepest gratitude to my parents, for their monumental love for me and for each other, and to my siblings, for our complicity in figuring out family and life.

To my husband and my daughter, I owe my dreams, because you were the first to come true.

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Preface

Matilde Ros Leaves the Jungle was born in a Singapore shopping mall in September 2013, by way of a mind map that I hurried to submit before getting on a plane back to Timor-Leste, my home for most of the last seven years, and the place where I have completed the UTEP Online MFA I started in 2010.

Back then, in 2013, I had discovered through Professor Lex Williford's class that I was a non-linear writer, eliminating my fear of writing a novel as certain questions (how to begin, how to end a scene or a chapter or what would happen next) did not need immediate answers and could be postponed while I wrote the stories that I wanted to read about contemporary Ecuadorian women, but had a hard time finding: stories exploring gender, class and race issues that portrayed women as agents of their own destiny.

This lofty objective gradually transformed into the story of an Ecuadorian environmental rights activist who marries for all the wrong reasons and gives up on her ideals, a weakened spirit who finds her way back to independence and ultimately liberates herself. It was still however, the kind of story set in Ecuador that I wanted to read but could not access¹. The novel would allow me to explore the themes of class, gender and race from the perspective of a woman seeking freedom from the confines of the society she was brought up in, interspersed with stories of four women around her, which would provide a better perspective on the protagonist's past and present.

In the spring of 2014 I had a thesis proposal ready, which I proudly shared with two

¹ While conducting research during the writing of this novel and preface, I have found that more Ecuadorian female authors than I initially thought have written these kinds of stories, and that I had a hard time accessing them because they are largely invisible in Ecuadorian bookstores, media and school curriculums.

Ecuadorian authors I interviewed, to get their perspective on the portrayal of women in Ecuadorian literature. Alicia Yáñez Cossío – lauded for creating strong female characters who search for their own identity and confront the social, religious and moral conventions of their society (Biblioteca Básica de Autores Ecuatorianos) – had inspired me as a writer since my teenage years. Abdón Ubidia, also an award-winning author, had taught the first writing workshop I ever attended back in the summer of 1999. Both authors congratulated me, said my novel sounded interesting, and then said: “But why don’t you write a novel set in Timor-Leste, where you live? *That* would be interesting. It’s a country on the other side of the world!”

That would have certainly been interesting. It would have also been interesting, I’m sure, to write a novel based in a Rohingya refugee camp, where I used to work in Bangladesh for the United Nations; or to revisit the Congo, where I spent three glorious years of my childhood (and which I revisit periodically in my dreams). But that would perhaps have been like a classmate I once had who preferred to write about epic kingdoms and noble warriors instead of the poverty, drug-related violence and racial tensions of his hometown on the US-Mexico border. Absolutely legitimate, but not the place to write from – as Lex would describe it – “the fire in my belly,” the one that had to come out before I could one day write about the other countries in my heart, the other cultures I have tried my best to understand while respecting them enough to know I never fully will, and the other beauty and ugliness that I’ve seen repeated in so many of these places, inhabited by mere human beings.

By writing what I knew best – the stories of Matilde and Esperanza – I was writing from the fire in my belly. By bringing in the stories of Leidy, Cynthia and Mariuxi – realities more removed from my own – I hoped to take on the challenge that Turchin presents in *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, a book that served me well throughout the writing

process: "...how to evoke, simultaneously, the Theater of the World – how to make the leap from ego-vision to omnivision." (Location 1440)

It turned out that once the fire burned from my belly, it did what fire is naturally inclined to do: it took on a life of its own. I'd heard characters in novels had this tendency, but I didn't like what my main protagonist, Matilde, was becoming. She refused to be shaped into the strong, idealistic, bright-eyed young rebel who takes on the world, working for a righteous cause and falling passionately in love, a heroine everyone can root for when she stumbles and wants to get back up on her feet once again to fight for her ideals. I looked on with dread, as Matilde became an insecure woman who just wants to find a good enough reason to escape an unhappy life, to be someone else, without confronting herself and her toxic desire to be liked – the tragic flaw that leads to her downfall. She's certainly not Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady*, my first inspiration for creating Matilde, but definitely a character I learned to love for who she really was – a protagonist who is not necessarily likeable. To reaffirm my a somewhat wavering loyalty to Matilde, I re-read *Madame Bovary*, a masterpiece that nonetheless had one of the most unlikeable protagonists ever written, and I secretly sighed with relief.

As the fire came from my belly, another fire of sorts replaced it, and grew steadily: I became pregnant with my daughter Ainara. Apart from a few weeks in which I was too nauseous to do more than read Ecuadorian classics in bed, I continued writing, particularly in Ecuador, where I spent the last trimester of my pregnancy, to avoid the potential risks of giving birth in Timor-Leste, a country with no system in place to deal with a serious medical emergency.

My productivity probably had a lot to do with the decision I took to narrate Matilde's thoughts in stream of consciousness – à la Mrs. Dalloway. Pregnant, on the other side of the world from my husband, living with my parents after more than ten years and seeing them

confront old age gave me a good amount of fodder for my writing.

Several months, many pages and one perfect baby girl later, the fog of what was probably a fair bit of post-partum depression lifted and I could suddenly see two things clearly: writing in stream of consciousness had mostly served as vessel for my own thoughts, and weighed down my story with unnecessary explanation; and Matilde's insistence on becoming someone I hadn't planned for her to be would require me to re-structure my novel.

I turned the layer cake structure I had initially proposed for the novel, whereby present action moments would trigger specific memories or scenes, into a straightforward, chronological narrative. My original Matilde would have fit well within the former, because the present time – her, married and unhappy – would have just been a temporary space, a mistake, between her idealistic past fighting for environmental justice in Río Salado and her decision to recover her ideals through politics. When I realized that Matilde's twin desires – to escape from the confines of the society around her while still seeking approval from those around her – were weighed more than her alleged idealism, I realized the plot could follow Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" (or anti-heroine journey?) in a straightforward, chronological narrative. Seeing Matilde's story unwind in chronological order, interspersed with secondary characters' stories was a relief, because at some point, my non-linear writing had gone mad: I had flashbacks within flashbacks within flashbacks. Chronology gave me the right amount of predictability that the story needed to avoid getting destroyed by the fire.

I should mention that, despite recurring to a chronological structure, my writing continued to be non-linear, which in turn, continued to give me the essential freedom I needed to write. However, I soon discovered that writing this way often challenged what Gardner calls "profluence" – the "sequence of causally related events" (Location 837) – any story must have.

As mentioned above, I had postponed certain questions (how to begin, how to end a scene or a chapter or what would happen next) in favor of losing the fear of writing a novel and being absolutely free to write. I had the broad strokes of the plot almost since the beginning – and these held up throughout my writing – but at times I was missing the more detailed, necessary plot crafting. I discovered that in writing, as in life, freedom comes at a price. I paid it, with arduous plot crafting that forced me to delete many, many scenes I had already written, and add in new ones that would help my novel achieve profluence. My hope that I have been successful in doing so is as strong as my awareness that, despite the challenges, I could have only ever written this plot in a non-linear way.

Setting was yet another element that steadfastly refused to follow my plan. In my mind, Matilde left her hometown in a South American capital (Quito, which I eventually called Inga) to go live in the dirty fishing town of Puerto López in Ecuador, and work in the national park of Machalilla, home to Isla de la Plata, the “Poor Man’s Galapagos”. In the writing, however, it was as if the duende kept typing out backdrops that could only be found in Lago Agrio, a town located in the Amazon region of Ecuador, on the guerrilla and paramilitary-infested border with Colombia, where I lived from 2004 to 2007. Thus, I accepted that I could not escape from Lago Agrio as a setting and created Río Salado, a fictional name, because by then, all my reference to geography, place and people had become fictional.

Some characters went exactly where they had to go and in so doing, started becoming clichés. Esperanza’s character, Matilde’s mother, became a cliché we all love to hate: the rich, classicist, sexist and racist older woman without a soul. It became clear that I had to develop a character arc for Esperanza to achieve a stronger story, and when I did, her transformation liberated her from the confines of society and of her life, providing the triumph that Matilde

failed to achieve at the end of her journey. However, I realized Matilde's character might be diluted this way, and questioned my decision over and over again: why not allow *her* to triumph? Why contrive something that could be better if it was simpler, more open to empathy from the reader? Again, why not make Matilde the protagonist we can all root for? Because I wanted to believe that there could be a second chance for Esperanza – and only Matilde could give it to her. Esperanza's liberation would, in the end, be Matilde's triumph.

While it was partly the duende that was responsible for Esperanza's redemption through Matilde's death (it *had* to be this way), I also made a conscious choice for resolution as opposed to logical exhaustion. As Gardner explains, a story's sequence "can only end in two ways: in resolution, when no further event can take place...or in logical exhaustion, our recognition that we've reached the stage of infinite repetition." (Location 840) Had Matilde's story ended only with her death, without Esperanza's redemption, I would have been driving home the point that nothing will ever change in the kind of society that I portray in the novel. Like Gardner suggests, by choosing logical exhaustion, I would have shown that Matilde's "supposed exercise of free will was illusory" and that I had "used [her] rather than cared about [her], much as a preacher uses old stories and straw men to drive home some point." (Location 848)

When I realized that my novel could easily end in logical exhaustion because I've always been tempted to take on a nothing-will-ever-change attitude in a society where classicism, sexism and racism are deeply entrenched, I asked myself: What if things *could* change? Would Esperanza free herself from the shame of her family's history? Would Mariuxi really stay with Gustavo? Would Leidy really burn down her house to escape from herself? Would Cynthia really choose power and money over love? The more I wrote, the more I got to know and care about my characters, which in turn, prompted me to allow them to exercise their free will.

Two of the male characters – Ignacio and Darwin – also required much writing and re-writing to characterize them without stereotyping them. By the end of the novel, Ignacio may have remained a rich, classicist, sexist and racist man, but I tried to find out and expose what was going on in his soul, mostly to do with the gender roles that often confine men as much as they confine women, and by doing so I hope the reader can identify with Ignacio at least at that level. And although I am ashamed to admit it, I initially portrayed Darwin as a flamboyant, funny gay guy who becomes good friends with Matilde. The character he actually became – a guy who is politically committed and a good boss and friend to Matilde and happens to be gay – was not only much more real but also fit into the story in a much better way.

Without the layer cake I had a straightforward narrative, but the presence of secondary characters telling their story through their own point of view created another technical challenge. At the most basic level, I had to avoid confusing the reader by labeling each character's corresponding chapters with their first names and reiterating their names at the beginning of each chapter. At a more complex level, they had to earn being included in Matilde's story, and Matilde's story had to earn their presence in her story. I believe I resolved this challenge by having them each shine a light on Matilde's character, while giving each a story all their own, unified by their non-conformism, their search for their own kind of freedom, and their quest for an escape from a society where class, gender and race may still get to tell them who they are. Ideally, as a result, my layer cake would have become a braid of thick hair, i.e. Matilde's story, intertwined with single, bright and colorful ribbons – Esperanza's, Cynthia's, Leidy's and Mariuxi's stories, and all but Esperanza's story climaxing in the events of 30 September 2010. A somewhat different take, you could say, on the "braided essay" Miller describes in *Tell it Slant*:

There was more of a sense of weaving about it, of interruption and continuation,

like the braiding of bread, or of hair. I had to keep my eye on the single strands that came in and out of focus, filaments that glinted differently depending on where they had been. At the same time, I had to keep my eye focused on the single image that held them all together. (242)

Nevertheless, because I was writing a novel and not an essay, and because I had four other stories (not only four other points of view of Matilde's story, as I had planned for at the beginning), at times I questioned whether these characters' stories were needed at all, or if I was just using them as mere decoration. I had read *Cloud Atlas* as part of a science fiction class with Professor Jeff Sirkin, and John Mullan's analysis of its structure in *The Guardian*, which resonated in my mind:

The very maplessness of Mitchell's design makes you think all the more about his novel's narrative structure...prompt[ing] one to ask whether any part of

Cloud Atlas could be taken away without damaging the coherence of the novel.

Could Matilde's story be told without the other four stories? Certainly, it couldn't be told without Esperanza's, given their symbiotic relationship in the story. But I could not dispense with the other three stories either, because while Leidy, Mariuxi and Cynthia have their own stories to tell, they each have a perspective on Matilde that tells a different story than the one she is telling through her point of view. Leidy, and – more compellingly – Cynthia, reveal that Matilde and Nuno were not in fact living the love story the reader has been led to believe in. Meanwhile, Mariuxi portrays Matilde as the sort of bumbling do-gooder that the reader may be suspecting she is. Most importantly, as mentioned above, in a society where class, gender and race can still get to tell someone who they are, Leidy, Cynthia and Mariuxi defy expectations and manage to find their own kind of freedom, giving the novel its unifying

theme and outcome.

This unifying theme is what I hope allows me to take the “leap from ego-vision to omnivision” that I mention above. Nevertheless, I was aware that taking on the point of view and voice of three women of a vastly different socioeconomic background than my own could expose me to accusations of cultural appropriation. I imagined cries of indignation for having dared “speak for” a refugee woman, an indigenous woman or an economically mobile middle class woman from a province far from the capital where I come from. Even if they were like women that I had worked with, interviewed and become friends with for years, it would not count, I told myself, because *I* wasn’t the one living their lives.

Thus, I feared my inclusion of characters so vastly different to me would reveal me, at best, as paternalistic, and at worst, as opportunistic. I turned to Henry James’ words in *The Art of Fiction*, which so beautifully encourage writers to question those who would demand writers only write from experience:

What kind of experience is intended and, where does it begin and end?

Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. (64)

Of course, I knew nineteenth century arguments from a British white man, even from Henry James himself, would not suffice.

Following Lionel Shriver’s recent criticism of the movement against cultural appropriation, I read the opinions of several authors on the subject. I realized I felt like Aminatta Forna, who explains to *The Guardian*:

To continually return to the same subset of humanity, and declare that there is no one else who imaginatively engages you or who you know how to imaginatively engage with, strikes me as one of the most dispiriting things a writer can say.

And like Kamila Shamsie discusses, also in *The Guardian*, I fully understood “that there are very powerful reasons for people to dispute [my] right to tell a story – reasons that stem from historical, political or social imbalances.” Re-reading the nineteenth and early twentieth century Ecuadorian classics that addressed class and race issues related to my characters, such as Icaza’s *Huasipungo* or Adalberto Ortiz’s *Juyungo*, allowed me to see how some of the most important figures in Ecuadorian literature – those who are still being read and influencing students across schools in the country – had attempted to give a voice or portray people of a different class, gender and race. I understood exactly why I could be questioned when writing such characters myself, but also how it *shouldn’t* be done.

Finally, I realized that my very work and life experience – from where I take a lot of the material for my stories – has trained me to question when, how and why someone speaks for someone else. As a development and humanitarian assistance worker who has lived in different countries around the world, I know how delicately I have to tread when working with someone who is different than me; be it a refugee, a woman who has suffered domestic or gender-based violence, or a young professional woman from the other side of the world who may not necessarily appreciate or see the need for the training I’ve been hired to impart. I’ve been humbled enough times to develop a capacity for understanding that I hope translates into my writing.

Successfully portraying strong women who have their own – interesting, adventuresome, surprising – stories to tell and their own interpretation of freedom will allow me to follow in the

tradition of Alicia Yáñez Cossío's *Bruna, Soroche y los Tíos* and *Yo Vendo Unos Ojos Negros* and Luz Argentina Chiriboga's *Bajo la Piel de los Tambores*, among other female authors in Ecuador².

Also in line with Yáñez Cossío, *Matilde Ros Leaves the Jungle* explores changes in the social institutions of family, and religion, and the nation state (Rojas-Trempe 31). It addresses the pervasive influence of political populism in the lives of Ecuadorians through a fictionalized characterization of the wildly popular President Rafael Correa (named simply Fusta in the novel) and the events of the alleged coup d'état against him on 30 September 2010 (30 April 2015 in the novel). Fusta and the events of 30 April 2015 tie together all the characters and provide the climax to the novel in what is perhaps the novel's most pessimistic aspect. In the novel – and I would argue, in real life – Fusta's violation of indigenous, environmental and freedom of expression rights and the corruption that surrounds him trumps the idealism of those who believed in him (as represented by Aldo, Darwin and even Matilde.) That he veils this in a revolutionary, leftist discourse makes it even more depressing. A more secondary, but still significant theme in the novel is the persistent influence of religion in the lives of Ecuadorians across social and economic classes, highlighting how the evangelical churches are gaining ground against the Catholic Church.

Contemporary Ecuadorian cinema that confronts class, gender and race issues head-on but also has interesting stories to tell, like Tito Jara's *A tus Espaldas*, and Viviana Cordero's *No Robarás a Menos que sea Necesario*, also inspired me when writing this novel. Tania Hermida's multi-dimensional characters in *Que Tan Lejos* and its attempt to question assumptions in *En el*

² Doing so in the English language might allow me to contribute to making Ecuadorian literary fiction written by women more widely known.

Nombre de la Hija particularly resonated with what I was trying to achieve in *Matilde Ros Leaves the Jungle*. In *Que Tan Lejos*, for example, an upper middle class girl's resilience, wit and sharp observations are only matched by her naiveté in chasing her ex-boyfriend across the country to allegedly stop him from marrying the wrong girl. The road trip she undertakes is replete with unforgettable characters that, like her, cannot be fit into a mold. *En el nombre de la hija* resorts to the religious, classicist, sexist and racist older woman stereotype in the grandmother's character but does so to contrast her with her (also stereotypical) atheist, leftist, equality-preaching son-in-law in a way that leads the viewer to conclude that the two characters could be one and the same. I hope *Matilde Ros Leaves the Jungle* contributes to having more and more stories and characters like these in Ecuadorian literary fiction.

Beyond Ecuadorian literature and film, writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, with an – as Elizabeth Day puts it in *The Guardian* – “extraordinary eye for the telling nuance of social interaction within a particular kind of liberal elite” – and Arundhati Roy have also influenced my writing. Nigeria and India may be very far from and different to Ecuador, but certain parallels in how we experience class, gender and race – as reflected in their novels – have always drawn me to the kind of stories they write.

In addition, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* have served to remind me that marriage concerns, gossip and intricate webs of social relationships are absolutely legitimate material for my own novel. When I feared my novel would be more like a telenovela than serious literature I reminded myself that I've always defended telenovelas for being a legitimate expression (even if not necessarily an accurate portrayal) of Latin American society, and that Gabriel García Márquez himself had at least once defended the writing ability of a telenovela scriptwriter. Thus, I have continued portraying the seemingly insignificant, what

Lex called the “dark underbelly of gossip.”

As I write the word “feared” above, I realize that this preface discusses the novel that I wrote, the technical challenges I encountered, the themes I addressed and the influences I had, but also the significant amount of fear and insecurity that has permeated the creation of *Matilde Ros Leaves the Jungle*. It turned out writing a first novel wasn’t just like running a marathon; it was like running a marathon naked, in a dream. It was long, it was grueling, and no one was looking but – except for those blessed duende moments – it almost always felt like the eyes of everyone I’ve ever known were peering behind my shoulder as I wrote. The worst and best part of it was, that I had to get to the end of it. So I’d be like Fred Flintstone, getting to the finish line when night has already fallen over Bedrock and everyone has left, collapsing into Wilma’s arms. This scene (though an online search reveals it never existed and seems to have *actually* been a dream) has often inspired me in life to finish the things I started, even if sometimes the result wasn’t exactly what I was hoping for, but exactly what I had to do. In this case, finishing this novel was exactly what I had to do to prove to myself that I was indeed, a writer.

.

Prologue

Matilde

Inga, in a country somewhere in the Andes Mountains

1998

Ever since she could remember, Matilde had liked being different. Popular among her classmates, pretty, intelligent. Unlike poor Nelly, who admonished the other girls in class, giggling that boys ejaculated.

“Why are you laughing? Girls also ejaculate.” Everyone in class laughed at Nelly.

“Okay, maybe ejaculate’s the wrong word, but when a girl’s turned on, she gets wet too.” This explanation shut the girls up while the boys pretended to throw up.

A gringo teacher who thought it was fine to explain to his fourteen-year old-students that he liked having sex with his girlfriend during her period — to “paint magical red swirls” on the white bed sheets — made Nelly stand in front of the classroom so that everyone could throw paper balls at her. He assumed they’d see how cruel it was to throw paper balls at Nelly, but his lesson didn’t work. They just kept throwing balls, over and over again, until the gringo asked them to stop. He rubbed his eyes, as if he wished he’d never become a teacher.

During their end-of-the-year school trip to an old hacienda turned into a countryside hotel close to the Arikulla, a volcano two hours away from Inga, Nelly asked Matilde for help.

“How can I get people to like me?”

“You know how everyone dances the same way?” Matilde said.

“Yeah, it’s *so* annoying,” Nelly said. “I like dancing my own way.”

Matilde nodded, relieved she could work with Nelly, and said, “Exactly — you can dance any way you like, Nelly, but you have to move to everyone else’s side.”

Chapter One: Chamomile Tea, Pisco Sour and E-cigarettes

Matilde
Inga
January 2013

“You want to go to God-knows where in the jungle,” Matilde’s mother, Esperanza, told her, “to work with God-knows what kind of people!”

“Yes, Mami.” Unconvinced she wanted to take the job Acción Futuro had offered in Río Salado, in the country’s Amazon region, Matilde wasn’t going to tell her mother that.

“I should’ve never let you work for Lucía,” Esperanza said, referring to Matilde’s boss at Acción Futuro. “A troublemaker since elementary school, that one.”

“She’s just showing she appreciates my work, Mami. Río Salado’s where the real work is getting done.”

“Real work? Lucía will make a good politician once she gives up on the environmental rights facade,” she scoffed. “But do what you want. At twenty-nine you should pay your own rent.”

Matilde nodded.

“And for God’s sake, fix your hair,” Esperanza said. “It looks like someone dragged you up three floors with it.”

Unable to do anything about her frizzy dark blonde hair, Matilde pretended to fix it and sat up straight, so that her mother wouldn’t tell her she stooped.

“So, apart from passing on information that I asked Vane to keep private,” Matilde said, “what else did Tía Chiqui have to say?”

“Not much,” Esperanza said. “Except she’s not that happy with how Felipe’s family asked for Vane’s hand in marriage.”

“Because they didn’t arrive at their house in a horse and carriage?” Matilde laughed. It seemed the archaic tradition of asking for a woman’s hand in marriage would never die.

“But at least someone who’s just about all right is marrying your cousin,” Esperanza said. “Surprising, given her history with men.”

Matilde’s mother wasn’t done with her.

“In that hellhole where you’re going,” Esperanza said, “the most you’ll find is some slovenly gringo backpacker!”

“But the gringo could be wonderful, Mami, a successful doctor who’s taken a year off to discover other cultures. Lots of Europeans do that.”

“Not if he dumps you and moves on with his trip! Not if he wants to move in together — so he can dump you, years later! No good man will overlook how you’ve been making a life with some random gringo!”

“So he’ll just *have* to dump me?” Matilde asked. “No man can actually love me, then?”

“No drama, please,” Esperanza said. “You could end up dumping this imaginary gringo, too, the moment you realize he isn’t like you. But the result — you, single and unhappy — will be the same.”

“If I stay here I’ll avoid the men you’d want me to date anyway,” Matilde said. “I’ll probably end up meeting a gringo backpacker in some club in La Independencia. And then you’ll realize you can’t control me, Mami.”

“I can’t control you partying with prostitutes and bank clerks, that’s the kind of people you’ll find in La Independencia.”

In silence, Matilde finished the flower arrangement she'd been helping her mother with and left. Esperanza's friends would arrive soon, like they did every Friday afternoon for *cafecito* in Esperanza's Lomas Altas apartment.

The wine glasses clinked in the big dining room. Matilde, watching a TED talk on her laptop, could hear everything from the kitchen dining room.

According to Mariuxi, who'd just come back from emptying out overflowing ashtrays, the afternoon's menu had been coffee, chicken empanadas, tres leches dessert, and — so far — three bottles of white chardonnay.

"And now they want a fourth," Mariuxi said. "Luckily, Señora Esperanza bought a case." She placed a clean linen cover on the tray, pulled the cork from the bottle in one go, and went back out with the bottle; her blue felt alpargatas silent across the floor.

Matilde closed her laptop about to head back to her room when she heard one of her mother's friends, Lidia, talking. Lidia's stories about her dysfunctional children were funny. Matilde sat back to listen.

"What will I do with my Bacha?" Lidia was saying. "She's set her heart on that man, Manuel Urquidi, who supposedly paints for a living."

Esperanza and her friends were probably relieved that someone else's daughter was having an affair with a hippie painter old enough to be her father, Matilde thought, but Lidia didn't need to worry; everyone (except Lidia, it seemed) knew Bacha was the one insisting on that relationship.

"He's not only a womanizer; he's also got a thing for men," Lidia continued. "You know, *bi-sexual*. Puts the cherry on top."

“Manuel will be the death of his poor mother,” Rocío said. “Thank God my Luchito dedicated himself to the family business, along with my daughter-in-law. She has a business degree from Harvard, you know?”

Matilde rolled her eyes and wondered about Rocío’s eldest son, the one Rocío didn’t talk about. Matilde hadn’t heard about Martin since everyone found out he’d run off with the forty-something black woman who cooked for him and his family whenever they vacationed in their beach apartment. Drunk, he’d declared: “She has the breasts of a girl who’s just started wearing a training bra, she makes my favorite shrimp encocado, and she has a kind look in her eyes. And she doesn’t need thousand dollar bags or shoes, just enough money for a decent life.”

Like Matilde, the other women were probably also thinking about Martin, but said nothing. Instead, Esperanza changed the conversation.

“But Lidia, I heard Manuel’s becoming well-known abroad.”

“That should make his mother happy,” Rocío said, “*and* you, Lidia.”

“If this relationship progresses,” Lidia said, “it would make me feel a *little* better not to see my Bacha rot in poverty!” She laughed, a deep, genuine laugh. That’s why Matilde liked her so much.

“Lidia, whatever we do, children will live their lives,” Laurita said. “As difficult as it may be, you’ve got to let them be. That’s what I did with Victoria and she turned out so well!”

“She did, didn’t she?” Esperanza said.

“Yes, Espe,” Laurita said, “Celebrate their achievements and be there when they fall. God only lends them to us.”

Matilde had always thought Laurita — probably sitting primly on the sofa in her usual grey pants, black turtleneck, and tortoise shell glasses — could make a living as an advice

columnist. The kind who dispenses sound advice with vaguely religious references. The kind who doesn't take her own advice. Laurita and her husband had just let their daughter be by forcing her to go to college in the US, when she'd been happily attending college in Inga, still in love with her gentile high school boyfriend. Now Victoria was married to a Jewish Peruvian lawyer from a well-off Miami family, and everyone was happy.

So, Lidia complained about her children, Laurita boasted and lied about them and Rocío continued in denial, preferring to focus on her Luchito. But Esperanza stayed quiet. She barely talked about Matilde to them, especially not about her being single and working for a laughable salary in an environmental non-profit. If Matilde ended up going to Río Salado, Esperanza would act like nothing had happened, in line with one of the maxims she'd learned from her own mother: "Never tell people about the joy in your life because you'll make them angry. And never tell people about the sadness in your life, because you'll make them happy."

Every time she thought about that maxim Matilde wished she had a mother like the kind someone had been celebrating recently on Facebook, "for always seeing the good in people."

It was only 9 pm, but Matilde decided to sleep, to be well rested for the staff training session the next day. On the way to her room she turned back, with a sudden urge to say hello to her mother's friends. They all hugged her tightly when she came into the living room, even Laurita, and asked her to stay and drink a glass of wine with them. She had a couple, and was halfway down her third when Lidia asked her how she was doing.

"I'm doing just great," Matilde said, "I'm sure my mother has told you."

"Of course, *mija*," Lidia smiled brightly. "You're happy at the NGO then?"

"Absolutely," Matilde laughed, "even if I *do* earn only twice what a housemaid earns."

Esperanza glanced at Matilde, with only the slightest reprimand on her face, but turned back to her conversation with Laurita.

“If your job fulfills you, that should be enough for now, mija.”

“You’re so right, Lidia!” All the women stopped talking and looked at her. “Since it looks like I’m never gonna get married and out of this house, I don’t really need a whole lot of money.” Matilde smiled at Esperanza. “Do I, Mami?”

Lidia feigned laughter and stood up, facing Esperanza.

“Espe darling, it’s been great, as usual,” she said, “But it’s getting late.”

The others followed her example. Within five minutes Esperanza had escorted her friends out and shut herself up in her room, without saying a word to Matilde.

Despite a restless night waking up repeatedly for water, Matilde woke up feeling good. She’d dreamed she was flying, always a good dream. After showering and dressing she went into the living room and put on some María Dolores Pradera. Humming along to the melancholic songs, she walked into the kitchen, and found her mother staring into a cup of chamomile tea.

Matilde took a deep breath, but started picking the cuticles around her nails, like she did whenever she got nervous. It had seemed easier to confront her mother last night.

“Your Tía Chiqui called last night after everyone left,” Esperanza said.

Good, her mother wasn’t going to talk about last night. Something else was going on. Matilde sucked a bit of blood off her index finger and asked, “Is everything okay, Mami?”

“Yeah, they’re doing great,” she said, still staring into the cup, “both happy with Vane’s wedding.” She poured honey into her lukewarm tea and finally turned to look at Matilde.

“Chiqui heard the new Pérez Donoso book mentions your Abuelo Josema.”

Abelardo Pérez Donoso regularly published books about the country's so-called "best families." When his last book mentioned Esperanza's grandmother, she'd been proud.

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"You had too much wine last night, mija, because you seem to forget my father's story."

Esperanza drank the chamomile tea and started crying.

When she realized what her mother was talking about Matilde immediately regretted the small scene she'd made her mother go through the night before with her friends.

At Vane's first communion years ago, a drunken Tía Chiqui had talked about Abuelo Josema's lover the day he showed up at his funeral.

"Like men of his kind, my father's lover had gorgeous, jet black hair despite his old age," Tía Chiqui said, alluding to the man's indigenous origin. "And unlike men of his kind, he wore an exquisitely fitted charcoal gray suit paired with fine leather shoes," she added, because he'd been the tailor down the street from the big house.

Esperanza gestured with her hands that Vane and Matilde were listening from the next table, sucking on a piece of lemon with salt instead of eating their food. The nanny hovering nearby shooed them off, but not before they heard Tía Chiqui say with half-closed eyes, "Fine, I'll stop, but...I'll always insist our father had good taste."

"Fuck you, Chiqui, you still think you're a hippie living in la-la-land. Do you want the whole world to know about our father's repulsive life?" Esperanza had answered.

“You’re not listening to me, Mati!” Esperanza waved her hand in front of Matilde’s face, puffing on her e-cigarette, no longer crying. “Go buy a copy of the book for me. I want to see it for myself.”

“I’ll get it when I go down to the valley to have lunch with the girls today, Mami. Don’t worry.”

Esperanza lit a Marlboro Light she’d taken from the back of a kitchen cabinet, and threw aside the electronic one hanging around her neck.

Thank God her mother still smoked real cigarettes, Matilde thought.

When she was about to leave the kitchen, her mother turned from the window.

“You see what happens when you take a wrong turn in life, Mati?”

“What, Mami?”

“People never forget.”

Matilde sat on a leather couch in Andean Books and traced the gold letters on the red book’s cover: *El Centro de Inga y Su Gente*. Her parents had grown up in the old colonial center featured in the book, but had left along with everyone else they knew when Inga grew northwards. When Matilde was growing up, it’d just been a place to gape at gold-leaf covered-altars, to tremble at the wall-length painting of purgatory decorating one of the hundreds of churches or to buy stuff like handmade lace or paschal candles that couldn’t be found in the shiny malls that had mushroomed in Inga over the years.

When he was still alive, Matilde’s father used to take her to the house on the corner of Sevilla and Navarra. “One of the best houses in Inga,” he’d say, describing its classic French decor and many servants. Matilde, chimoy ice cream in hand, nodded, impressed by the

colonial structure, oblivious to the grim shops on the bottom floor and garbage on the street, the norm in the old town before its revival in the early 2000s.

Who'd lived where and when had mostly been forgotten, except by some of the older generation, and Pérez Donoso, of course, who summed up Abuelo Josema's life in a pathetically small paragraph of his book:

"Corner of Sevilla and Navarra streets, Osoro Muruzábal family: With a prestigious medical career, a wife belonging to the Muruzábal Goicochea family, thousands of well-managed hectares of land in his hacienda, and three children, the family patriarch Dr. José María Osoro Adriasola was the envy of Inga. He died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-eight, sparking malicious gossip about his sexual inclinations when the neighborhood tailor showed up at his funeral, distraught and heartbroken. Rumor has it that Dr. Osoro's wife paid the man to disappear, along with his wife and children. Years later, Victoria died under mysterious circumstances while on a boat journey to Europe."

A message from Martina, asking where she was, interrupted Matilde's reading. She paid for the book and hurried to the malls' courtyard, to have lunch with her friends.

At the table, squirming in the midday equatorial and sweating under the turtleneck she shouldn't have worn for lunch in the valley, Matilde managed to smile when Nati announced her engagement to Mauri, whom she'd been dating since she was fifteen. "I can't believe it's finally happening," she told Nati, taking her hand and squeezing it. "It's wonderful!"

"It was time," Nati said. "On and off for fourteen years was becoming a little absurd."

"But you enjoyed every bit of it," Martina said, "including the breaks you had to sample everything else on the menu!"

Everyone laughed, acknowledging Nati's array of past relationships. She'd always gone back to Mauri. They toasted to Nati and Mauri with micheladas, except for Cristina, who was pregnant and had to toast with lemonade. Matilde, who'd changed her mind about telling them she was thinking of moving to Río Salado, excused herself as soon as she had the chance. She lit a Marlboro light when she got to the mall's garage and thought about Nati's engagement.

When they'd all come back from college in the States seven years ago, marriage and children had seemed so far away, at least for her. But now she saw things had already been falling into place for her friends even then: Nati had stopped talking about following her leftist Basque boyfriend to Brazil, where he'd joined the landless movement; Cristina had given up on her mother ever accepting the brawny, sweet-hearted Ohio boyfriend descended from Swedish farmers; and Martina had finally gotten over the Turkish boyfriend who'd disappeared along with the Mercedes Benz he'd given her, only to reappear with the Muslim woman his family had always expected him to marry.

Matilde hadn't had anything or anyone to give up on; all she'd been doing was study environmental science at Boston University. It's not that she hadn't dated any guys. There'd been the Polish guy from The Psychological Novel class who called every night and talked in a really low voice about Virginia Woolf and feminism. Then there'd been the hippie Portuguese who, in the midst of making out in the back of a blues club, had told her he knew his silver Audi had turned her on, but that she should know the car belonged to his brother. The only one who'd lasted past the first date was the guy from some God-forsaken town in Colombia who carried with him a picture of his family's long-dead dog. She'd ended it after the fourth or fifth date, but she didn't remember why.

Matilde was putting out her cigarette to leave when Martina came into the parking lot.

“The mall’s also implementing the no smoking thing in the parking lot, Mati.”

“Martina! I thought you were staying on with the girls?”

“And I thought *you* were in a rush to get back to work?”

Martina took the cigarette Matilde offered her, her slender white hands and red nails even more beautiful next to Matilde’s torn, bloody cuticles.

“I got to get back to work,” Martina said as she lit her cigarette and leaned against the car. “What’s wrong? You look terrible.”

“Thanks,” Matilde laughed.

“So, what’s wrong?”

“Issues with my mom. The usual.”

“She wants you to do everything we do, doesn’t she?”

Martina held up her phone. On the screen, Matilde, Martina, Nati, and Cristina grinned in the classic sky-blue smocks from Planeta Infantil. They’d all gone there until they were four years old, before moving on to the American School.

“I love that picture,” Matilde said.

“I do too.” Martina put the phone in her purse. “But you know it doesn’t always have to be this way, whatever your mother says.”

“Says the person who does everything by the book,” Matilde said. That was unfair, she knew; Martina had married earlier — and had had more children — than she’d ever planned, hanging on to her sanity and her marriage only after several bouts of depression and marriage counseling.

“Take the job,” Martina said, ignoring her comment, “and prove me right.”

Matilde raised her eyebrows.

“Back in the ninth grade, in Social Studies, remember our teacher...what was his name?” Martina asked.

“The one who told us about having sex with his girlfriend when she was on her period?”

“Ew, no, not Brian! Charlie,” Martina laughed. “The really cool one. Don’t you remember? When he made us watch *Gorillas in the Mist* I said that whatever you did with your life, you’d end up being like Jane Goodman.”

“For fuck’s sake, Martina, I’m not thinking about going to live with the gorillas in Africa. I hope that my job isn’t *that* obscure!”

”Get off your high horse, Mati,” Martina said. “I’m not stupid; I know what you do. You investigate environmental crimes so victims can defend themselves. That you do this from the comfort of your tenth floor office has always bothered you a little, so now you’re thinking about doing the same thing in Río whatever, where you’re *really* going to have to get your hands dirty.”

Matilde blushed. “Okay, sorry, Tini,” she said, using the most affectionate nickname she had for Martina, “I didn’t know you realized—”

“No need to get dramatic, Tilda,” Martina said, with her own nickname for Matilde.

“Anyway, ten thousand years ago I said that one day, you’d be saving something or someone.”

“You know me well, Tini...but now you’re getting all soft-hearted on me—”

“Fuck you, Tilda,” Martina laughed. “I’m off to work.”

She air kissed Matilde and walked off to her car.

Matilde drove back up from the valley in the rain and thunder that followed the afternoon sunshine, the kind of weather that would at least keep her from being robbed. She touched her

neck, remembering the thick gold chain and cross pendant she'd stopped wearing last year since people started being mugged in their cars.

In Lomas Altas, the elevator doors opened into the foyer of the apartment, where Mariuxi was waiting to tell her she should go see her mother straight away.

The drawn curtains and wet chamomile tea bags on the bedside table didn't surprise Matilde, and neither did the carefully folded yoga clothes that her mother hadn't used that day. She sat on the bed and shook her mother's arm gently, pretending she didn't know she was awake.

"Sorry to wake you, Mami."

"How was lunch with your friends?" Esperanza turned over to look at her.

"Fine, Mami."

Matilde wasn't going to tell her about Nati's engagement, or about Martina's little speech motivating her to take the job in Río Salado. Esperanza was already collapsing over this thing about Abuelo Josema, so she just gave her the book. Esperanza took it without looking at her.

Later, the smell of cigarettes woke Matilde, fallen asleep on the bed while her mother read the book. Esperanza smoked by the window, fully dressed, with freshly blow-dried hair and wearing the pearl necklace Matilde's father had bought her on their trip to China. Matilde walked over and placed her arm around her.

"Things have changed, Mami," she said. "Nobody cares about those things anymore."

"What *things* are you referring to?" She pulled away.

"Abuelo Josema being gay. Big deal. It's nothing to be ashamed of anymore."

Esperanza looked at her like she did when Matilde was eight and asked why God didn't get tired of pouring out buckets of water from the sky to make it rain.

“Didn’t the Larraga’s accept their gay son?” Matilde said. “And Pancha Lastrilla is *lesbian* for God’s sake! Her family’s accepted her.”

Esperanza pressed her forehead to the wet window, making it squeak. When Matilde took her hand, she shook it off.

That night, before going out, Matilde went into her mother’s room to say goodbye. She found Esperanza in bed, leafing through the book again.

“This new club is at La Independencia, I suppose?” Esperanza asked without looking up.

“Don’t worry, Mami, people who go there are okay. I’m going with Nati’s younger sister Isa.”

“You think it’s not important, mija,” Esperanza said, “but being at a club with people like us means that, if you drop dead, at least someone will recognize you.”

“Or,” Matilde replied, “if I meet a guy, someone will know who he is, what school he went to and who his parents are.” She laughed, hoping her mother would too.

“Don’t come back too late,” Esperanza replied. “And don’t drink too much — alcohol makes you fat.”

At Sal y Pimienta, Matilde hovered around the bar, dancing with her gin tonic and cigarette to the latest cheesy Latin pop hit, her eyes half-closed. Everyone who’d come to the club with her was already dancing with someone else.

After a couple more drinks and trips to the bathroom, Matilde bumped into Isa, Nati’s younger sister, and her new boyfriend, Juan Manuel. He was shorter than Isa, with blonde hair and blue eyes that could have made them siblings, and an awkwardly-fitting navy blazer that clashed with Isa’s soft mohawk, black-rimmed glasses and leather booties.

“Juanma wanted to meet you, because he also works on environmental stuff, except he’s with the government,” Isa said. “Working to keep our dear president Fusta in power, you know. But I’m too much in love with him to care, right, mi amor?” She kissed him and left Juanma and Matilde to talk.

As one of the many bright young academics the government had plucked straight out of university, he said all the right things and asked all the right questions about Matilde’s work with Acción Futuro. She felt comfortable with him, so she told him about possibly going to Río Salado.

“You’d be doing real work, impacting the lives of people,” he told her. “I’d take that in a second instead of shuffling papers around all day.”

They talked more: about the damage the oil companies were causing, about the farce of online activism, and about how more and more people around them were starting to support the controversial President Fusta, a key figure of the Hugo Chávez-led “Socialism of the 21st Century.”

“Maybe people have a heart after all,” Matilde said, “and see how much Fusta’s doing for health and education,” Matilde said.

“Or maybe it’s because his policies make the rich richer.” Juanma laughed and held up his shot glass to Matilde’s. “Here’s to aguardiente, the only pure thing in life.”

As Matilde gulped some beer to get rid of the sickly sweet taste of the aguardiente, she noticed Juanma had the longest eyelashes she’d ever seen in a guy, and that he also picked his cuticles. She imagined herself stroking his hair, calming him down after some petty humiliation at work. She was going to ask him how long he’d been dating Isa, telling herself the girl was too young to be getting serious with this guy, but he spoke first.

“You’d be better off in Río Salado,” he said. “At your age, you must be getting bored of the same old partying every weekend, huh?”

Matilde laughed, and sat up straighter. After making the effort to talk a little longer, she left to the bathroom.

When she came out she saw Isa and Juan Manuel making out, so she joined Isa’s other friends on the dance floor. The night was ending, and the usual playlist for that time of the night was playing. She danced to the Cure’s “Just Like Heaven,” Prince’s “Kiss” and Alaska’s “Mil Campanas” with a guy she’d never seen before, smiling and flipping her hair until he got his hand too close to her butt. She gestured urgently to Isa’s friends and they moved to close off the circle so that he’d remain outside of it. He drifted off, joining a couple of other guys Matilde had never seen.

A few songs later, Matilde had to run to the bathroom, stick her finger down her throat and throw up. She slept on the red velvet couch Isa and Juanma had been making out earlier, until someone woke her. After the one-hour line to pay the tab, they left the club, putting on their sunglasses to ward off the 6 am sunshine, late home again.

At lunch the next day, her mother refused to talk to her, so they ate in silence while Mariuxi cleaned the kitchen.

“Will that be all before I leave for the weekend, Señora Esperanza?” Mariuxi asked after serving coffee.

“That’ll be all, thank you, Mariuxi,” Esperanza said. “I hope you didn’t clean Señorita Matilde’s room?”

“I didn’t, Señora.”

“Good,” Esperanza said, “because she’s got to learn this isn’t a hotel to come and go to at any time she pleases.”

After lunch, Esperanza walked into the TV room without acknowledging Matilde, trying to sleep off her hangover on the sofa.

“I don’t know why I followed this stupid fad and changed all my gorgeous silk curtains,” Esperanza said, tinkering with the window blinds. “All these awful things do is get tangled up.”

“Just pull gently.” Matilde got up from the couch. “See?”

“I know how to do it,” Esperanza said, slapping her arm away with heavy-ringed fingers. “I’m not useless yet.”

Esperanza yanked on the cords until something cracked, and then she started crying.

“I’m sorry for having stayed out so late,” Matilde said, though she knew that’s not why her mother was crying.

“I’m all alone”, Esperanza said, her head in her hands. “All you do is work and go out partying.”

“Come on, Mami, you know that’s not true!”

“Lidia spends her entire weekend with her son and daughter-in-law. She even sleeps over.”

“Please, that’s only because they don’t have a nanny on weekends and they use her instead.”

“At least she’s *got* grandchildren. *She’s* not alone!”

Matilde plucked out an eyelash and was going to pluck a second one out before she stopped, reminding herself that it’d been two years since she’d been able to quit that habit.

“You’ve got Tía Chiqui and Lidia and Laurita and Rocío,” Matilde insisted.

“Chiqui’s got to get her drinking under control. That book’s brought all sorts of devils back into her head.”

Matilde had never seen Tía Chiqui’s drinking as a problem, just an endearing remnant of her rebel days as a theater student at the Jesuit University, a way for her to let out steam after settling with her ex-hippie husband in their countryside home.

“Don’t be such a drama queen, Mami. Tía Chiqui’s fine — her organic food’s in every Supertienda in the country!”

Esperanza looked at Matilde with a small smile on her face.

“You need to get your head out of your ass, mija.”

“Fine. So Tía Chiqui’s an alcoholic. How about the rest of your friends?”

“I hate watching them gloat when someone brings up the stuff about my father,”
Esperanza said. “People talk, you know.”

“People talk, people talk...that’s all you care about. But you got to understand no one really cares anymore, Mami. Stop being so pathetic!”

Esperanza slapped Matilde’s face, walked over to the window and yanked the whole blind off.

A week later, Matilde walked into the kitchen. “If my mother asks, I’ll be at Martina’s for Cristina’s baby shower.”

“Another baby shower, señorita?” Mariuxi asked.

“Yes, Mariuxi.” Matilde said, “Why do you ask?”

“You go to so many, Señorita...”

Matilde pretended to smile and slammed the door behind her without saying goodbye.

Fueled by the pisco sour a scowling waiter had served her as soon as she arrived at the baby shower, Matilde squealed along with her cousin Vane and correctly guessed how many toilet paper squares fit around Cristina's belly. After "guess the baby food flavor" and crossword puzzles with words like "pacifier," "bottle," and "reflux," the games ended. The conversation turned to upcoming births and weddings, which of two kindergartens to enroll children in, and who was getting divorced. Matilde fidgeted, especially when someone pointed out it was easier for a divorced woman to land a husband than for a single woman in her thirties.

"If at least *someone* has wanted her for a wife in the past, she's got to be somewhat normal," a girl was explaining as Matilde excused herself to go smoke outside.

In the dining room she left cash on the silver platter so Cristina could donate baby kits to the public maternity ward, ate three cupcakes with the name "Joaquín" on them, and downed a glass of chardonnay. She refilled it and went out to the verandah, to sit on the Bali-inspired rattan furniture, and enjoy the view of the Ariquilla.

That night, Matilde dreamed she was in her grandmother's bed, resting among clean, white sheets.

In her dream, her grandmother, a woman of almost the length and width of a life-sized doll, called her into the bathroom of her small house. Matilde could see their reflection on the pink tiles.

"A clean bathroom shows good upbringing," her grandmother said, and then shut the bathroom door. Matilde sat on a red velour couch and watched her turn on the shower above the door, soaking a fake Persian rug below.

"Showering is bit uncomfortable, but I manage," her grandmother said.

Then Esperanza, having suddenly appeared, called them over and pointed at a white booklet with cartoons of people dressed in bell-bottoms, knee-high boots and wide-lapel shirts. They looked happy, having ice cream under a smiling sun. A tourist map clearly labeled recreational areas, for sunbathing, sailing and picnics.

“I spent my own money, to have people design this for your father and me,” Esperanza said. “We thought this was going to be the city where we’d always live. I told my mother I’d be with your father, at whatever cost. She knew with him, I was like a moth to the fire. I was going to go straight in, no matter what.” She turned to face Matilde’s grandmother. “I loved coming to visit you here, Mami, even if I had to hide under a scarf and sunglasses.”

They laughed, but Matilde noticed they both had tears in their eyes.

Chapter Two: Christmas Suckling Pig

Esperanza
Inga
January 2013

Esperanza's mother, Victoria, would have said that only indian women slapped their children around.

Victoria would have also said only indian women engaged in public scandal. That's why, when Esperanza's father, José María, had come back from a fitting with the tailor at 10 pm on Christmas Eve, she'd laughed and pulled out a chair for him beside hers at the dinner table.

There'd been a newborn with a high fever, he explained, though no one asked him. No one they knew, he added. Victoria kissed him and served him the juicy suckling pig she'd saved for him. Esperanza and her siblings continued eating and bickering over who'd cheated at the card game they'd been playing before dinner.

From that day on, José María worked longer and longer hours, and though he disappeared for hours at a time on weekends, he never missed a wedding, baptism or funeral with Victoria smiling on his arm. He usually showed up at home right before they had to leave, so Esperanza would get to zip up her mother's dress, clasp on her necklace and make sure her slip wasn't showing. Victoria rewarded her by letting her wear her jewelry for the day. The pearl necklace, filigree gold earrings and the diamond-studded bracelet were Esperanza's favorites.

After that Christmas Eve dinner, Victoria took up stitching exquisite designs for her children's clothing, for her table napkins, for her bathroom towels, for her bed sheets, and for her walls. Once she stitched enough for her household and her children's future households, she started selling her stitching, which made her enough money to buy some land in the north of town. The land increased its value as the city grew northward, so she sold that land and bought

more, only to sell it two years later and buy even more land. Over the years, stitching, buying and selling land made her independently wealthy, with José María obediently signing off on all the documents and never asking her to pay for any of the household expenses. Victoria's money grew exponentially, in line with her tremendous talent for speculation, smiling, and silence.

When the tailor showed up at José María's wake, twelve year-old Esperanza watched her mother hug the whimpering man for a long time and accompany him to the kitchen. People, even the ones crying, stared and whispered. From behind the kitchen door she saw her mother give the man an envelope, her white hands looking even whiter as she clutched his brown ones. He put the envelope into the pocket of his suit and handed Victoria a rosary. They hugged again and he left, through the backdoor. When she came out of the kitchen she said, to no one in particular, "This poor man thought I wouldn't continue helping out his family like José María always did. But I have to; his father was Grandpa's hacienda manager."

Victoria never took the rosary off. "To keep your father close to my heart, to remember him every second of every day," she told Esperanza, who gushed to her friends it was the most romantic thing she'd ever heard, especially when they complained their fathers saw other women.

Only one odd thing ever happened, when a young man who looked a lot like the tailor turned up at the house years later. Victoria showed him to the kitchen, just like she'd done with the tailor, but this time, she could hear threats and screams from the kitchen. After Victoria finally managed to get rid of him, he came back to throw eggs at the windows.

"Crazy old bitch!" he screamed.

Victoria, serving herself a cup of chamomile in the kitchen, ran out the front door.

"You'll become old one day, too" she spat, "but I'll *never* become brown like you."

The day the last of her three children turned eighteen, Esperanza's mother brought a lawyer to the house to explain she was transferring each of them an amount of money that could last them a lifetime, if they used it wisely and married the right person. After the lawyer left, she explained their father had devastated her life by fooling her into marrying him when he — and her mother-in-law — knew perfectly well that he was gay, that she had stood the humiliation with dignity because “that was the thing that had to be done,” and that she was going to go spend the rest of her days in Europe, where no one knew about her, the tailor, or the desperate stitching that had saved her life and her independence.

A couple of months later the same lawyer brought them a death certificate indicating their mother had accidentally fallen overboard when she was making her way to England. But, the lawyers explained to Esperanza and her brother Leopoldo once Chiqui had left the room, several witnesses reported having seen her climb onto the gunwale and jump a couple of days before reaching England.

Chiqui became a theater student and joined a theater troupe of revolutionaries standing up to the military dictatorship, but when she found herself cooking and cleaning with the other women on their tours, she convinced her communist boyfriend to marry her, to abandon acting and society, and to dedicate themselves to making his family hacienda productive again. They eventually divorced, but she and Chalo were still business partners in the country's largest organic food company.

Leopoldo married well, but his wife Gigi did her best to keep him away from his sisters — not a difficult thing to do, since he was afraid that a failed marriage might lead people to suspect he was gay, too. He did the minimum for Esperanza and Chiqui: showing up at Matilde's father's funeral, at the hospital when Chalo had an accident, and at the baptisms, birthdays and

first communions of his nieces. He'd bring a heavy gold present — a medal of the Virgin, a guardian angel pendant or an identity bracelet — provide an excuse why Gigi couldn't attend, and stay for an hour after the meal had ended. Esperanza and Chiqui acted correspondingly at his children's events, with expensive presents and express appearances. After the last celebration of a first communion years ago, they'd mutually — and in perfect, unspoken coordination — stopped inviting each other to their children's birthdays. Nowadays, if they met — mostly by chance — everyone was polite and serene, just like their mother.

Gigi had probably heard about the book, and was patting herself on the back for keeping Leopoldo far away from his family. Thinking about them always gave Esperanza a stomachache, so she forced herself to stop, drink her chamomile tea, and fall asleep.

A couple of days later Chiqui convinced her to go for coffee at the new mall close to La Margarita Park, El Eden. It'd be safe enough, she thought, because Chiqui wouldn't drink at 5 pm on a Tuesday, especially at the mall. Chiqui was at her sober best, in a boho chic outfit, black hair that still shined at the age of 52, and ecstatic over her recent encounter with Chalo, which had ended with them in bed, wondering why they'd ever divorced. When she didn't make Esperanza angry, Chiqui made Esperanza laugh as if they were both little girls again, when they used to communicate in turtle language and drive everyone else crazy with their shrieking.

Chiqui was doing a spot-on imitation of Esperanza's friend Laurita when Gigi showed up with her friends. Because it wouldn't do to ignore her, they stood up, and in a sort of synchronized dance, the six women criss-crossed to kiss each other hello and ask about their respective children and husbands. Then Chiqui — who even sober couldn't keep her mouth shut — took Gigi aside and asked her if she'd seen the book. In the loudest tone her raspy voice could

manage, Gigi said, “I don’t have time for lowbrow gossip,” and paused to make sure her friends were listening. “It’s stuff everyone knows, like the thing about Leopoldo’s father’s gay lover. Big deal. Mentioning his mother’s suicide though, *that’s* bad taste.”

Esperanza, praying to God that Gigi was done, remained quiet. Chiqui smiled and said, “*Our* father, Gigi, *our* mother.”

“I’ve known about Mami’s suicide for a long time, Espe,” Chiqui said in the parking lot before they kissed goodbye. “You and Leopoldo wanted to protect me from it, I know, but I made my peace with it a long time ago.”

As Esperanza walked off, she turned to say something to Chiqui but stopped when she saw her at the wheel, drinking from a small bottle of vodka.

That night, when Matilde told her she’d be moving to Río Salado, Esperanza nodded and smiled, saying she wasn’t surprised, and she locked herself into her room so she wouldn’t have to listen to Matilde justify doing exactly what she’d told her not to do, or give a speech on how people didn’t care. People did care. Victoria put on a decade-long show, saving them from being social pariahs, and they’d all been happy enough in their lives as a result, hadn’t they? Even if Gigi had subjugated Leopoldo, their marriage had worked, and Esperanza’s nieces would also marry well. And despite Chiqui’s divorce, Vane’s family name and Felipe’s money made a good marriage for today’s standards. Except for Chiqui’s drinking, everything had turned out all right.

When she fell asleep, she dreamed about Matilde going to Río Salado, except she looked just like Gigi.

Chapter Three: Wet Converse

Matilde
Río Salado
February 2013

Matilde looked up at the peeling, numberless building, a sign welcoming visitors to Río Salado, but no sign saying Acción Futuro. She poked her finger through the rusty metal bars and pressed the intercom button, but it didn't seem to be working. This had to be the right place though, with the fruit salad bar and coffin shop on the bottom floor, just like Giuseppe — the Italian policy adviser she'd been in contact with to arrange her move to Río Salado — had described. Just then, the man from the fruit shop beckoned her. Slightly intimidated by the "NO GUNS ALLOWED" sign behind the counter, she went into the shop. Darwin, the AF boss, had told him the intercom was broken, he said. If she pushed on the door she could go right in.

Darwin introduced her to everyone at AF: Franklin, the secretary; a kind-looking program assistant named Consuelo who would soon go on maternity leave; another program assistant named Estiven; and Bosco, the driver.

"You'll learn as you go, so you'll need everyone's help. But make sure you get Bosco on your side — he'll be driving you to remote places where people trust him more than they trust AF," Darwin said as he showed her into her new office.

Matilde settled into the dark, hot office with white plastic furniture, a newish computer, no printer and no air conditioner. She took off her Converse tennis shoes and rolled up her wet cargo pants — both soaked from walking on the puddle-filled streets — and started working. The pre-assignment training at the Inga office had consisted of a morning-long meeting with Lucía, so Matilde would have to learn quickly. The fact sheets, photocopies from academic journals, newspaper clippings, photographs and United Nations reports occupied her until she heard a

knock and saw Darwin at her office door. He patted his stomach protruding over his skinny jeans, and proposed they have lunch together at the vegetarian place close to the office. He wasn't vegetarian, he explained, but the food was cheap and good.

On the way to the restaurant, Matilde realized that the high-heeled platform sandals and short skirts women wore kept them dry; an observation that made Darwin laugh heartily. He also laughed at the restaurant, when she saw the walls plastered with advertising on the wonders of vegetarian food and the miracles of the Bible and worried the restaurant owner would try to evangelize her.

"Doña Flora's a smart businesswoman; she does her evangelizing in her private time only." Darwin paused for a second, as if thinking something over. "My partner, Jaime, says she doesn't even try to evangelize people at the chamber of commerce, and she's one of the most active members there."

"And what kind of a business does Jaime have?"

"He owns several cafeterias in town," he said, evidently satisfied with Matilde's reaction to him just having indirectly told her he was gay. "He started off as a penniless busboy, and now he hires over fifty people. And pays them well, too," he added, with a grin. "But let's not talk about me, let's talk about the work we're doing."

After Darwin's gave her an overview of everything from Río Salado's environmental politics to AF office politics, they chitchatted about Matilde's first impressions of the town. By the time they went back to the office, Matilde felt she was going to have a great boss.

Matilde wasn't wrong; within a couple of weeks it seemed she had worked with Darwin for years. He even included Matilde in a meeting with Aldo Guamán, Prefecto and highest

provincial authority, to inform him of AF's suspicions that oil companies were profiting from the subsidized cleanups of continuous oil spills in the jungle.

"As an NGO we don't need his permission to investigate, of course, but it's better we keep him informed and on our side," Darwin explained. "And he usually is; he's the most honest politician around. He transformed Río Salado from a backwater jungle town into a prosperous provincial capital without keeping a cent for himself."

They found the Prefecto watching Hugo Chávez giving a long-winded speech on television, and though the secretary announced them in a loud voice, they had to stand there for about five minutes, staring at his small back and thick silver hair.

The tiny wooden desk and bamboo furniture looked shabby compared to the usual massive desks and meeting tables of governmental offices. Images of the Virgen del Cisne, President Fusta and Hugo Chávez covered one of the walls. The biggest picture featured the famously handsome Fusta atop a yellow truck, striking a whip in front of a delighted crowd. They held flags with the campaign slogan — and pun on his last name — "Whip 'em hard!" Portraits of his family covered the Prefecto's desk, including one of a tall, pretty quinceañera posing with a black boy in a tuxedo, surrounded by a full court of honor.

"Young people like you should be learning from Chávez," the Prefecto said, turning around to face them.

"Yes, sir," answered Darwin, as if they were continuing a conversation. "Chávez is a good man."

"A man who's changing everything!" The Prefecto's voice broke, his eyes became tearful. "Like Napoleon...or even Bolívar!"

Then he looked at Matilde as if he'd just noticed she was there.

"You've brought another gringa to Acción Futuro?" he asked Darwin. "I hope this one speaks Spanish."

"Let me introduce you, sir," said Darwin. "This is Matilde; she used to be in our office in Inga and will be working with us for a year, at least."

"And I do speak Spanish, sir," Matilde laughed. "I'm a blanquita from Inga, not a gringa."

"You don't look like the type who'd honor us with a visit here, much less work here."

"I'm really looking forward to working here, sir. I fell in love with this region when I visited with the Flotel Carvajal back in the nineties."

"The Flotel Carvajal!" he laughed. "I thought that river boat was only for gringo tourists. I'm glad they brought children from Inga to appreciate our splendid rainforest."

The Prefecto turned around and pressed play on the DVD. Darwin faced the screen as if this was normal, so Matilde did the same. Chávez, back on the screen, stood at the UN General Assembly podium, waving Noam Chomsky's *Hegemony or Survival* as the introduction to his infamous "The Devil has been here, and it still smells like sulphur" speech. They watched the whole thing, with the Prefecto pressing *stop* every once in a while to comment on the marvels of Hugo Chávez. In the best parts, Matilde couldn't help laughing and by the end of it, she liked Chávez even more. The Prefecto wiped tears from his eyes.

"Darwin, have you ever had a teacher who changed your life?" the Prefecto asked, scrolling through his phone without looking at them.

"Yes, sir," Darwin replied. "Father José at the Salesian secondary school made me want to dedicate myself to helping my people."

“And Chávez has been *my* teacher,” the Prefecto said, looking up from his phone. “He’s transformed my life, just like he transformed our beloved Fusta’s life.” He clasped his hands together and looked up at the ceiling, as if in prayer.

“So, Acción Futuro,” he said. “You’re doing good work.”

“That’s why we came to talk to you today, sir,” Darwin said. “We’re is investigating the companies reaping all the benefits from the oil spills that — as you very well know — have become a daily reality in our province.”

“The spills keep increasing every year,” the Prefecto said. “And the companies keep blaming it on local youth sabotaging the pipelines.”

“The demand for cleaning services keeps increasing, too,” Darwin said. “And the oil companies paying for the cleanup don’t have to compensate the local communities because it’s not a so-called ‘operational spill’”

“You’re implying that the oil companies are causing the sabotage themselves.”

Matilde caught Darwin’s eye to signal she wanted to intervene; he nodded.

“Sir, maybe you’re asking yourself why,” Matilde said, “even if the oil companies don’t have to compensate the local communities, they’d want to pay for cleanup to begin with?”

“The young lady — Matilde, that’s your name, right?” the Prefecto asked and Matilde nodded. “She’s read my mind. It doesn’t make sense.”

“People in middle management are involved,” Darwin said. “People getting paid to make sure the cleaning companies’ business continues thriving.”

“And middle management are not ultimately responsible for profits, but they *are* responsible for operational spills—”

The Prefecto's phone rang. He excused himself and walked over to the window, his back to them. Matilde raised her eyebrows at Darwin to ask how he thought everything was going. He gave her two thumbs up.

"Mijita, I'm in a meeting, I can't," they could hear the Prefecto saying. "Fine, I'll call you in."

Darwin stood up from his chair and gestured to Matilde to do the same.

"Sir, we know you're busy," he said. "We'd just like to know if we can count on your support to continue investigating this issue."

"I can't make any promises," the Prefecto said, "but you've got my support."

In the waiting room, Darwin introduced Matilde to Cynthia, the Prefecto's daughter, and Nuno, a lawyer working at the Pastoral Social. Except for her thick blonde highlights and his yellow mohawk cut, they looked exactly the same as in the quinceañera picture on the Prefecto's wall.

"First round's on me, but next one's on you, Nuno."

Darwin set two liter-size Pilsener bottles on the plastic table.

"Sure," Nuno, the guy they'd met outside the Prefecto's office when Matilde had just arrived in Río Salado, said. "I want to impress your new friend from Inga. People from the capital don't hang out here too often." He scrunched his mouth in Matilde's direction.

"No need to impress me," Matilde slapped her arm and wiped a mosquito off, along with the blood it had sucked from someone else. "I'm impressed enough with the kind of partying you do on Sunday afternoons."

Nuno laughed, the fake Versace logo on the side of his huge sunglasses and his buckteeth sparkling in the sun. “Not for much longer though — Fusta’s gonna banish the sale of alcohol on Sunday.” he said. “That’s the one thing he’s doing wrong.”

“We’ll just move the party to Saturdays,” Darwin said. He turned to Matilde, “So, you like the setup we have here in the chozas?”

Matilde nodded. She did like it: the thatch-roofed dance floor overlooking the river, the masses of sweaty people twerking to the reggaeton music, and even the muddy parking lot teeming with teenage boys on motorcycles, hitting on teenage girls made up to look like they were twenty. The man with a python around his neck, and the little children who followed him around while their parents were dancing or drinking, just added to the atmosphere.

“Let’s toast to Matilde becoming part of Río Salado,” Darwin said, holding out his flimsy plastic cup.

“Let’s toast to pretty girls from Inga,” Nuno said.

Matilde held hers out and gulped down the lukewarm beer, trying to ignore Nuno’s comment. When Darwin left to go dance, Matilde pulled out her phone and pretended to check messages.

“So, what’s new in Inga?” Nuno asked. “How’s my President Fusta doing?”

“Wonderful, as usual.” Matilde looked up from her phone.

“You’re a fan? Not many among your people.”

“Nope, not many among *my people*.”

“I guess in Estatal I didn’t meet any people like you,” he said apologetically.

Matilde wanted to change the subject. “Why’d you choose Estatal and not something closer to Río Salado?” she asked.

“Because it’s the best place to study law in the country.”

Matilde couldn’t think of anything to say. She associated Inga’s public university with the smell of burning tires from student strikes, which she’d see on the way to get dresses measured at her mother’s seamstress in the old town. Esperanza would shut the car’s windows and say what a great university it used to be when Matilde’s father went there and how bad it was for old men to use young men for their politics.

“Two good friends of mine spent the entire day at Estatal one day,” she said. “People were really nice to them.”

“Did they have something to do there?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said, “I mean, no. That’s the point. They just went there.” Nuno raised his eyebrows. “They’re two of my most open-minded and cool friends,” Matilde added and immediately regretted it.

“They didn’t have a friend they met up with? They didn’t have a conference to go to?”

Because the private universities had opened law and medicine programs in the nineties, no one Matilde and her friends knew had ever needed to go to Estatal — a separation that bothered Tommy and Carlos. They said they met really cool people there, hadn’t seen anyone on strike, and Estatal as a separate universe was classicist bullshit.

“They wanted to see what it was like,” she said.

Nuno ran his fingers through the crinkly brown hair on the sides of his head, then through the bright yellow mohawk in the middle. He took a yellow hair between his thumb and index finger, pulled it out, and let the strand fall on the ground.

“I guess there could be stuff to see,” he said. “For example, black guys like me, right?”

He nudged her side gently with his elbow. Matilde didn't know if she should apologize for having made the stupid Estatal comments, so instead, she took Nuno's hand and held it up to hers, pressing her fingers against his.

"Let's dance," she said.

On the way to the dance floor Matilde saw a woman twerking between a wooden column and a man, her back to him and her feet spread wide, the ruffles of her jean skirt grazing his crotch, to and fro, to and fro. His pale arms stretched to hold on to the column while he moved without touching her, something that so impressed Matilde she almost tripped over a small child, but managed to hang on to Nuno's waist. She enjoyed how it felt almost slimmer than her own.

The DJ changed the music to salsa, better than reggaeton, but Matilde still felt like a twelve-year old learning to dance for her first boy and girl party back in the sixth grade. Thankfully, Nuno never grabbed her hands to dance like the couples around them, just moved his long torso back and forth, like a puppet. When the ridiculously dirty "Micaela" started playing, Nuno dramatized the lyrics: "El doctor empieza a besarla de lenguita...Micaela enferma, enferma de amor, le dice a su papa que le lleve al doctor..." He pouted like the people around them, prompting her to do the same, until she was laughing like she hadn't laughed in a long time.

"I'm going to have to tell my mother that this time, the Tunda almost caught me," Nuno whispered in her ear when they said goodbye.

Leidy, who worked with Nuno at the Pastoral, offered to take Matilde home. In the car, Matilde stared at Leidy's diamond-encrusted nails and wondered if they didn't make it difficult for her to drive. Leidy caught her looking, but didn't say anything.

When they left the road by the river and came onto the paved road, the rattling stopped. To break the silence, Matilde asked Leidy, “What’s the Tunda?”

“She’s one of those witch characters parents scare their children with. This one’s black, with an indigenous face.” She honked at a drunk tottering out of one of the many brothels that lined the city streets. “Nuno’s been hitting on you, huh?”

Matilde blushed. “A little,” she said. “But how did you know that?”

“The Tunda’s an afro culture thing. I’m guessing it’s not something you would've heard about if it wasn’t from Nuno trying to charm you.”

To prove she did have something to say about the afro community in the country, Matilde thought about saying how incredibly racist ads she thought the ads on television used to be, like the one with a black woman in a white dress holding up a bag of detergent while singing she was “black, but very clean!” Then she thought to mention an article she’d recently read about black communities in the country having been ignored until someone discovered they might have been lacking in electricity, roads or job opportunities, but they were bursting with soccer talent. Staying quiet was probably a better choice.

Chapter Four: Le Monde

Leidy
Río Salado
February 2013

This new girl from Inga, Matilde, intrigued Leidy; she seemed to have everything going for her, yet seemed jumpy, as if something were missing. Leidy couldn't imagine this girl lacking anything, but she saw discontent in her, because she'd learned to spot it early on in her life.

When she was a recently arrived Colombian refugee in Río Salado, twelve-year old Leidy would see her mother leave the refugee shelter every night — and eventually, the room they rented in town — to prostitute herself. The well-meaning and nicely dressed women at the Pastoral Social and UN office would try to talk her mother out of what they called (for Leidy's sake, she supposed) Sandra Milena's "nightly activities." But it took years for her mother to find something else that would put food on the table; years Leidy used to do everything in her power not to end up like her mother.

So when she wasn't studying to be the top student at her school, Leidy read everything she could get her hands on. "La Economía," "El Planeta," and "Ahora" newspapers for national and international news, "Elite Club" for politics, art and culture and "*Le Monde's* 100 Books of the Century." She was currently on number 46, *The Great Gatsby*.

At sixteen she waited tables at D'Luca and learned everything she could from all the gringos on their way to see the black water lagoons, piranhas and pink dolphins in the Pumaní national park. She saved money to buy a tiny canister of olive oil and a bottle of balsamic vinegar for her salads and made coffee in an Italian espresso maker she found in the restaurant's storeroom. And — though she'd never left the country — Leidy read the *Lonely Planet* guides

the tourists would carry with them everywhere. She laughed right along with the Swedish woman who read the Río Salado section out loud after finishing her dinner at D’Luca: “a place full of drunks, prostitutes and questionable characters”.

By the time she graduated from high school and enrolled in law school, Sandra Milena complained she sometimes couldn’t believe Leidy was her daughter. Classmates’ bewildered looks didn’t help either, so Leidy relinquished some of her mannerisms and expressions, like kissing on both cheeks instead of one, refusing to use white vinegar and palm oil for her salads and alluding to literature every chance she got.

But she still dreamed of going to Europe. Paying a coyote to make it to the US or to Europe wasn’t the point, she’d explain to people who suggested it; only a real trip would do: paying her own money for a hotel in Madrid’s Gran Via, for tapas and a glass of wine, and for watching *Les Misérables*. That, or getting her master’s degree in International Law, like she would once she got her scholarship to the UK.

The gringos she spurned never understood, because they thought her friendliness was a ticket to sex or love. Some of them even thought she could be the kind of affectionate woman with no qualms about cooking that they were looking for; the kind of woman apparently difficult to find back home.

Marrying a gringo had been her mother’s dream, after Leidy’s stepfather, Lenin, died. Leidy always remembered Sandra Milena, who’d transitioned from prostitute to hairdresser once she got her Tecnóloga Diploma in Cosmetology, talking to her clients about her dreams of securing a gringo.

"This is what's gonna happen," she'd said to the Colombian consul's wife one afternoon. "First, I'm gonna get myself one of those big gringos with money: a blanquito, a strong one, with the balls to defend me and my children."

From a corner of the salon where she was doing her homework, Leidy blushed to see her mother wrapping her fingers around imaginary balls.

The Colombian consul's wife fanned herself with a 1997 copy of "Vanidades".

"Then I'm going to go back to Colombia and show him off to all of those good for nothing women who always thought I'd fail," Sandra Milena continued, tugging at the woman's burnt-out yellow hair with a fat brush thick with knotted black hair. "Finally, I'll have a blue-eyed baby just to spite them." The glittery butterflies on her nails flashed as she cradled the brush like a baby.

"I'll show up in my best gala and tell them: 'This is Sandra Milena Saavedra! And she's back!'" She tugged at the woman's hair again. "That'll show them, don't you think?"

The woman, whom Leidy often saw walking around the muddy town looking lost in beige linen suits and Panama hats, nodded. She declined an offer for a manicure and left.

Sandra Milena had failed to secure a big, white gringo to fix her life, but had called out for Lenin — short, chubby, brown-skinned Lenin — right before she died.

Chapter Five: Red Pleather Sandals

Matilde
Río Salado
March 2013

A couple of weeks after meeting him at the chozas, Matilde saw Nuno at a work meeting at the Pastoral Social. Giuseppe had gotten the Spanish embassy to fund two youth to attend an environmental youth summit in New York, and she'd contacted Nuno to coordinate the selection. She'd spent at least half an hour planning what to wear that day, and had gone home for lunch so she could shower after a sweaty morning in her muggy office. Once the meeting ended, and because it was past 6 pm on a Friday afternoon, Matilde and Nuno went for a beer at the corner shop near the Pastoral.

They talked for so long and sat so close, that the two little girls playing with their Barbies on the floor teased them with kissing sounds. Matilde and Nuno bought them lots of candy. And they drank so much beer, Matilde had to ask the elderly shopkeeper for the bathroom key.

Inside, it smelled so bad, she did her best to avoid throwing up while she peed without sitting on the toilet bowl, swatting dengue-ridden mosquitoes. When the cuffs of her khakis got wet with the brown water on the floor, she wondered for a moment what she was doing in Río Salado.

On the way home, Matilde and Nuno acknowledged each other only when one of the many street dogs barked at them, baring their teeth, and making Matilde whimper. He put his arm around her until the dog was out of sight and then they continued as before, in silence, until they got to her house.

Matilde and Nuno were having their usual after-lunch coffee at La Esmeraldeña, the bakery close to the AF office, when Leidy came in, a big grin on her face. “You better start imagining Río Salado without me,” she announced. “The British Council has finally re-started their master’s scholarship program, and I meet all their requirements. *And* I’d make a much better model for their website.” She laughed as she held up her huge phone screen. “All I have to do is improve my IELTS score. My English is terrible.”

“Stop reading so much and watch more television,” Nuno said, looking up from his phone. “Teach yourself English like I did. It’s easy.” He was brazen, just like Leidy, and like her, he loved to show it off.

“Better yet,” Leidy said, ignoring Nuno, “you both help me do my homework for the English lessons I’ll take every other weekend in Inga.”

”You can help me with the speaking,” she said, looking at Nuno. “And — because television doesn’t really teach you writing —” she laughed as she was saying this, “Matilde can help me with the writing.”

Nuno rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Leidy.”

“Okay,” she said. “But you’ll help me.” She was saying, not asking.

“You know I will.” He grinned.

Leidy worked full-time, and with only her income to support her, she could find the time, money and motivation to take the nauseating eight-hour bus ride to Inga and back, twice a month to learn English. Matilde, on the other hand, had never been able to make it to her French classes at the Alianza Francesa five blocks from her house in Inga.

The three of them met every Tuesday after that, for Leidy's homework, but also for long conversations over beer and cigarettes, and for Leidy and Nuno to — as they described it — “teach Matilde how the rest of the country lives.” Matilde went along with it. Whenever Leidy spent the weekend in Inga, she'd relish detailing how the smell of kid's vomit in the bus made the low-budget porn and gory horror movies played in the eight hour-ride even worse. “Thank God Fusta's gonna give us a first-class highway soon, *and* control the kind of movies passengers are made to watch,” she said. Like Nuno and Matilde, she was pro-Fusta.

Sometimes, Nuno played the guitar and Leidy sang along with her terrible voice. Though she knew had a decent voice, and often sang when she'd had enough to drink at karaoke bars, Matilde refused to sing with them until Nuno convinced her by playing “Algo Contigo” — the song he'd sang for her when they'd started dating a couple of months earlier. With time, their confidence rubbed off on her.

Matilde didn't miss Inga at all. When she stopped answering messages, her friends stopped contacting her. Martina had insisted the longest, but had given up with a “Fuck you, Matilde. Call me when you need me.”

Her mother called throughout the day, despite Matilde's answering only at around seven pm. They'd talk about her mother's poetry, which she'd finally taken up writing again, about Matilde's job and about all the latest gossip in Inga. Bacha, Lidia's daughter, was going to marry Manuel Urquidi, the painter twenty years older than she was. He wasn't bisexual after all, Lidia claimed. As for Rocío and Laurita, they'd started missing Friday afternoon cafecitos after finding out about Abuelo Josema's gay lover. One day they'd stopped coming altogether.

“See? They weren't really your friends, were they, Mami?”

“Too much smirking will start setting your mouth the wrong way, Tilda,” Esperanza said softly, “especially now that you’re reaching your thirties.”

Esperanza seemed to be okay though, especially because Tía Chiqui had gone through rehab and seemed to be doing well. Despite the nonstop calling, Esperanza never asked Matilde much about her personal life.

In Río Salado, Matilde knew she was exactly where she had to be — a certainty reinforced when AF received an international award for the work it had done to uncover the corruption behind the oil spills in the province. The petrol companies had been forced to investigate and publicly admit their role in the spectacular profits being made by the companies cleaning up the oil spills. Matilde had done her part, befriending the Prefecto to a point where he’d told his secretary always to fit the “gringa from AF” into his schedule, and bringing top journalists from Inga to Río Salado. She’d also convinced AF and the Pastoral that sending a refugee to the conference in New York would get more attention and it had: the engineering student’s declarations on how oil spills had forced families from their homes in the jungle went viral on social networks.

When all of them — Matilde, Darwin, Leidy, Nuno and Giuseppe — toasted to Río Salado’s future in the big award celebration, the usual thick, sweetly sick taste of Gran Señor champagne tasted like glory to Matilde. After AF staff posed for pictures in front of the huge banner commemorating the event, Leidy brought in a tall, plastic-orchid topped-cake to celebrate Matilde’s thirtieth birthday. Once she blew out the candles, Matilde took a bite directly off the cake and Darwin pushed her face into it, like local tradition dictated.

Matilde finally met Jaime, Darwin's partner, who told her how many good things he'd heard about her and even asked her if she'd be interested in volunteering as an after-school English tutor for his staff's children.

Giuseppe, who'd had too much Gran Señor, took the microphone and announced the Spanish girl he'd met in South Sudan was pregnant, and invited everyone to the wedding he'd be having in the summer at his family's farmhouse outside Florence. The women complained he was going to leave too many broken hearts in Río Salado, the men regretted he'd be leaving behind what they called his "playboy life," and everyone — also fueled by the pee-colored champagne — said they wouldn't miss it for the world.

It was a Friday evening, but instead of joining everyone for fish barbecued in bijao leaves and a night at the karaoke bars, Matilde and Nuno went home early, to get a good night's rest before the long weekend they had planned at Pumaní national park.

From the moment they stepped onto the long canoe that took them down the Piaguaje River, to the black water lagoons of Pumaní, Matilde and Nuno seemed to disappear. The tourists were busy bird and monkey watching, putting on repellent and trying to bond with the local guides. And the guides, knowing there was a high chance of getting a good tip and a decent chance of landing a gringa looking for an exotic jungle affair, were more than happy to comply.

To Matilde, it seemed as if the two of them sailed alone down the river for hours, talking and occasionally — lulled by the sound of the motor — sleeping on each other's shoulders.

Sex in one of the small huts lined up by the lagoons, was a rushed, mosquito-swatting disaster, but ended with both of them repeating, "It's okay. Don't worry," to each other in the sweet, hushed tones of two persons who feel like they have all the time in the world. At dawn,

with a headache from too much lukewarm Pilsener the night before, they rowed out into the lagoons to spot pink dolphins, and when that also failed, Nuno grabbed Matilde's hand and said, "Don't worry, Tilda; we'll come back tomorrow morning, or some other time."

As they rode back, Martina felt that her arms were stronger, and her headache had disappeared. She slept soundly while Nuno left to meet people in the local community, who wanted him to pass on a message to the Prefecto back in Río Salado. "He's my godfather, and people know that," he said, all the explanation he and Matilde needed.

One day, Matilde ran into Juan Manuel Gabilondo, Isa's now ex-boyfriend, at La Esmeraldeña near the office. Without asking, he pulled out a chair and bought her a fruit shake, saying he was in town to train local government committees on environmental monitoring. He was curious to hear about her, noting she'd transformed in only a few months — she looked happy, fulfilled. Isa would be happy to hear that.

Feeling for the first time as if someone from Inga was actually interested in what her life was like in Río Salado, and not caring — even hoping — that he'd spread everything she said, she told him everything. About the refugee who spoke at the UN and how everyone'd gotten drunk off the horrible champagne at the award celebration, about the wonderful work the Prefecto was doing and his obsession with Hugo Chávez, about Darwin being a great boss and how no one in Río Salado seemed to care he was gay, and even about how she'd learned to like singing and killing cockroaches. Everything, except about Nuno, of course.

They met for dinner that night, and after drinking a whole bottle of wine Juan Manuel confessed he'd presented his resignation because he also wanted to help people and do

something real for the environment, like Matilde was doing. She offered to help him in any way she could. When he asked for her help in getting AF to expose a case of corruption at the environmental ministry, she rushed to say yes, flattered he'd asked and sure Darwin and Giuseppe would be thrilled.

That night, for the first time since leaving Inga, Matilde felt strong enough to return to for a visit.

Besides her mother and Mariuxi, Vane was the first person Matilde saw in Inga, and — as usual — it seemed time hadn't passed.

"Rehab seems to have worked for my mom, thank God," Vane said. "I thought we'd lose her after that stupid book was published."

"Same for my mom, shutting herself up in her room to read sad poetry," Matilde said, "but at least she wasn't drinking."

Vane reached for Matilde's hand, but when Matilde saw her perfectly manicured nails, she clenched her fists to hide her bloody cuticles.

"You know you don't need to hide your hands around me, Tilda."

"Let me be, prima."

"Sorry," Vane touched her arm. "Tell me something: did your mom's breakdown have something to do with you leaving to Río Salado around the same time?"

"She had the breakdown after I left; it had nothing to do with it," Matilde said. "And I left because it was an amazing opportunity to do some real work, helping people."

"My mom says she doesn't know what's gotten into my Tía Espe, but she's not complaining about you."

Her mother was quieter than usual, that's all Matilde had noticed during her visit in Inga so far.

"But are you happy there, Mati?"

"You have no idea." Matilde covered her face with her hands and bit her bottom lip. "It's not only the work, Vane. I met a guy."

"No shit," Vane said. "The pictures on Facebook were discrete, but it was still pretty obvious."

After making Vane promise she wouldn't tell Matilde gushed about Nuno for at least half an hour, until she remembered to ask Vane about her upcoming wedding.

A few days later, Vane called Matilde to tell her Esperanza knew about Nuno, and she just wanted to make sure Matilde knew she hadn't been the one to tell.

Esperanza was acting like there was nothing wrong, so Matilde gave her a couple of days. But every time she saw Matilde all she did was make the sign of the cross on her lips and puff on her electronic cigarette, its blinking red light as silent as she was.

"Fine, I'll say it for you," Matilde said on the second day of waiting, "I'm going to ruin my life by dating a black guy."

Esperanza glanced at her, her lipstick gone, the tattooed line around her thin lips visible, and turned her back. Matilde walked out of the room.

"You're not going to ruin your life, mija," Esperanza said, leading Matilde back into the room. "I already ruined it for you when I let you go off to that place. I almost convinced myself that I should let you live your life as you wanted."

“You won’t make me feel guilty about being happy with Nuno, Mami,” she said. “And you won’t make me change for you.”

“You don’t need to change, mijita.”

She turned to face the window again. Matilde walked over and stood between her mother and the window, forcing her to look at her. She finally did, her Botox-smoothed forehead contrasting with her sagging cheeks, her breath smelling of artificial strawberry.

“You’re not telling me it’s okay to keep dating him.”

“No,” Esperanza said. “I’m saying you’re still the fifteen-year-old who cried for weeks after shocking everyone with your green hair.”

More than ten years had gone by since her green hair had become a running joke at school, yet Matilde still blushed.

“No one really cared about your scorched hair,” her mother continued, “except you and me, trying for months to recover your beautiful chestnut hair.”

“I was fifteen and that was my hair, Mami,” Matilde said in a pedagogic tone, “not the guy I was in love with.”

“You’re not in love, mijita,” Esperanza imitated her tone. “You’re in love with the idea that you’re special because you’re going out with a black guy.”

“Whatever you say, Mami.”

“Life is difficult enough as it is, Tilda. Why do you want people to reject you? His people will *also* reject you.”

“His *people*? We’re not talking about some uneducated people living off the mangrove, Mami!” Matilde said. “He’s a lawyer, and both his parents are university graduates with good government jobs.”

“A lawyer from some random provincial university!” Esperanza laughed. “For God’s sake, Matilde, half the taxi drivers in this city are lawyers!”

“He’s a *human rights* lawyer,” Matilde paused. “Not something you would know much about,” she added.

“Defending human rights must be easy when your parents are getting rich off the wonderful 21st century socialism.”

“Are you done, Mami?”

“Just one thing, *mija*,” Esperanza said, “I hope that when this guy drops you and you stop living your life like a soap opera, God’ll be there to help you.”

Matilde changed her ticket and flew back to Río Salado the next day.

Back in Río Salado, Matilde told Leidy all about the fight with her mother as they were watching one of the many parades planned to kick off the annual town festivities. High school girls in pleated mini skirts, strapless corsets and knee-high pleather boots marched by while the two women drank beer at a roadside table.

“I used to be one of those girls,” Leidy said. “You could also see a bit of my butt every time I twirled in time with my baton.”

“Did they make you participate even if you didn’t want to?” Matilde asked and squished a cockroach with the heel of her red pleather sandals.

“I don’t know. Most of us wanted to — it was an excuse to show your body, wear lots of makeup and have everyone look at you,” Leidy laughed. More quietly, she said, “I was just happy to be in school. Being a refugee *and* having a prostitute mother didn’t make it easy to get a place in school.”

“Everyone knew she was a sex worker?”

“Everyone knew she was a prostitute, Mati. Don’t call her a sex worker for God’s sake,”

Leidy laughed again.

“Anyway, I’m proud she never begged for our place in school, like other people did when there weren’t enough places to go around, even if they *weren’t* refugees or prostitutes.” Leidy she rolled her eyes. “She never did the whole ‘Excuse me for bothering you at this time, mi señor, perhaps you could spare a space for my daughter, she’s a great student and a good girl, and I know you’re really busy but maybe if you can be so kind as to authorize a space for her.’”

Leidy sipped her beer. “God, you people are submissive in this country!”

Matilde laughed.

“But when I graduated top student in my high school *and* second best at law school, the asshole director boasted about me like I was his daughter,” Leidy continued. “Now I’m everyone’s model refugee.”

“And you’re gonna be the model refugee at whichever university that’s smart enough to give you a scholarship in the UK.”

Leidy blew a kiss towards her.

“Nuno got the top student award at law school, didn’t he?” Matilde asked.

“He did.” Leidy half-smiled at Rita. “Nuno’s always the best at everything.”

“When I hear him talk about the work that you guys do with refugees, I’m just in awe.”

Matilde put her hand on her chest.

“That’s the thing, Mati. Nuno’s a great lawyer, a great friend —” Leidy signaled the waitress to bring two more beers “—and a great boyfriend. But he’s not for you.”

Matilde put out her cigarette in the leftover beer and hummed along with the karaoke video on the screen across them. She'd always thought Leidy and Nuno were too close, but was just happy to have it out in the open now.

"You've gone out with him."

"Over two years ago, just for a short while. Enough to know he'll always end up with Cynthia Guamán."

"The Prefecto's daughter? His high school girlfriend?"

"Of course. It's on and off with them." Leidy paused. "You know this, right, Mati?"

"Yeah, I'd heard something." Matilde touched the red bracelet Nuno'd given her to ward off bad spirits. "Thanks for watching out for me, Leidy."

"That's a relief. What you were telling me about the fight with your mother freaked me out a little," Leidy laughed. "And I just proved Darwin wrong, too."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That you're not serious about Nuno, of course. No way you'd ever be, I kept telling Darwin."

"So why'd you think I've been with Nuno for the last few months?"

Leidy looked away from Matilde, her chin close to her shoulder as she fumbled with her bra straps. When the bra strap snapped in place, she faced Matilde.

"I don't know, Mati, having fun, I suppose."

"I'm in love with him, Leidy."

Leidy was quiet for a while.

"Have you met his family, Mati?" she finally said.

“Stop it, Leidy. It’s like I’m back in Inga with my mother.” Matilde laughed. “No, I haven’t met his family yet.”

“You haven’t met his family for the same reason he hasn’t met yours. You guys are too different from each other.”

“We’re happy together, Leidy. Why don’t we change the subject?”

Leidy opened her mouth to say something but drank her beer instead.

Chapter Six: Big Pony

Cynthia
Río Salado
August 2013

At the nuns' orphanage outside of town Cynthia Guamán found a group of girls, some not even pre-teen, already dancing, moving their small hips in time with the reggaeton music, their almost identical, long, black hair shining under the fluorescent lights of the verandah.

“Lo que pasó, pasó...entre tu y yo!” they shrieked.

On a break from dancing, Cynthia blotted her face with rice paper sheets and re-touched her lipstick, then crouched on the floor to tip over a nineteen-liter bottle of water to fill a jug for the girls. Except for one girl complaining about the broken electrical water dispenser, they all guzzled the warm water and ate their cake in happy silence. Then they lined up and, one by one, searched Cynthia's phone for the hairstyle she'd style for them, like she did every Saturday afternoon after English tutoring.

Together with Nuno, Cynthia had been volunteering at the orphanage for years. Except for him and a few other people, no one knew she went there weekly, and that she'd helped the nuns place eleven girls in foster care over the last five years.

A girl of about four sat on her lap and stroked the big pony embroidered on Cynthia's light pink polo shirt, saying she wanted one like it. “Ta-tan, ta-tan, ta-tan,” Cynthia bounced the girl on her lap, increasing the speed until she shrieked with laughter and the rest of the girls started asking for their turn.

Nuno soon arrived, and after the English lesson, they stayed for dinner. The girls fought over who got to sit next to Nuno, and when everyone was done eating, dragged their chairs over to the table and listened to him tell stories. Though she'd always seen how good he was with

children — and it'd been a year since they'd last broken up — that night Cynthia pictured herself having a baby with him.

Chapter Seven: Rain on the Zinc Roof

Matilde
Río Salado
September 2013

Matilde woke up with pain behind her eyes and a headache on the Sunday Lucía flew into Río Salado for an emergency meeting at the AF office. Indigenous groups were using AF's recent report on Chinese open-air mines in the Amazon to blame the government for having had to leave their homes and their water being polluted. President Fusta had threatened to shut AF down if they didn't rectify what he deemed to be slander.

She arrived at the office before anyone else and made herself some coffee while she waited. When Darwin, Giuseppe and Lucía arrived they immediately tuned in to Fusta's live, weekly report to the nation. After a congresswoman from his party gave a long report on the improvements made on maternal health during the Good Revolution, Xico-Xico the clown performed for the children in the audience, and Fusta insulted an American comedian who made fun of him on US television, Fusta put up a picture of Giuseppe. The cameras zoomed in.

Giuseppe ran his hand through the curls plastered on his head and smoked, a habit he'd quit years ago.

"My dear citizens, this is Giuseppe Mencari, a foreigner working for a so-called non-profit, Acción Futuro. His name is in a slanderous, politically motivated report they just published. I'm worried, because American-funded organizations and foreigners can't tell us what to do. We're a democratically elected government!"

The audience clapped wildly. Lucía grumbled about AF never having received US funding.

“My dear citizens, I think these people are some of the last to realize that it’s been years since you — the people — said ‘Enough is enough — down with foreign imperialism!’ Maybe this so-called adviser thinks we’re still the backward banana republic we were before the Good Revolution recovered our dignity? Beware — he comes from the land of Mussolini, so if we scratch a little, we’ll surely find a neoliberal fascist beneath the surface!”

Giuseppe left the room.

“We understand, Mr. Mencari; the tide has turned and your model has failed; there are no jobs in your country. You come here, to live off our successful model, and we receive you warmly, under good conditions, not like you received our migrants who used to sweat blood in your fields and in your construction sites for pennies before I came to power. But you need to respect us! We will not let people like you threaten our economic progress!”

Giuseppe came back in, boiled water on the electric kettle and poured it into the coffee press.

“I heard the part about me coming here because I can’t find a job in Italy,” he laughed.

“We won’t take even one step back in this historical process! We won’t be defeated!” Fusta continued. “Mr. Giuseppe Mencari, come forward and tell the people what you are really trying to do, how you’re conspiring with the Americans to keep us down! Don’t hide behind the glossy pages of a report full of lies, full of slander, full of trash!”

Lucía looked at Giuseppe, covering her face.

“You *are* a foreigner, and with the new communication law, Fusta can make any judge rule the report is political,” she said. “I’m sorry, but we’ll have to put out a statement explaining we’re letting you go.”

“That’s okay, Luci,” Giuseppe said. “I bought a flight to Italy already.”

They all sipped their coffee for a few moments.

“But, Lucía, AF should at least *try* to defend itself, and Giuseppe,” Darwin said. “Fusta promised he’d protect indigenous groups and the environment. He’s fucking us over!”

Matilde’d never heard Darwin swear, or even raise his voice.

“Think about it, Darwin,” Lucía said. “If AF doesn’t exist, it can’t defend anything at all.”

“I didn’t join AF to conform with the status quo, Lucía.”

“I know someone in Fusta’s communication department.” Matilde interrupted, “Maybe I can talk to them.”

“I *also* know people in the Government, Matilde,” Lucía said, rolling her eyes. “That’s not the point.”

“There’s something else, Mati,” Giuseppe said, looking at Lucía as if for permission. She nodded. “You know Juan Manuel Gabilondo, the guy from the environmental ministry you introduced me to?”

Matilde nodded.

“He wasn’t a whistle-blower, Mati,” he continued. “The government never authorized that Chinese businessman to build a holiday resort in the Pumaní reserve, like Juan Manuel was supposedly denouncing.”

Matilde suddenly became very aware of not having brushed her teeth after breakfast — she could still feel the taste of eggs in her mouth.

“But that journalist from *El Planeta* published that big story based on the information *you* provided,” Matilde said. She took a sip of coffee to try and get rid of the taste of egg in her mouth.

“Yes, Mati. He did.” Giuseppe said. “And while writing a report based on fact is one thing; real slander — like the one I engaged in through the article in *El Planeta* — is another.”

“But the journalist, she should have been more thorough—” Matilde tried saying.

Giuseppe interrupted her. “*I* should have been more thorough, Mati. This is no one’s fault but my own.” He was being gracious, Matilde knew, but one thing was clear: *she* should have never vouched for Juan Manuel Gabilondo.

Giuseppe hugged her, and Lucía proposed they all go out for a drink. Darwin excused himself, saying he had a family thing to attend.

The rain pummeled the zinc roof for two hours, swelling Matilde’s headache and delaying Nuno’s arrival. She’d been in bed with dengue since Lucía left and hadn’t seen Nuno in days. He’d been holed up in the refugee shelter, tending to dozens of Kichwa families running from a confrontation on the other side of the border.

They hugged for a long time when he arrived. He helped Matilde out of bed, replaced the sweat-soaked sheets with fresh ones and took all the dirty ones home for the maid to wash.

“You shaved off your mohawk,” she said.

“And got my teeth whitened,” he laughed. “You’re one of the first to know, Mati: I’m running for mayor.”

Running with Alianza Patriótica gave him a good chance of being elected, Nuno explained, and although some people thought he was too young, his reputation would probably carry him through. Matilde asked him more about his plans and evaded his questions on why Giuseppe had left so suddenly. The throbbing pain behind her eyes and the shivering seemed to

subside around Nuno. When he kissed her hand, like he always did when he said goodbye, she cried, making him stay for half an hour more. He didn't kiss her goodbye.

"It's just dengue, Mati. Don't worry," he said at the door, "I've had it three times, even the hemorrhagic kind."

Matilde thrashed all night. By morning, a rash had spread throughout her body. Nuno didn't answer the phone, and Leidy was in a meeting, so Darwin took her to the hospital to confirm his suspicion: she had hemorrhagic dengue. Matilde refused his advice to get treated in Inga, even when he told her Nuno wasn't answering her calls because he'd been seeing his ex-girlfriend Cynthia. That was because the Prefecto was backing him to run for mayor, she explained; they probably had a lot to talk about.

Esperanza also tried convincing her, asking Matilde to forgive her for what she'd said about Nuno, but Matilde's answer was steadfast: People in Río Salado got treated for hemorrhagic dengue at the local hospital; why wouldn't she? She'd stay in bed, a nurse would come every day to monitor her white blood cell count and change her IV, and Darwin would bring her the food she would surely throw right back up anyway.

"My mom sent you," Matilde told Martina when she showed up the next day.

"She did, and she also had me send a driver ahead of my flight," she said. "He'll take your stuff and we'll leave this afternoon." She wiped Matilde's forehead with a wet towel, then rubbed antibacterial gel on her hands.

"It's dengue, Tini, not ebola."

“It’s *hemorrhagic* dengue, Tilda, not a cold. You’re not planning on dying for this guy, are you?”

Martina started picking up Matilde’s things and putting them in a suitcase.

“If you’re happy in your bubble of money, lunches and baby showers, that’s your problem, Martina,” Matilde said. “I’m staying here, where people appreciate me for what I am, not for who I marry or how much money I have.”

“I guess you’re forgetting you called me to cry about how this Nuno hadn’t had time to visit you in days? And about all the drama going on at work?”

“Nuno came by yesterday. Everything’s okay.”

“Yet you still look like you’re in mourning,” Martina said. “And don’t say it’s the dengue.”

Martina’s resolve seemed to decrease throughout the morning, until it was time to fly back to Inga. She stocked the fridge with bottles of coconut water, left several sets of clean sheets on the sofa, and kissed Matilde on the forehead before she left.

As soon as she left, Matilde picked up the phone. “Franklin, can you please get me Cynthia Guaman’s phone number?” Matilde asked Daisy, the AF secretary over the phone.

Though she’d ever been introduced to Cynthia only the day she met the Prefecto, Martina called her, convinced she’d deny she was seeing Nuno.

Chapter Eight: Subsidized Gas

Cynthia
Río Salado
September 2013

The girl from Acción Futuro, the one from Inga, was on the line, demanding to know if she was back together with Nuno.

Cynthia felt sorry for her; Nuno had told her Matilda had been responsible for the mess at the NGO, for Giuseppe having had to leave the country like a common criminal, and that she was now in bed with hemorrhagic dengue refusing to leave Río Salado.

“Matilda, please, you should be resting now,” she tried saying, but the girl started crying. “Really, Matilda, you should at least have someone take care of you. There’s a small house in my parents’ backyard. It’s not in such a great condition, but we can set it up for you. My mother can take care of you.”

“Are you or are you not back with Nuno?”

“I am, Matilda,” Cynthia said, and though Nuno had told her, in passing, about his fling with this girl looking for an exotic adventure, she said, “I’m sorry, I thought your relationship with Nuno was over.” Better to have her think Nuno had cheated on her than to know the truth.

When the girl finally hung up, Cynthia gathered her things and left to her father’s office.

As soon as he saw her come in, Aldo turned off the Chávez video he’d been watching at his desk and stood to hug his daughter as if he hadn’t seen her just yesterday.

“Mi Papito, how are you? Have you taken your medicine?”

“I did, mijita.” He kissed her. “I love how you’re always watching out for me.”

“That’s because I love you, Papito.”

“My godson Nuno better count his blessings,” he said. “I heard you’re back with him. Why don’t you stop this on and off and get married already?”

“Maybe I’ll bring you and Mami the good news soon, Papito.”

“Just don’t get pregnant too soon,” he said. “It’s hard leaving a baby behind when you have to work. And I know my daughter won’t be fooled into giving up her monthly paycheck to take care of a child.”

“Don’t worry, Papi,” she laughed. “What you should be worrying about is making sure all your staff is attending their AP neighborhood committee meetings. I’ve heard not all of them are.”

“Mija,” he said, “Fusta knows I’m loyal to him, and to this province; he doesn’t need all my staff to prove it.”

“Papi, Nuno told me people in AP are talking. And now that he’s going to run for mayor, it’s even more important to do things right.”

“Nuno better get his values straight if he’s getting involved in politics,” he said. “What matters is the work that you do, not what people say or don’t say. The few people who don’t attend are excellent workers. I’m not going to force them to do anything they don’t want to do.”

“It’s not about forcing, Papi,” she said. “It’s about persuading them, making them see that we can’t go back to the way things used to be before the Good Revolution.”

Aldo agreed to go through staff attendance records together, so Cynthia could suggest ways to get more people on board with the meetings.

“I’ll see what I can do, mija,” he said when she closed her laptop and got up, “but just because you’re asking. I never could say no to you, could I?”

On her way out, Cynthia made sure her father's secretary noted her in the visitor's logbook before she went to the staff cafeteria to have lunch with the Infrastructure Department's director.

Her father had become complacent, she thought as she waited for her uncle to arrive. He seemed to have forgotten how far he'd come from his grandfather, the indio who'd slept on a sheepskin by his white master's door. Once his own party members sidelined him in the next election, Aldo and his family would be left in limbo, were it not for Cynthia having turned her father's position — and an economy of cheap credit and big government spending — into contracts for her uncle's construction company. Like her mother before her, Cynthia was counting on herself — and Tío Jefferson's help — to move things forward for their family. Nuno becoming mayor would also help.

Aldo had become the Prefecto by — or despite of, like her mother liked to say — never bribing and never receiving bribes. One of her first memories was her mother in a dirty apron, her greasy hair in an improvised bun, trying to justify to her father why she was using subsidized gas for her baked goods business. He'd accused her of being like the oligarchy, making profit off something meant for the poor, and ordered her to buy commercially priced gas. She did, until she rented a space in town with a loan from her cousin Jefferson, and used subsidized gas for years in a booming business that funded their three children's university education in Inga.

Chapter Nine: Ducking the Wave

Matilde
Inga
September 2013

Matilde tried to dissuade Darwin from going with her to Inga, but he insisted, saying he had to meet some people after having resigned from AF. It'd be harder to get a job without Lucía's recommendation. Also, he wanted to make sure Matilde was okay, because she hadn't fully recovered.

"From which part? Nuno breaking my heart, Lucía fucking us over, or Giuseppe having to flee the country on account of my stupidity?" she asked. They both laughed.

Once they settled into the seats on the small, thirteen-row plane, Matilde took a deep breath and said, "Okay, if you're coming with me, it means you're going to meet my mother. So you have to know a few things."

"Should I be scared?" Darwin put his hand on his chest and opened his eyes wide.

"You laugh, but let me tell you what I mean."

As they flew from Río Salado to Inga, Matilde told Darwin all about Esperanza.

The young guards in Esperanza's building stared at Darwin's blonde highlights, dark skin and belly protruding over his tight jeans and snickered.

"Good afternoon, Don Stalin," Matilde said to the older guard, the only one whose name she knew. "Can you please ring the tenth floor? I don't have my card."

"Of course, Señorita Matilde, immediately." He glared at the others.

Darwin whistled under his breath when they came into Esperanza's four thousand square feet apartment, which took up a whole floor of the building.

"I'll have some chamomile tea please," Matilde told Mariuxi, as they sat in the one of living rooms overlooking the city.

"Another one for me, thanks, Mariuxi," Darwin said. He smiled warmly at her, but she didn't smile back, just arranged the ruffles on her white blouse, patted down her bright green pleated skirt and walked off.

"So, is it true," Darwin turned to Matilde, "that the Ministry of Labor makes surprise visits in buildings like these?"

"Yeah, they ask all the maids to come down, and God save whoever's been stupid enough not to enroll their maid in the system. If you're even one dollar behind in paying your maid's social security they won't even let you out of the country."

"Fusta would be a hero if he hadn't turned out to be such an asshole." Darwin sighed and took a magazine, *Temas*, from the coffee table. "But let's not talk about him; let's look at something fun instead, like these articles: 'My Fashion Alter-Ego,' 'The Return of Cahiers du Cinéma,' 'Beauty Begins Within: Buddhism.' God, I love them," he laughed.

"I love them, too." Matilde took another issue of *Temas* from the pile and leafed through it. "But after you read them, don't you feel the same as after you've had McDonald's?"

"Exactly the same!" They both laughed, making Matilde think how much she was going to miss him.

"Hold on," Darwin said, "here's something worthwhile about Fusta's pet project: 'Pagarina: Waking up to a New Dawn'."

"Does it say it'll cost 600 million dollars?"

“It says Fabricio, Lucia’s husband, is going to be heading it,” Darwin sighed. “That explains a lot, I guess. Seems they’re drinking the Good Revolution’s kool-aid, too. Yet another good reason for me to have quit, Mati.”

“And for me to have accepted Lucia’s polite suggestion to *voluntarily* resign,” Matilde laughed. She covered her mouth with her hand and stared out the window. The rays of the sun cut through the sky and reached down the Urkurasu, the volcano that towered over Inga.

Darwin put an arm around her. “Whenever I see that kind of light over the Urkurasu,” he said, “I think Inga should’ve been nicknamed God’s Hand, instead of God’s Face. Don’t you, Mati?”

Matilde put her head on Darwin’s shoulder and cried.

When she came out to say hello, Esperanza invited Darwin for lunch, as a way of thanking him for coming with Matilde on the plane. Her mother’s fake graciousness and congenial conversation made Matilde uneasy, but at least Darwin wouldn’t end up hating her for her mother’s faults.

Esperanza stared at the elevator doors for a long time after Darwin left. “He’s nice,” she said. “He’s got a boyfriend, I suppose?”

“He does, Mami,” Matilde groaned, “but please don’t start, I’ve only just arrived—”

“Don’t get worked up, Matilde,” she said. “Just saying it’s good to see he’s not fucking someone’s life up, like your grandfather did.”

“It’s been almost a year since the thing about Abuelo Josema, Mami! I thought you’d gotten over it.”

“Forget I said anything, Mati.”

With the excuse of having to recover from the dengue, Matilde didn't leave her mother's apartment in a month, except for helping Martina prepare Nati's kitchen shower before the wedding. The shrimp ceviche she helped make for the brunch landed her in the hospital with dehydration; the perfect excuse to miss the wedding and turn down another month's worth of invitations. She read a lot. Like Leidy, she'd started going through *Le Monde's* list of 100 novels.

Unlike Leidy, she couldn't get herself to accept — just like that — Nuno going back to Cynthia Guamán. After a few weeks of scrutinizing their Facebook profiles all the way back to 2007, finding pictures and comments that may or may not have been clues she could've seen sooner, she shut down her account. She asked Martina to change the password so she wouldn't be able to go back even if she wanted to.

But she could still access AF's website, updated constantly and ever more in favor of Fusta's government and the Good Revolution. AF had removed the infamous report on the open-air mines and displacement of indigenous communities, as well as most of the information that could even potentially discredit the government.

Lucía, however, seemed to want to make amends with Matilde. She called a few times, but Matilde refused to answer, so she tried Esperanza to get through to Matilde.

"That woman!" Esperanza complained. "Ever since elementary school, Lucia's been—"

"I *know*, Mami," Matilde interrupted Esperanza. "How'd you get her off your back?"

"It wasn't difficult," Esperanza said. "I just told her I'd seen Fabricio driving a brand new Land Rover around town, and that he probably needed it to drive on all the first-class roads Fusta's built with our millions."

One night, Matilde felt like calling Cynthia, just to hear her voice, because she couldn't really remember it from the conversation they'd had that last day in Río Salado. A call from Martina interrupted her, and after hanging up, Matilde erased Cynthia's phone number. She looked at her thumbs, peeling all the way down to the middle from so much picking, and erased Nuno's phone number too. Realizing she needed to get out of the house, Matilde called one of her new friends from the gym.

Dinner at the Ulluku, the trendiest restaurant in town, with all its lemon thyme gin and yucca pita bread novelty and the company of unmarried people her age, was different from what Matilde remembered from going out in Inga. The night at Bar Iguana — despite the retro-inspired setting and eclectic music playing — wasn't. Girls who'd come alone, like Matilde and her friends, were still dancing in circles to have some fun while waiting for a story to begin with a guy who could show up any time, any night.

Selfies with her new friends were the highlight of Matilde's evening. That and messaging with Darwin, who refused to send her Cynthia's number after she'd had three gin tonics and was set on talking to her.

A couple of weekends later, Esperanza asked Matilde to go with her to Bacha's wedding, saying Lidia had insisted. Since her only other option was another night at Bar Iguana, and suspecting a wedding that involved Manuel Urquidi and his artist friends would be a lot more entertaining, Matilde said yes.

At the ceremony, Matilde found herself sitting next to Ignacio Berasmendi, a guy from the American School she hadn't seen in years. They caught each other's eye when Lidia, with a look of happy resignation on her face and a straight voice, announced there would be a Blue

Moon that night, making it “an auspicious day for a wedding.” When Bacha and Manuel poured purple and red sand into one single, heart-shaped vial, Matilde and Ignacio tittered. At that point, Esperanza jabbed her elbow into Matilde’s side. “Don’t be rude,” she hissed.

“Last time I saw you must have been at the New Year’s party back in 2001, stuck to Martina, as usual,” Ignacio told Matilde as they sat at one of the dozens of tables under the ample white tent that would shelter guests from the sun and heat of the afternoon and the cold of the night during the long hours of drinking and dancing ahead. No one they knew was sitting there, just some of Bacha’s college friends from the States. Matilde and Ignacio didn’t really have to talk to them, so it was perfect.

“At the beach, yeah, I remember. You were stuck to that gringa girlfriend of yours,” Matilde replied. “Whatever happened to her?”

“She’s a high-flying businesswoman over in the States now — she was never going to come languish here,” he scoffed and looked down at the printed menu on his plate. “That’s okay. She deserves to be happy. But never mind, I want to hear about you.”

They talked for hours — about the years he’d spent in Miami after college, her time in Boston, why he’d given up on his career as a biologist and joined the family business, and her time in Río Salado.

“I knew you weren’t like the rest of girls in this city,” he said when she gave vague answers to his questions about her love life. “You haven’t been sleeping around since college. I like that.”

Esperanza, who’d been with Tía Chiqui and her friends all day, just raised her eyebrows when Matilde told her she’d stay a while longer because Ignacio would be taking her home. “Send a big kiss to Elvira for me, mijo. I haven’t seen her in ages,” she told Ignacio.

When she arrived home that night, Matilde got her Facebook password from Martina to re-open her account. She unfollowed Nuno and Cynthia and replaced her abstract profile picture with one someone had taken of her at Nati's baby shower. She looked good enough in it.

Within a month, Ignacio invited Matilde over to his family's hacienda.

"You know the Berasmendi family used to own half of Quillabamba, Mami?" Matilde asked her mother over breakfast.

"I used to go there when I was a girl," Esperanza said. "The 200-hectare hacienda you'll see today is tiny compared to what it was then." She picked a stray thread off Matilde's white linen shirt. They'd spent at least an hour that morning picking out what Matilde would wear.

"They're related to Rocío, and to Vane's father, *and* to Martina's mom," Matilde said, "so you can be happy now — I've saved myself!" She held up her arms like a born-again Christian.

"I *am* happy, mija," Esperanza said. "But I wonder if you're not going from one man to the next like there's no tomorrow..."

"You've got no cure, Mami!" Matilde laughed.

"His drinking—"

"Ignacio stopped drinking ages ago."

"But people who drink always go back, mija. Look at Chiqui."

"Sheesh, Mami! Don't ruin this for me. He's got everything you ever wanted, doesn't he?"

"He does, mijita, but—"

“Okay, Mami.” She held up a Barbour jacket and a quilted blue jacket. “Should I take both?”

“Yeah — it’ll definitely rain. And it’s cold as hell there.” Esperanza kissed Matilde. “Have a good time, mija. And don’t let Elvira intimidate you — she’s convinced her son’s God’s blue-blooded gift to the world.”

After lunch on the hacienda verandah, Ignacio’s father and sister went horseback riding, while the two stayed with Elvira for coffee and cake.

“Alfredo loves riding with Barbara,” Elvira said, “especially since Ignacio never got back on a horse after his big fall.”

Ignacio rolled his eyes. “I don’t know why you always have to mention that, Mami.”

“And I don’t know why you’re embarrassed,” Elvira glanced at Matilde. “Only pity is, the poor thing was only eight, and the scare left him that occasional stutter.”

Matilde, who’d never heard him stutter, nodded firmly.

“You know the doctors said the timing was probably a coincidence, Mami.”

“That’s bullshit, mijo,” Elvira said. She moved her chair closer to the table and served herself more cake. “So, tell me more about you, mija.”

It was an order for Matilde, not a request, but she didn’t mind; she’d gladly undergo an interrogation on the Osoro Muruzábal family tree if it increased her chances of never going back to an Inga nightclub as long as she lived.

“And don’t worry. I don’t need to know more about your gay grandfather than what everyone knows already,” Elvira added. “Skeletons in the closet are overrated.”

Matilde laughed louder than she intended but remained on guard for a while, until she had to admit to herself she was enjoying the conversation, finding it much easier to talk to this woman she'd never known than to her mother. At one point, Ignacio slipped out to the garden, signaling to Matilde to take as long as she wanted.

Once she was done digging, Elvira spoke openly about Ignacio's past drinking problem and how seeing a psychologist for her own struggles wasn't only for crazy people, whatever people still thought. She was also a born-again Christian, something Alfredo didn't mind as long as they showed up at Catholic mass for weddings and baptisms. He was practically an atheist anyway, she explained.

Matilde found Ignacio dozing on a rattan chaise lounge in the garden, waking to hug her and thank her for being so good with his mother.

"She worried I'd start drinking again when I broke up with my ex," he said. "She's happy I found you."

"Being local probably increases my eligibility," Matilde laughed.

They took a walk to the small waterfall on the property, competing on who knew more names of plants and trees along the way. After a cold dip in the waterfall, they drove to see a giant sundial to be inaugurated on land that used to be part of the hacienda. The equator line run through it, and a group of local astronomers had convinced Ignacio to get his father to donate the land. On a clock face spanning nearly one hundred eighty feet, Ignacio showed Matilde how to read the time and month through the gnomon's shadow on stones. Standing on the painstakingly measured equatorial line across the sundial, Matilde took Ignacio's hand, knowing this is what she'd been waiting for, feeling as if she'd just managed to duck under a giant wave.

Elvira invited her to stay overnight in one of the many spare rooms of the house, but Matilde declined. Her mother would never accept it.

Matilde climbed into Ignacio's spotless Land Rover and kissed him.

"Sorry I took so long, puchi" she said. "My mom was interrogating me about where we went last night."

"I should have come up and said hello, puchi," he said, "but I had to take a few calls from work."

"My mom doesn't mind," she lied. "But she *was* interrogating me about where we went last night."

They laughed; Matilde's legs still ached from having wrapped them around Ignacio just a few hours earlier.

"Is the Volkswagen thing still hurting you guys?" she asked.

"Yeah. I can't believe the Germans — of all people — would rig engines to cheat on emission tests. But it's okay. My dad's making *very sure* the government keeps licensing us to import other car brands," he said. "Just got to keep working them to get more of share of the licenses they give to El Abad."

"I see you showing up at an Alianza Patriótica march any time now, puchi, defending Fusta," Matilde laughed, because ever since everything that happened in Río Salado she'd lost all hope in Fusta.

"Maybe," he also laughed, "but it's going to have to be for a lot more than the ten dollars and the sandwich all those poor bastards get to march for the Good Revolution."

They made their way across the city to Ignacio's apartment. Elvira had invited Matilde over for lunch.

"You know the Arbaizas who live across the hall from us?" Ignacio asked.

"The one related to Esteban?"

"Yeah, Raúl is Esteban's..." he counted off with his fingers, "great-uncle, Clarita's brother. Her other brother, Álvaro, died."

"I get it, puchi," she interrupted. "So what's the story?"

"In one of their surprise visits, the Ministry of Labor found the maid locked in and beaten up."

"That's sickening," she said.

"Absolutely," he said.

Matilde turned down the volume on the Latin pop music and closed her eyes.

"But you know, puchi," he said, "sometimes, when the maid does something stupid for the tenth time, like burning your shirt with the iron, it can really piss you off!"

Matilde closed her eyes again, then turned up the volume.

When Matilde told Martina about Ignacio's stupid comment later that day over coffee, Martina groaned. "Ignacio Berasmendi's an asshole for that and other reasons — like how he acts when he gets drunk."

"He stopped drinking over a year ago, Martina, you know that."

"But you should have seen him when he did," Martina said. "He'd accuse waiters of stealing from him, yell at anyone who beat him at cards and even hit on people's *mothers*, for God's sake!"

“People can change.”

“Not that much, Tilda.”

“You’re happily married with four beautiful children and a successful career, Martina.

Don’t you want the same for me?”

Chapter Ten: Quinceañera

Leidy
Río Salado
April 2014

When only Darwin got invited to Matilde's wedding in Inga, Leidy realized just how hurt Matilde had been when she left. Once again, she regretted not having told Matilde about Nuno and Cynthia sooner, and for not having told her she used to date Nuno, too.

Leidy could have sworn Matilde was just having an adventure in a place that she would never settle in, with a good man she'd never take back to Inga because he didn't have the right skin color. And she saw no problem with that: like she'd told Darwin, Nuno would never settle down with a woman like Matilde either, or any other woman who wasn't Cynthia. Leidy had learned that pretty quickly when she'd been with Nuno, but — when she learned how Matilde felt about Nuno — she thought it best to keep quiet about her own story.

Behind her house, where the garden gradually turned into jungle, past the marble bathtub the ninety-year old owner of the big house used whenever he flew in from Inga, past the papaya trees and behind the multi-colored bougainvillea that made her nauseous just from looking at it, Leidy had planted a tree with velvety, bubble-gum pink flowers called “quinceañera.”

It'd been five years since she'd planted it, after she and Nuno had decided it would be best to end her pregnancy. She'd preferred going back to law school and her job and he'd preferred going back to Cynthia and his future career in politics. Whenever she thought about her baby girl, the question of which had come first — her reasons or Nuno's reasons — lingered for a while, but she never seemed to remember. It would all be for the best, they had both concluded. Nuno'd looked up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling in his room, quietly thinking for a

while, then leaned over to tuck the mosquito net on Leidy's side of the bed and kissed her goodnight.

Ever since then, Nuno and her had been the best of friends.

Nuno smiled widely at Leidy when she came into the Pastoral one afternoon after lunch.

“Your letter’s here, flaca. You’ll be leaving us soon, I hope,” he said.

After several months of going back and forth on entrance requirement hurdles, she was finally going to know whether her scholarship had been granted. She looked at the image of a young Queen Elizabeth on the envelope’s stamp and closed her eyes, imagining herself atop the London Eye, looking at the Thames from high, high above everyone else.

Two hours later, the butt from Leidy’s last cigarette crackled in the plastic cup on the table.

“I’ll go buy another pack next door, flaca. Don’t worry,” Nuno said, downing the fourth bottle of beer they’d been sharing.

“That’s okay, negro. I’m ready to go home now.” She felt a little light-headed. “You’re late for your campaign meeting, anyway. Cynthia’s cool with us hanging out, but she won’t like you slacking on the campaign,” she laughed.

“You know her so well, Leidy, I don’t see why you don’t hang out more,” Nuno said. “She’s always tried, but you’re not interested.”

“Sorry, negro,” Leidy put up her hands and laughed, “but I can’t be as open-minded as her.”

“Yet you’ve agreed to be the godmother of our baby boy,” he said. “I’ll never fully understand you, flaca.”

“That’s okay, negro. You don’t need to.” Leidy smiled and put money down on the table.

Back home, Leidy joined Don Napo, the property’s guard and gardener, for a cigarette on his small verandah. She told him she’d lost the scholarship, and that she feared she’d only ever be ever be the Río Salado refugee success story with a law degree from a provincial university, the daughter of a prostitute who’d had to ask the UN for diapers and sanitary pads for years. He looked at her, already a bit drunk, and said, “Not a bad life, mija, not a bad life at all.” She declined the wine he offered her from one of the bottles he regularly pilfered from the big house and walked back to her house on the other side of the property.

The next morning Leidy went back to Don Napo’s to check on him. She helped him off the rattan chair he’d passed out on, washed his face and hands, brushed his hair, put him in bed and left for her Saturday morning English class. Despite her mediocre English being one of the reasons she hadn’t received the scholarship, she’d resolved to continue with her classes, both in Río Salado and in Inga. Sooner or later she’d find a way out of Río Salado, Nuno hadn’t stopped telling her yesterday afternoon. She’d told him a thousand times no, but he was right — she’d make it out one day.

Chapter Eleven: Sundial

Matilde
Inga
Second half of 2014

During the first months of her marriage, if there was no wedding, baptism or big birthday party in Inga, Matilde insisted on spending weekends at Quillabamba. With no internet connection and his father's firm resolve to keep work matters outside the hacienda, Ignacio always relaxed there. If he really had to work, he stayed back in Inga on Friday night and joined them on Saturday. In the 200-year old house with three feet thick adobe walls he never woke up to check his emails, and Matilde never woke up for water, or because she was too hot or too cold.

They made love every morning, careful to be very quiet. The only time they weren't, Elvira smiled at the breakfast table and told Matilde, "Please take that mortified look off your face, mija. Alfredo and I are happy you two make good use of the bedroom. A sexless marriage is a tragedy."

Esperanza, in Quillabamba for the weekend, didn't try to one-up Elvira, like she did with nearly everything. Unlike setting a table or knowing who belonged to the warped branches of Inga family trees, talking about sex had never been Esperanza's thing. She just pretended she didn't hear Elvira and continued talking to Alfredo.

In Quillabamba Matilde volunteered at the giant sundial's information counter, something Ignacio had encouraged her to do. Maybe that way she'd recover the enthusiasm for work, he said, knowing she still hadn't gotten over the way everything had ended in Acción Futuro. The interaction with people from the nearby villages and foreign tourists was something she always looked forward to, but she was equally happy to spend her afternoons with Elvira,

Barbara and whoever else was in Quillabamba for the weekend. She eagerly participated in the long afternoons in the sunroom overlooking the mountains, be it a discussion on flower arrangements, children's attire, and five-course menus for Barbara's exhaustively planned wedding to a guy from one of the country's richest families or the recurring discussions around Fusta's sins and virtues. Plenty of conversation, wine and coffee made the adobe walls feel even safer, the house even older and the land around it, endless.

Every weekend she spent in Quillabamba, Matilde forgot Río Salado a little more.

With time however, Matilde noticed Ignacio was becoming jumpy and spending all his time on the phone. Esperanza had also noticed. "You need to spend more time with your husband, mija. Don't let him stray," she told her.

When Matilde proposed spending a long weekend at the hot springs outside of Inga, Ignacio immediately agreed, and even pointed out they hadn't spent a weekend alone since their honeymoon. She always insisted so much on going to Quillabamba, he added, making Matilde curse her mother under her breath.

Ignacio asked for the wifi password as soon as they checked into the hotel, but he barely looked at his phone during the long weekend. In the evening, after the crowds had left, they soaked in the pools, touching, but barely visible to each other amid the steam. During the day, they hiked, and though he got off the horse after just a couple of minutes, Ignacio tried horseback riding for the first time since he was eight years old. At 18,000 feet above sea level, Inga, and even Quillabamba, seemed very far away.

Chapter Twelve: Overcooked beef

Cynthia
Río Salado
October 2014

One day, when Cynthia arrived for her usual time with the girls, Madre Benedictina told her a new Spanish volunteer would soon arrive, and she'd need her to show her around Río Salado. Cynthia claimed that with her job and Nuno being mayor she was overworked and had more on her plate than she could handle.

"You don't know what being tired is, Cynthia," the nun told her. "In high school I personally dragged you out of class when you had dengue and refused to go home because you had a math test."

"But Madre, I don't have enough time," Cynthia tried again.

"You find time to jog by the river every morning at six, Cynthia," Madre Benedictina laughed, "I'm a nun, not a fool."

Because she knew how stubborn Madre Benedictina could get, Cynthia finally gave in.

Volunteers "experiencing" Latin America irked Cynthia. They usually never had time to establish relationships with the girls at the orphanage, but always set a confusing example for them. The European ones would ridicule the local custom of calling someone by their academic title, like "Licenciada," alleging a university title wasn't that important, though *they* often had multiple academic degrees. They dressed as if they were on an endless trip to the Pumaní national park, but complained constantly about not being able to eat like they did back home. Restaurants served overcooked and over-seasoned beef, the bread was too sweet and the food had too much coriander, the foreigners never tired of repeating. Even worse, their countries'

leaders were hopeless, but some of them thought they knew enough or belonged enough to get involved in local politics, like Giuseppe had done at Acción Futuro a while back.

A few days later Cynthia followed through on her promise and met the volunteer for a fruit shake at La Esmeraldeña.

“Madre Benedictina tells me you’ve been working with the foster care program for years,” Nuria said. She pulled up her low-rise cargo pants and sprayed repellent around her Birkenstock sandals. “Maybe you already know this, but the General Council back in Madrid suggested I compile a list of the program’s best practices.”

“Sure, I can set up interviews with some of the families who take in the girls.” Inwardly sighing, Cynthia added, “Let me also show you around Río Salado whenever you have a chance.”

“Really? Thanks! I’d love to see it through the eyes of a local.” As she said the word “local” Nuria opened her eyes wide. “What are you doing this long weekend?”

Cynthia hadn’t expected the girl to be so eager, but she’d promised Madre Benedictina, so she invited her to a barbecue she was hosting at her house during the long weekend.

Nuria was a huge success with everyone at the barbecue. She’d gotten rid of what Cynthia and her friends called the “Out of Africa” look, brushed her hair and not once made any kind of observation about the “local culture” or “the social classes.” She seemed to be okay with everything and everyone around her, not needing to analyze or comment on it all. Even Cynthia’s mother, who was so difficult to please, liked her, and told her she could stay in the guesthouse during her time in Río Salado. Cynthia, despite herself, liked the idea. With time, the

two women became good friends, and Nuria became a constant presence in Río Salado's social and political scene.

Chapter Thirteen: Caressing, not Grabbing

Matilde

Inga

November 2014

“Hola, mi amor.” Ignacio came into their Lomas Altas bedroom one day and stretched as he took off his blazer. He kissed her. “What were you up to today?”

“Just out to lunch with the girls.”

“You guys go out to lunch so much,” he said. “Sometimes it seems they don’t work, like you, mi amor.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but Cristina and Nati work in the valley and Martina doesn’t actually come that often — heading her mother’s company’s hard work.”

“Here, I brought you a copy of this month’s *Temas*.” He threw the magazine on the bed.

Matilde snorted when she saw Angelina Jolie on the cover, a turquoise headscarf illuminating her hazel eyes, hands clasped across her chest, listening to a young refugee girl.

“Before I lose you to the social pages,” Ignacio said, “take a look at Alexandra Murga in an interview about her family’s flower business.”

Matilde’s high school classmate, in a black pencil skirt and tight button-down blouse, held a bouquet of roses on a full-page photograph.

“She definitely bounced back after that fiasco with the dodgy Portuguese,” she said.

“Last time I saw her at the gynecologist she was gushing about her new husband.”

“Every time I see her I remember your friend Pancho saying her ass was meant for caressing, not grabbing,” Ignacio laughed.

“I should’ve never told you that. You can be such an asshole sometimes.”

“Your friend Pancho’s wrong about a lot of things, but he’s damn right about that,” Ignacio said. “It’s still true, though she *does* look a bit slutty.”

“Stop being a pig,” she said. “She’s nice. And she’s gone through a lot.”

“A lot of what?” He licked his finger and turned the pages. “Working for a living?”

“I don’t know, Ignacio. I’m not that close to her.”

“I wonder if her father pays her salary whether she works or not?” he said.

“God, Ignacio, I don’t care!”

“That’s because you’re not very worried about work yourself.”

“How’s this about me all of a sudden?”

“Never mind, Matilde,” he said, turning to leave the bedroom, magazine in hand.

“I just don’t know why you’re being such a pig.”

Ignacio leaned on the doorframe with his arms crossed and sighed.

“If I really wanted to be a pig, Matilde,” he said, “I would’ve said that guys are probably lining up to fuck your friend Alexandra, and that the old man she married better be careful.”

“You’ve outdone yourself, Ignacio.”

“I’ve heard you criticize Alexandra Murga before,” he said. “Why are you being so sensitive?”

“I don’t give a fuck about Alexandra Murga!” she yelled. “Just stop talking about women’s asses with me — or in front of my friends!”

“You’re overreacting, Matilde. Have a cup of tea or something.” He went into the bathroom and called out behind him, “Maybe you need to get a job. It’ll give you something to do.”

That same week, the phone's persistent ring forced Matilde out of a mid-afternoon shower.

"Good afternoon, may I speak with Mr. Ignacio Berasmendi?"

"He's not in right now," she said. "Who's calling, please?"

"Elite Club, ma'am," the man said, in a tight, polite voice. "It's the third time we've called in two weeks and we haven't received a call back."

"Yes, sir, any message I can take for him?"

"Thank you ma'am, we'd really appreciate it," He coughed. "Just to call us back about the pending debt on his card."

"I'll let him know as soon as I can, sir. Thank you very much."

Matilde slammed the phone down and went into the kitchen to make herself some chamomile tea.

"Was that the credit card company, Señorita?" Mariuxi asked. She now worked for Matilde but still called her "señorita." "I've already given Señor Ignacio all the messages, but they keep calling..."

"That's okay, Mariuxi. Don't worry about it."

"They sound angry."

"Like I said, Mariuxi," Matilde said, "no need for you to worry about it."

"The last person who called, she was rude," Mariuxi insisted. She scraped chopped onion onto a pan, poured olive oil and sprinkled salt over it. "She said I'd better make sure you had enough money to pay my salary."

For a moment, Matilde thought she saw Mariuxi smile.

In the studio, Matilde went through the credit card bill, letting out a small cry when she saw the amount they owed. She was going to put the bill back in the drawer when she saw a charge for something called *Fantasías de Altura*. A quick search on her phone took her nowhere. Then she remembered Ignacio recently mentioning he'd had to cover part of the bill for the company's anniversary party.

When Ignacio came into the bedroom later that afternoon, he gently pulled Matilde away from the window. She'd been standing there for at least a half hour, forehead on the glass, watching the fog settle over the Urkurasu.

"Elite Club's chasing you down."

"Mariuxi told me about the calls, puchi, but I wouldn't call a couple of phone calls 'chasing me down,'" he said. "I've already talked to Elías; the branch manager assured him we won't be receiving more calls."

"I thought we paid off the card monthly," she said.

"You shouldn't let one phone call make you so nervous," he said. "I'll ask Mariuxi to make you some chamomile—"

"Don't fucking patronize me, Ignacio."

"You have no right to t-t-t-talk to me that way!" he stammered, something he hadn't done in a long time. "You talk to me about mo-mo-money and you don't even make any money yourself."

He took a silver-framed photograph of the two of them at his sister's wedding and traced his fingers over it.

"Of course. Barbara's wedding," she said. "You helped your father pay for it."

“Liquidity...my father didn’t have—”

“To fly a 22-member band from Colombia to play at the wedding?” she said, “Who would?”

“It wouldn’t have done to have anything s-s-s-smaller.” He looked up at the ceiling and took a several deep breaths. “*Not* for my little sister, not if she was marrying into that family.”

He put his head in his hands and stretched out his arm to Matilde. For the first time, the light brown hair plastered against his sweaty forehead and the pale hands starting to blotch made her imagine Ignacio as an old man.

“Just last week you spent a thousand fucking dollars buying a painting from Manuel Urquidi!”

“He’s been sick *and* is broke for God’s sake, Matilde!” he said.

“And is your mother’s godson, of course...”

“You know how much your engagement ring cost? You know I asked money from my father for that.”

“I told you I didn’t need that, that it was pathetic to buy social status with it!”

“I convinced you easily enough.” He pointed to the ring on her finger: a diamond the size of a pebble laid on white gold, heavy on her small white hand, with not a bloody cuticle in sight.

“I’m not taking the blame for this, Ignacio.”

Matilde looked out the window while Ignacio curled up in the couch. A stifled sob led her back, and she kneeled by him, stroking his wet forehead and kissing each of his fingers.

“I know how much my engagement ring cost.” She took it off and smiled. “How much do you think we can get for it at a pawn shop?”

“We wouldn’t even *know* where to find a pawn shop,” he laughed and buried his head in Matilde’s neck,

“I love you, mi puchi,” he said.

“I love you too, puchi.”

They fell asleep on the couch, and as Matilde dozed off, she thought about Mariuxi being pregnant.

Matilde dreamed she had a baby girl who looked like Mariuxi. The baby girl was crawling in the middle of the kind of library you’d see in a noble English countryside home. Standing by the window, a woman sobbed because she’d realized the hundreds of leather-bound classics her uncle had left her when he died had suddenly turned into paperback romance and detective novels, and stacks of old tabloid magazines.

The baby girl crawled into a big, wood-paneled closet, where the same woman was now sobbing because tattered, patched clothes and dirty underwear had replaced the designer dresses, tuxedos, shoes and bags she’d also inherited.

Matilde’s baby girl started crying, and the woman breastfed her until she fell into a placid sleep, sighing softly every once in while, like babies do.

Chapter Fourteen: Mamita Virgen

Mariuxi
Inga
November 2014

Mariuxi washed the dishes, feeling sorry for Matilde — childless, stuck at home and married to a man she fought with all the time. By the time Matilde had children she'd be old, and she'd never be able to enjoy her grandchildren.

That wouldn't happen to Mariuxi; at twenty she was three months pregnant, and excited to tell her boyfriend, Gustavo. She just hoped he'd want to marry her before the baby was born. Even if he didn't, thanks to President Fusta, Mariuxi would still have her job. A law had recently been passed that made it extremely expensive to fire a pregnant woman, something Mariuxi suspected Matilde might have otherwise done.

That night, Mariuxi and Gustavo laid on her bed, in the rented room far north from Lomas Altas.

"She'll be a beautiful girl," Gustavo said, "like her mother." He kissed her flat belly.

"No, he'll be a strong boy," she said, "like you."

She stretched her long black hair on the pillow like Gustavo loved, and stroked his face, so much smoother than the hairy skin of white men. Seeing hair clogging the sink and shower she cleaned daily at Matilde's house was more nauseating to her than seeing their shit in the toilet.

"If the baby's due in May," he said, "we need to get married as soon as possible."

Mariuxi sat up from the bed. "You're not being serious."

“You’re the mamacita of my child. I’m not playing with you,” he said. “We’ve got to do things right, so I can show you off at my ten-year anniversary ceremony with the police. I’ll give our baby the pin and the big bonus.”

“Isn’t Fusta taking stuff like bonuses away?”

“He’s threatening to, but he doesn’t mess with us,” he said. “We know how to set him straight.”

“Last I heard, *he’s* the one setting people straight,” Mariuxi laughed.

“Rich people and teachers, doctors, those kinds of people. He’s putting *those* people in their place,” he said, “not us or the military. I’ll get my bonus so we can take care of our baby. Don’t worry.”

“I also have savings from my job,” she said.

“I’m so lucky, my mamacita is such a hard worker!” he said. “But once the baby’s born, you’ll stop working for those people, right?”

“Let’s not worry about it now. We’ll have time to talk about it later,” she hurried to say, because she would never give up her job for a man, even one as a maid.

Later that night the noise at the door woke Mariuxi up. Through the thin curtain she saw the sun rising, and Gustavo coming back from a night celebrating he was going to be a father.

“Mi mamacita!” Gustavo stumbled in. “Mi amor...”

He kicked off his shoes and threw himself on the bed. The smell of alcohol and greasy food on his breath made her run to the toilet and throw up. When she came out of the bathroom, Gustavo was right outside the door.

“I made you puke?”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “I’m pregnant.”

“Silly? You’re going to call me stupid next.” Gustavo spat on the ground. “That’s what my friends called me for believing you I’m the father of that baby.”

“Don’t mind them, mi amor,” she said softly. “They don’t know me. They don’t know I’m a good woman.”

“You find me sickening.” Gustavo started crying. “Maybe during the week, when you’re not with me, you’re with someone who doesn’t make you puke.”

“You know I could never be with anyone else.” She gestured for him to come over and sit by her on the bed. “It’s just our baby who’s making me feel a little queasy.”

Mariuxi caressed him, even though he kept pushing her away.

“Get off me!” he screamed. “That’s not my baby and you’re a whore for having gotten pregnant!”

She stood up, but he pushed her back on the bed and punched her. Mariuxi easily pushed his stumbling body away and locked herself in the bathroom. Her reflection on the small, blue-edged plastic mirror was covered in blood.

Mariuxi stroked the worn plastic image of María Auxiliadora she always carried in her bra, repeating her namesake’s prayer: “Mamita Virgen, how sweet it is to come to your feet imploring your perpetual help...Mamita Virgen, if earthly mothers cease not to remember their children, how can you, the most loving of all mothers, forget me? Mamita Virgen...”

When Gustavo’s pounding on the door stopped, Mariuxi washed the blood and puke off her face, placed a folded towel under her head and lay on the floor. His pleas for forgiveness woke her a few hours later, but she waited until he left before coming out. With no time to shower, she brushed her teeth, changed her clothes and put on deodorant.

“I heard the screaming, mija, but I didn’t call the police,” Don Samuel, the compound owner and her godfather’s cousin, said when she walked by him on her way out. “You should call them the next time he beats you,” he added, without looking away from the clothes he was hanging on the line, his long black braid of hair shaking in disapproval. Mariuxi prayed he wouldn’t say anything to her godfather back home. He just wouldn’t understand.

People on the bus hadn’t even noticed Mariuxi’s swollen eye and cut lip, but Matilde acted shocked and asked lots of questions. Just like the twenty-something girl white girl who’d once interviewed Mariuxi for a report called “Domestic Violence and the Indigenous Woman: An Analytical Perspective.”

The girl tried hard to find out if Mariuxi’s father, brother or boyfriend had ever beaten her. Yes, her father had beaten her a few times, but not too badly, Mariuxi told her. No, he’d never touched her inappropriately and neither had any of her relatives, teachers or neighbors. Yes, it had happened to some of her friends and relatives. No, she didn’t know the details, she lied. She didn’t tell the girl one of her uncles had tried touching her once, but stopped when she kicked him in the balls, like her godfather had taught her. Her uncle was still around and had almost always been kind to her. No use making him look bad with some girl she’d never seen in her life and that she talked to only because her cousin Paulina had insisted.

It’d be more interesting if the girl interviewed her now: “The night I told him I was pregnant he hit me for the first time.”

Chapter Fifteen: Thick-braided Hair

Matilde
Inga
February 2015

Matilde woke up one morning trying to see if milk would come out of one of her breasts. She went on Facebook to stop thinking about the dream, and saw Darwin — who hadn't updated his profile in months — had posted a new set of photos. He was leading the campaign to call a referendum that could overturn the constitutional amendment allowing Fusta to run for a third term, something that had been all over the news. Fusta's declining popularity in light of recently discovered corruption cases gave the opposition a high chance of winning a referendum, so the government was doing its best to stop it. Matilde wanted to know more.

They met a week later, when Darwin came back from holidays in Miami with Jaime. "I knew you'd call," he said when he saw her, "and if you didn't, I was going to call you."

Within two hours they were sitting on white plastic chairs in a dilapidated house behind the public maternity ward, close to the old town, eating the cheese sandwiches they'd helped prepare when they arrived.

Flora Estibalis, a woman about Matilde's age and leader of the leftist opposition movement Anhelos Insurgentes, criticized Fusta with the even voice and posture of someone who sleeps easy at night. Matilde watched her in awe. Flora had been one of Fusta's principal supporters, and the youngest assemblywoman — barely more than a university girl — to help write the Urkununa Constitution back in 2005. A decade in politics and three children seemed to have barely left a mark on her smooth olive skin and black, french-braided hair that she'd evidently never dyed.

After Matilde left Río Salado to return to Inga, Flora had defended Giuseppe from Fusta's attacks. But Matilde couldn't remember much of the details; she'd been too busy falling in love with Ignacio. All she'd wanted at the time was to forget she ever stepped foot in Río Salado.

By the end of the meeting, Matilde volunteered to collect signatures around Lomas Altas as part of the effort to force a national referendum on the constitutional amendment that would define if Fusta could run a third term. Darwin was proud. Jaime and him would lead the collection in Río Salado, and could support her in anything she needed.

"For once in my life, I'm going to do something right," she told Darwin. Before he could reply, she went to talk to Flora, who smiled warmly and kept her hand on her shoulder while she listened to everything Matilde had to say.

After the meeting, Matilde invited Darwin over for cafecito. Ignacio was nice enough to him throughout, and said goodbye with an extra firm, extra manly handshake.

"So great to have met you, Darwin," he said, "I've always been grateful to you."

Darwin raised his eyebrows.

"You helped my wife survive that hellhole." Ignacio put his arm around Matilde. "I know you're from Inga, so I can imagine how difficult it must be for you to live there."

"I was born and raised in Río Salado. My partner, Jaime, he's the one from Inga," Darwin replied, looking sideways at Matilde, "though not from anywhere even close to Lomas Altas." He patted Ignacio's back. "I need to be getting back to that hellhole now, so I'm going to have to excuse myself."

"Ha! Just kidding!" Ignacio winked, almost as if he was hitting on him. Matilde hurried to show Darwin out.

“Let me know how it goes,” Darwin said to Matilde before kissing her goodbye. “Nice to have met you.” He patted Ignacio’s back again before leaving.

“What’s that look on your face, Mati?” Ignacio asked as soon as the door closed.

“You tell me,” she laughed, deciding not to address the how he’d just called Darwin’s hometown a “hellhole.” She was still in a good mood from the meeting. “You were the one winking at him.”

“Oh, fuck you, Mati,” Ignacio rolled his eyes. “I was just trying to be nice.”

“Okay, okay. Just not what I was expecting.”

“You expected me to go all homophobic on you, right?”

“Can you blame me?”

“You love to think you’re the only one who’s open-minded around here, Mati, but you’re not.” Ignacio kissed her forehead, then covered his face and burst out laughing. “Though I really don’t know *where* the winking came from!” They laughed, both relieved not to be fighting again.

Ignacio was trying to make up for the last few days, Matilde knew. She tested him, by telling him about where she’d been, about Flora Estibalis, and about her plan to collect signatures for the referendum. He was surprisingly supportive, though he didn’t ask many details.

So when Ignacio touched her arm in bed later that night, Matilde talked herself into going down on him. She almost enjoyed it.

After Matilde had met the target of five hundred signatures from Lomas Altas, Flora Estibalis contacted her. She’d heard Matilde was doing a great job, and wanted to ask her to coordinate the volunteers in the entire county, Kuskaniitiku.

“Our target will be five thousand signatures,” Flora told her. “I’m sure you can handle that.”

“I’ll get more than that, Flora, you’ll see.” Matilde took a deep breath and said, “Thank you for the opportunity.”

“Thank Darwin, who’s always raving about you.”

That next day Matilde met the person in charge of social media at *Anhelo Insurgente*, to update the Kuskañitiku webpage and accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Her days quickly filled with meetings and signature collection rallies, forcing her to cancel weekly lunches with her friends and even miss Cristina’s daughter’s baptism. Ignacio didn’t seem to mind.

“You better not get all worked up with these people, Mati,” Martina told her over the phone one day, when Matilde canceled on her yet again.

“I have to be there, Martina. They need me.”

“Come on! Working for free should give you *some* flexibility.”

“If we don’t hold this referendum, how else are we going to keep Fusta from ruling this country forever?”

“I’m all in favor of the referendum, which is why my entire family and Nico’s have signed already,” Martina told her. “But you need to live your life too, Mati. *And* get a paid job. I’m assuming your friend Darwin has a job that pays him, besides this volunteering for Anhelo Insurgente?”

“I’ve told you that after I’m done with this I’ll try to get a job teaching at one of the universities.”

“Don’t let another year go by Mati; your curriculum’s going to start being a liability soon.”

“I’d hate you if I didn’t love you so much, Tini,” Matilde laughed.

Chapter Sixteen: Nightingale

Mariuxi
Inga
February 2015

One afternoon, Mariuxi was watching her favorite soap opera in the kitchen, the one about the stripper turned nanny who falls for her boss, a widower with seven children. She thought about how she used to look forward to talking about the day's episode with Gustavo, who also watched it if he had downtime at the police station.

"I can't stand the woman in this soap opera," Matilde said coming into the kitchen. "It's as if her life revolves around men, right?"

Mariuxi looked up. "Yes, Señorita."

"You like it, though, Mariuxi."

"I do," Mariuxi smiled.

"But why?" Matilde tilted her head; just like that girl had done so many times while she interviewed Mariuxi for the report.

"It's just a pretty story, Señorita."

Thank God Matilde was on her way out to continue with her signature collection crusade, like Señora Esperanza had called it. Mariuxi thought it was a good thing — it seemed to keep her busy and happy — but Señora Esperanza had recently scolded Matilde for getting herself invited to a condo meeting in Lidia's building down the street, just so she could collect signatures. Lidia had complained that an angry political debate had replaced the long-awaited discussion on how to get rid of the corrupt building manager who argued that broken lights in the swimming pool "couldn't really kill anyone." Mariuxi thought of Lidia in her bathing suit, her small, pale feet

encountering the trailing electrical wiring in the swimming pool and laughed softly. She turned up the volume on the TV.

Maybe on Facebook she'd meet a good man like the soap opera's widower, or like the man her cousin Paulina had met: a tall Spanish farmer who knew Kichwa from having volunteered at an orphanage in Peru. But that could only happen in places like Spain, where white farmers could fall in love with brown women like them (as long as they weren't gypsies, no one liked gypsies in Spain, Paulina had explained), and live in houses with electricity, running water and internet connection, minutes away from big shopping centers.

But internet cafes revolted her, so right before dozing off, her head on the kitchen counter, Mariuxi decided she'd save enough to buy a smartphone and open a Facebook profile. She slept uneasily, dreaming of sweaty adolescent boys grunting in front of computer screens.

"Ven a calmar mis males...mujer no seas tan inconstante..." Julio Jaramillo sang from Mariuxi's phone. She grabbed it so fast it flew across the granite counter and came apart. She put it back together as fast as she could and called Gustavo back, glad she'd never changed his special ringtone, the one with the song he'd sang to her the only time he'd taken her out, to a karaoke bar. Gustavo loved Julio Jaramillo, never referring to him as JJ like most people, only as "El Ruiseñor de América."

It'd only been a few months, but Gustavo sounded different, gentler. He asked about the medical checkups, and even about the baby's name, something he'd always refused to talk about before Mariuxi finally left him.

"I dreamed you called our baby girl Angélica, like the star of our soap opera, and that she'd be just as beautiful as you."

Despite the hitting and the drinking Mariuxi still missed him and wished he could feel their baby girl kicking in her belly. So she said yes, she was going to name her Angélica.

“Good,” he said. “She’ll also be an angel sent from heaven, like you.”

He’d stopped drinking because he’d found God, he added, and he wanted Mariuxi back. He wanted her to see for herself how he’d changed his life for her and their baby.

They met a few days later for a fruit shake at a cafeteria close to where Gustavo now lived. When they were done, he offered Mariuxi his hand and they walked down the street, until they reached a sign saying “Comunidad del Séptimo Milenio.” Gustavo pressed Mariuxi’s hand as the tall, pale Brazilian woman he’d told her about opened the big metal gate.

“I’m Amanda, and you must be Mariuxi,” the woman said, and hugged Mariuxi. Her generous breasts felt like a warm cushion against Mariuxi’s head, reminding her of her mother, whom she hadn’t seen for years. She’d left for Spain back in 2004, with everyone else who was looking for something better. Mariuxi held on to Amanda longer than she intended.

“The whole community’s excited to meet you.” Amanda smiled at Gustavo. “God was always going to bless our dear Gustavo with a good woman like you. Let me show you our home.”

They followed Amanda, holding hands and smiling at each other, as if following a real estate agent about to sell them their dream home.

In the TV room Mariuxi imagined Gustavo sipping tea and watching movies on a Friday night instead of going out to get drunk with his friends. In the dining room she imagined him praying before eating, instead of gobbling down food before others had started. And in the men’s dorm room she imagined him at his tiny plywood desk by the bed, listening to Julio Jaramillo

while cutting out white letters to spell out “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Jesus Christ: Philippians 4:19” and pasting them on sky blue and grass green cardboard. The Virgen del Cisne statue on the nightstand and the neatly hung police uniforms in the foldable closet convinced Mariuxi Gustavo had indeed changed. Everything looked so clean, so complete — and so much better than what Mariuxi had in Don Samuel’s compound.

“Our community members are mostly single young men and women from the countryside, here in Inga to make a better living and study,” Amanda said, “so the space is generally okay for them. But we have space for couples and families in the other house. You’d be most welcome there with us, Mariuxi, once you and Gustavo get married.” She looked at Mariuxi’s belly and smiled, again, like only her mother ever had smiled at her. “I myself am married and have two children.”

People had tried to convert Mariuxi before. The American Mormons traveling in pairs were nice to talk to; their blonde hair, black ties and white shirts so bright against the dirty streets and exploding commerce of Mariuxi’s neighborhood. And she liked the magazine the long-skirted women would leave at her door every weekend, *Awake!* She’d tiptoe out to grab it as soon as they left, tired of knocking.

This community seemed different, though. Amanda’s low cut top and tight jeans didn’t reveal her mission to convert, and the small cross hanging from a chain around her neck could have been the kind any Catholic would wear. Dinner, with toddlers being passed around from lap to lap, laughter and only a brief prayer accompanied by a speech welcoming her, made the room she’d have to back to later seem even lonelier. Gustavo did his best to explain the inside jokes

everyone at the table seemed to enjoy so much, and Mariuxi laughed, not because she found them funny, but because she loved Gustavo when he was sober.

When they said goodbye, Amanda invited Mariuxi to Bible classes every Wednesday evening. The community could lend Gustavo the car so he could take her back to her place.

“But I’m Catholic...” she told Amanda.

“That’s not a problem,” Amanda said. “We’re really open-minded here; we welcome people of all faiths.”

The pressure to get married started on the third Wednesday after Bible class, from both Amanda and Gustavo. Mariuxi, still on guard about his drinking and not having forgotten the beatings, initially recoiled. It all seemed too easy. And they hadn’t had a chance to be alone together. The community was starting to feel a little claustrophobic.

As her belly grew heavier and her room at Don Samuel’s smaller and colder, Gustavo’s devotion and reasons for getting married multiplied. If they didn’t marry, she’d have to give birth at the public maternity instead of Inga’s big police hospital, Gustavo pointed out, because they covered the costs only for police personnel’s legally recognized family. More importantly, he needed Mariuxi and Angélica with him to stay sober and on God’s good side.

“Don’t let me go astray, mamita,” he told her, and kissed her belly.

“This woman and the widower live together, have sex, and she takes care of his children, right?”

As usual, Matilde interrupted Mariuxi watching her soap opera in the kitchen. Mariuxi had never understood why Matilde didn’t watch the soap opera on her own, on one of the two

big TVs she had in the apartment. “Couldn’t she claim they’re in a de facto civil union?” Matilde insisted.

“I don’t know, Señorita.”

“I’m sure she could. But this story’s supposed to be happening in Mexico. I don’t know if it works the same here.”

Matilde left, probably off to collect signatures again, and Mariuxi turned back to the soap opera, with a huge smile on her face.

That evening, with a handkerchief covering her hand, Mariuxi pushed open the internet cafe’s greasy door and went straight to the computer the leering owner pointed to as soon as she came in. When she read everything she could find on civil unions, she slipped her hand under bra and pulled out the image of María Auxiliadora.

“Mamita Virgen, thank you for always being there for me,” she whispered as she kissed the image. “If he’s still good to me after a few months, I’ll marry him.”

Even if the police did, the community wouldn’t recognize a civil union, Gustavo said; they’d only accept a civil marriage followed by a proper religious ceremony. But he’d do it for her, because he understood she needed to wait a little more to trust him, and because he also wanted her to deliver Angélica under the best care possible, at the police hospital. He wanted to make up for how much he’d hurt them already.

Chapter Seventeen: A Silken Tent

Matilde
Inga
28 April 2015

Matilde heaved; before she could reach the bathroom, she threw up on the bedroom floor. She sat by her vomit and closed her eyes. Ignacio came into the room a few minutes later.

“She’s angelic, has a tight pussy, small frame? She wanted you to stick her fingers in her, but then begged for your dick?” she asked, in a low voice.

Ignacio saw his telephone on the bed.

“Puchi —“

“You’re new so you don’t know if a *pregnant one* who’s been fucked real good is available?” she screamed. “Why don’t you go fuck Mariuxi, then!”

“Wait, *that’s* n-not me!” he cried, “I’m not the gu-guy looking for the pregnant one ”

“Which one *are* you looking for, then? What the fuck are these messages?”

Ignacio scratched a tiny scab from a pimple on his face.

“It’s a group online,” he said. “I ch-ch-check it out sometimes, but it’s mo-mo-mostly for laughs.” He paused and took several breaths. “Sometimes, puchi, you’re so wrapped up in yourself — ”

“How the fuck is you looking for sex online *my* fault?” Matilde ripped a thick cuticle from her thumb, sucking on the blood that seeped out. She sucked on her thumb to stop the blood.

“It was just a cou-couple of times I actually brought them —“

“You brought them into our home?” Matilde, still on the floor, put her head between her legs. After a few moments she looked up, “Fuck you, Ignacio!”

“Yeah, fuck me, Matilde,” he said. “Because it’s not about me, is it? It’s a-a-always been about you. So much so that you refused to see this was happening.”

“I was supposed to know you were fucking putas in our own home?” she laughed.

“You told me exactly how much I owed on the credit card,” he said, his voice steadier, his stutter gone, “so I know you saw the site’s charges. And I saw you searched for *Fantasías de Altura* online.”

“What the hell are you talking about? That stuff was for the company’s party. You said so yourself.”

“Come on, Matilde! You’re way smarter than to have believed that. We both know that,” he bit his bottom lip and shook his head. “But denial runs in you family, doesn’t it?”

Matilde lay in bed, reading after lunch. She hadn’t rolled up the blinds or turned her bedside lamp off since she’d kicked out Ignacio three days before.

“The guards say Mr. Ignacio’s mother’s downstairs in the building’s lobby, Señorita,” Mariuxi, the only person Matilde’d seen during that time, said through the door.

“Tell the guards to get rid of her.”

“She won’t leave, and they keep calling.”

Matilde stood up and unlocked the door, going straight back into her bed. Mariuxi leaned on the doorframe for support, rubbing her swollen eyes with bloated hands. She’d become even thinner in pregnancy, her belly disproportionate to her small frame, her colorful sash barely visible above her pleated turquoise skirt.

“Don Jeffrey says she’s screaming at them, Señorita, and people from the other apartments are calling to complain.”

“The neighbors can call me personally, if they want.”

“Okay, Señorita,” Mariuxi said. “I’ll give the guards your number.”

“Don’t give them my number for God’s sake, Mariuxi!” Matilde pulled herself up from the bed.

Mariuxi leaned back on the doorway, pressing her fingers to her back.

“There’s something wrong with you, Mariuxi.”

Mariuxi nodded. “It’s just my back, it’s hurting, Señorita.”

“You better go home and rest for the day.”

“The guards will ask me — ”

“Just say you have no idea, Mariuxi.” Her voice was louder than she’d intended; she lowered it. “I’ll ask Don Jeffrey where he and his friends were when Ignacio was bringing prostitutes into the building.”

Mariuxi looked down at the floor.

“I’m sorry, Mariuxi. Ignore what I said.” Matilde took a good look at Mariuxi’s drawn face and thirty-five week belly. “And why don’t you go ahead and start your maternity leave a week earlier? You seem to need it.”

The next day, the click-clacks of high heels and hushed conversation in the hallway interrupted Matilde’s sedative-induced sleep.

“Mati, dear, I’m sorry to hear you’re sick.” Her mother-in-law, Elvira, leaned her head into Matilde’s room. “I hope you don’t mind me using Ignacio’s key to drop by, but I brought a friend you might like to talk to.”

Matilde asked Elvira to wait outside while she put on a bra and brushed her teeth.

In the living room, Elvira introduced Matilde to her friend Macarena, founding member of the New Spirit Fellowship Church. The tall blonde — who looked more like Giselle Bundchen than the bespectacled, long-skirted Jehovah's Witness who'd once knocked on Matilde's door in Río Salado — stroked Matilde's hand and offered to help heal her emotional wounds.

Matilde declined as politely as she could. After a long silence, she asked, "You might want to have something to drink before you're off?"

"We're leaving now, *mija*," Elvira said. "But please tell me you'll think about Macarena's offer?"

"I won't, Elvira," Matilde said. "I think you know why I'm not in the mood for a stranger to evangelize me."

"There's no need to raise your voice, *mija*," Elvira said. "Macarena's just trying to help. Turning to God's the best thing you can do in times of spiritual suffering."

Matilde faced Macarena. "Forgive me, Macarena, but I'm not feeling up to dwelling in the fire of God right now." She got up and went to the elevator, pressing the button repeatedly and as hard as she could.

"Before we go, *mijita*, here's a small present to help you remember why bumps in marriage are worth overcoming," Elvira said, scurrying behind Matilde. "I noticed you no longer have any pictures around the apartment."

She placed on the foyer table a laptop-sized silver frame with a picture of Matilde and Ignacio kissing on their wedding day.

"I'm presuming, Elvira, Alfredo never fucked prostitutes in your house, or you didn't mind," Matilde said as she slapped the frame of the foyer table. "Either way, I'm glad your spirit remained strong."

Before the elevator doors closed behind the two women, Macarena mouthed, “Call me” to Matilde, her pious gaze as unperturbed as it was when they arrived.

Matilde went straight to her mother’s house after the women left. She found her mom and Tía Chiqui — back from her second stint in rehab — sprawled across Esperanza’s king-sized bed, looking at old photo albums. They’d gone to the hair salon together, they told her, and were having virgin piña coladas they’d made themselves.

“Your mother’s maid has no idea how to make one,” Tía Chiqui said. “Here, come look at your mom’s incredible body way back when, mijita.”

It was 48 degrees with no heating, and despite being wrapped in alpaca wool shawls, the two women looked like they were basking in the sun. Matilde took another shawl from her mother’s closet, slipped off her shoes and joined them. She’d tell them about Ignacio later.

Tía Chiqui patted Matilde’s leg and kissed her cheek. She pointed to a twenty-something Esperanza in a mustard cutout bathing suit, one hand on her waist and the other wrapped closely around Chalo, Tía Chiqui’s ex-husband.

“I went for him when your mother dropped him for your father, mija,” Tía Chiqui giggled. “Good men have always been hard to find. Especially when they’ve got to have pedigree.”

“His Che Guevara phase was too much for me,” Esperanza rolled her eyes, “but your Tía Chiqui went crazy for it. ‘Chalo’s *actually* read *Das Kapital*’ she’d tell anyone who would listen, thinking she sounded intellectual just by saying *Das Kapital*.”

“Fuck you, Espe.”

“Come on, all you ever read was *The Communist Manifesto*, but how you loved to say *Das Kapital* every chance you got!”

Chiqui couldn’t even answer she was laughing so hard.

Five photo albums later, they found Abuelo Josema’s lover, in a picture with Matilde’s grandmother Victoria. The dark skin, lean body, hook nose and sharp suit would have looked elegant — had it not been for the rigid pose and hands held across his body that told the world he feared the pale, slight woman beside him too much to look at ease.

“Abuela Victoria was beautiful.”

“Beautiful and stupid,” Esperanza spit out. “She shouldn’t have stayed with our father. She should’ve just let him go live with that indio tailor.”

“You don’t mean that, Espe,” Tía Chiqui said.

“I know,” Esperanza said. “He rotted with our mother instead.”

Matilde couldn’t take the silence, so she told them all about choosing not to rot with Ignacio, about the prostitutes, the debts and Elvira’s evangelizing friend. When she was done, Tía Chiqui started tapping away on her phone.

“Don’t, Tía,” Matilde took the phone away from her. “Badmouthing Ignacio on Facebook will only make me look pathetic. And you’ll just look weird.”

As Tía Chiqui tried to wrestle the phone away from her, they both heard a small whimper coming from Esperanza.

“Come on, Mami,” Matilde said, “so many people get divorced—“

“Stop, mijita.” Esperanza wiped her eyes and slurped on her piña colada. “Don’t say anything. Do whatever you need to do to sleep easy at night.”

Esperanza turned to the CD player by the bed and put on her favorite band, Mocedades. She'd gotten to see them live five times since the seventies. The first four times had been in Inga; the last had been in Spain, in Pamplona's Plaza del Castillo.

"By the time I got to see them in Spain they were so old they had to sit on stools to sing, but their singing was still amazing," she said, like she always did. Matilde knew this story by heart; her mother had only recently started repeating the stories she loved, something she vowed she'd never do, "like some crazy old woman."

"Do you remember that night, Mati, when you tried to confront me in front of my friends? Before you left to Río Salado?" Esperanza asked but didn't wait for an answer. "You were mad that I didn't talk about how wonderful you were, that I didn't approve of you."

Matilde nodded.

"When you were born, every child in the world — every single one — became you, just older or younger, darker or lighter, taller or shorter, everywhere I looked. They all became *you*, mijita. I've never needed to tell others what you are."

"Mami, I never—"

"No drama, please, Tilda."

"Just leave it, Tilda," Tía Chiqui laughed, "some things never change."

Matilde slept at her mother's that day, in her old room.

When she woke up in her mother's house, Matilde finally felt like turning her phone data and wifi back on. The tsunami of messages and notifications she had from the five-day hiatus tempted her to turn everything back off, but then she saw five hundred policemen had taken over Inga's police regiment, in protest against Fusta's budget cuts. Matilde jumped out of bed and ran

to the TV room, forgetting her sedatives on the bedside table. She found her mother and Tía Chiqui in pajamas, wide-eyed in front of the television.

Live coverage showed a red-faced Fusta, microphone in hand, at an open window, loosening his tie and yanking his shirt open. “If you want to kill the president, here he is. Kill him if you want. Kill him if you have the power. Kill him if you have the courage, instead of cowardly hiding within the crowd!” His hoarse screams only increased the roar of the policemen below. Minutes later, they obstructed Fusta — still hobbling on a crutch due to a recent knee operation — from reaching the helipad, asphyxiating him in clouds of tear gas. When a muddle of bodyguards, medical personnel and policemen still loyal to Fusta finally managed to escort him into the police hospital attached to the regiment, the image went blank. After that, claiming he was being held against his will in the hospital and launching accusations of a coup d’état against him, Fusta ordered that only GoodRevolutionTV would be allowed to cover events.

That afternoon, as soon as the government called on Fusta’s supporters to march towards the hospital and show their support, Matilde started making calls. Darwin wasn’t answering, so she called a guy she’d met recently met from the university student federation. Just as she expected, they really didn’t support the police uprising, but were taking the opportunity to march against Fusta’s attacks on freedom of expression, university reforms and budget cuts. She said very little to her mother and her aunt, because she knew they wouldn’t approve, and left the Lomas Altas apartment in a hurry. On her way to the meeting point close to the Jesuit University, Darwin called her back.

“You barely know the people you’re going with, Mati,” he said. “Military from all over the country are being deployed to Inga — it’s going to get ugly.”

“These people are fighting for the same things we’re fighting at for Anhelio Insurgente, Darwin. What’s wrong with you?”

“That may be true, but their approach is completely different. Listen to me, Mati!”

Having failed to convince her, Darwin agreed to go with her.

Chapter Eighteen: Kangaroo Warmth

Mariuxi
Inga
28 April 2015

Around eleven pm, Mariuxi started throwing up and having contractions less than ten minutes apart. With no credit on her phone to call Gustavo or Amanda, she made sure the police affiliation card he'd given her was in her bag, and went to ask Don Samuel for help.

"Hang in there, mija. Manuelito will be here any minute. We're going to get you and your angelita there, I promise. Just hang on," Don Samuel repeated over and over again, as if praying the rosary, his fingers softly rubbing each of Mariuxi's fingers, until the minute Manuelito's car rode onto the curb and landed at the compound's door.

"Don't worry. We'll be at the Maternidad in no time," Manuelito said. The tires screeched and Don Samuel yelled at him that they were trying to get the mother alive to the hospital, not kill everyone in the car.

"The police hospital," Mariuxi groaned.

Angélica was born that morning, at a little over thirty-five weeks but with the thick black hair of a one-month old baby. She should stay in the neonatal unit as a precautionary measure, the doctor explained. In between periods in the incubator, Mariuxi held her between her breasts as much as possible, like the nurses advised, to help regulate her body temperature. Gustavo, having arrived just in time for the birth, looked on uselessly, at times standing, at times sitting, his thick black hair greasy, his olive green uniform crumpled. When Mariuxi finally asked him to unbutton his shirt and hold Angélica on his chest, he did it with such grace that Angélica's soft

breathing didn't miss a beat. Imagining her feeling her father's soft skin, Mariuxi relished moment. She was convinced that once they moved into the community with Gustavo, he'd quit drinking again.

Gustavo woke Mariuxi to tell her he had to go to police headquarters, just next to the hospital, to join a demonstration against Fusta's budget cuts and reforms. At Mariuxi's insistence, he put the image of María Auxiliadora into his pocket and left, saying, "I'll just be next door, mamita. Don't worry."

As she breastfed Angélica, Mariuxi watched from the second floor window as hundreds of policemen gathered in the distance. Despite the bright sun and blue sky, the snow-covered peak of the Urkurasu promised a chilly morning for the protest.

Later that morning, while Angélica was back in the incubator, Mariuxi turned on the TV for an update on the protest. Live images showed Fusta at a window, screaming at hundred of policemen who stomped their feet and waved signs of "Restore what's ours" and "Down with the cuts" among the black smoke of burning tires. "There's been no government that's done as much for you! Be loyal to your country and not yourselves!" Fusta's voice turned hoarse from the effort, his face red, but the men's rumble only increased.

"Have you ever spent a night on the street, you son of a bitch?" a policeman screamed, and then another, "Have you ever spent a night away from your family, fearing for your life?"

Mariuxi called Gustavo, but got no answer. Not knowing what else to do, she went outside to see what people were saying and found a group of nurses and women huddled in front of the TV in the waiting room.

Gasps and applause broke out in the room as Fusta challenged the policemen to kill him. A policewoman who'd given birth to premature twins screamed at the television, "Kill that son of a bitch once and for all!" to which another woman replied, "That's *my* president, a real man, not like your husband, who's probably hiding within that crowd of cowards!" The nurses turned off the TV and escorted everyone out of the room, just when several phones started beeping, ringing and vibrating at the same time. All, including one a text from Gustavo, had the same message: Fusta was being taken into the police hospital.

Wild-eyed nurses tried to reassure the panicked women that he was being taken to another floor and ordered everyone back to their rooms. The panic gradually gave way to a silence that lasted all afternoon. All they could hear was Fusta's voice on GoodRevolutionTV and radio, accusing the police of conniving with the opposition to overthrow him or kill him. Either way, he said, he'd leave behind an infinite love for his land and for his people, the ones he was willing to die for.

Amid chanting and stomping, the crowd of policemen blocking the hospital entrance grew steadily.

Mariuxi spent all day holding Angélica between her breasts or — when the nurses forced her to put her back — looking at her through the incubator. By 4 pm, GoodRevolutionTV reported intensified clashes between the police and Fusta's supporters, with some seriously wounded. Mariuxi called Gustavo incessantly without receiving an answer, telling herself that if anything happened to him it would be her punishment for not having married him properly, for having put off moving into the community, for not having appreciated the man she'd had by her side all that time. All she could do was adapt the prayer all policemen recited before going on duty, the one Gustavo had taught her before he'd found another version of God: "Lord, he is a

policeman. You instilled this vocation in him. Just as you watch over the order of the world, he also helps you watch over a part of it...protect him and his loved ones..."

That night, when Fusta ordered the military to force their way into the hospital and rescue him, Mariuxi could no longer pray. As she hid in the bathroom, trying to protect Angélica from the tear gas that had come into her room through shattered glass, all she could do was whimper like a dog. She'd left the TV on, and thanks to GoodRevolutionTV's live coverage, Mariuxi and a wailing Angélica couldn't escape from the sounds from the shootout outside the hospital entrance and the battle that ensued in the first floor as the military forced their way into the hospital.

When she heard that several policemen had been killed, she did her best to hold Angélica steady in her arms. Then gradually, and in line with Fusta's safe deliverance from the hospital, Mariuxi felt better and better. She imagined Angélica and her living in a small house, alone, without any fear of being beaten by Gustavo and smelling alcohol on his breath, and everything seemed okay. When she was sure the battle was over, she went outside to hand over Angélica to one of the nurses, asked for a sedative and slept better than she'd done in a long, long time.

Mariuxi woke to a brilliant sunny day, with Gustavo standing over the bed, cradling Angélica in his arms.

"I'm safe now, mamacita," he said. "You don't have to be afraid anymore."

"Thank God you're alive."

"All I could think of when I was out there was getting married, giving you a proper life and our angelita a proper family."

“I know,” she said, and patted the bed to signal he should sit by her. She kissed Angélica on the head, looked up at him and said, “But I’m not going to marry you, Gustavo.”

Chapter Nineteen: Maricón Like You

Cynthia
Río Salado
30 April 2015

Cynthia's had father failed to show up at the central plaza to demand Fusta's liberation. Ignoring the doctor's warnings to avoid strenuous activity, she ran to his office, holding on to her five-month pregnant belly. Aldo's absence from the central plaza could mean Río Salado's top authority had turned against Fusta, opposition journalists were saying. She found part of the staff getting ready to leave. They'd go with or without the Prefecto, they said, while the others — those who'd refused to attend the party meetings — stayed behind.

"You're not answering the phone, Papi," she told him, gently, as she came into his office.

He caressed her face with soft hands, his cataracts bluer than ever.

"I would defend Fusta with my life, mijita," he said, "but it's time for me to leave politics."

"But you're still the Prefecto right now — we need you at the demonstration!"

"Remember when your mother was using subsidized gas to bake the bread she was selling?" Aldo replied. Cynthia took his hands off her face and held them between her own.

"I always tried to do inside our house what I did outside, mijita," he said.

"I know, Papi, but I don't see how this is related to you coming out to support Fusta."

"It'll soon be public Jefferson owns the company receiving most of the provincial government contracts." He looked at the pictures on the wall and smiled. "I made him promise I'll take the fall, not you or Nuno."

Cynthia felt her baby kick. Aldo put his hand on her belly and she put hers on top, to stop herself from shaking.

“The nuns, that’s how they found out, Papi,” she grabbed his other hand. “Didn’t they?”

“The nuns, *mija*? It’s a Spanish girl, Nuria something. She’s gotten a journalist to publish something. It’s just not out yet.”

“I was helping the nuns with the foster care program,” she was running out of breath, “and Nuria, she’s my friend, I trusted her—”

“You’re going to hurt the baby if you don’t calm down. Get a hold of yourself, for God’s sake!”

Cynthia took the glass of water he offered her and explained, trying to justify herself without hurting her father, without telling him the part about how him getting old, but stopped when she realized her father didn’t need any explanations.

“I’m assuming Nuno doesn’t know about the contracts?”

“He doesn’t, Papi. He’ll never accept it, but at least if Tío Jefferson convinces him it was coming from you...” she said and put her face in her hands. “What are you going to do, Papi?”

“I was going to step down soon anyway, *mija*,” Aldo said, his hands behind his back as he looked at the photos on the wall. “You were right. I couldn’t — I didn’t *want* to — make my staff attend party meetings. I didn’t have it in me, *mija*.”

“You wouldn’t have stepped down only because of that, Papi.” She looked down. “It’s this thing about the contracts—”

“When I say I don’t have it in me anymore, I think I mean I don’t believe in this anymore,” he said, pointing at the campaign photos on the wall.

“What? Río Salado? Fusta? You said you’d give your life for Fusta.”

“I’d still give my life for him, *mija*, despite seeing where this is going,” he sighed.

“Forget about me, *mija*. Just think of my grandchild. And Nuno. He’s turning out to be a great mayor. Don’t let him go astray.” Aldo stroked her belly and smiled.

Cynthia hugged him and walked out the door.

“*Mija*?”

“Yes, *Papi*?”

“And please, marry him, once and for all.”

Cynthia found Nuno outside, helping to organize the staff to march on to Río Salado’s central plaza, like Fusta supporters were doing all over the country. As she approached Nuno, he went up to a group of men, one with his shirt off, shaking a Fusta poster and screaming at a policeman: “This is your daddy! He’s not a *maricón* like you guys! He’s a real man! Come on, tell me he’s your daddy!” Nuno berated the man and asked his friends to get him out. Then he took a megaphone from one of the other organizers.

“*Compañeros*, there will be no violence today. We will march to defend our President, but we will do it in peace. That is what he wants us to do, because he is a man of infinite love, with clean hands, a blazing heart and a lucid mind. Let us not be the same as the oligarchy, those who want him gone because they cannot accept the historic change our dear President has put in motion. We won’t let them kill him today, and we won’t let anyone get killed or hurt — or even one single looting take place — here in Río Salado! *Our* love will also be infinite, *our* hands will also be clean, *our* hearts will also blaze with passion and *our* minds will also be lucid!”

When he was done, Cynthia locked arms with him and went to the head of the crowd, stroking her belly and thinking their baby boy should be named Aldo Norberto.

Chapter Twenty: Bali Incense

Leidy
Río Salado
30 April 2015

Leidy dodged a military truck on the main avenue in Río Salado. Someone from inside screamed: “Civilian with a Molotov cocktail to your right!” She recognized some of the UN staff, hunched over in black bulletproof vests in the back of the truck. They were going in the direction of the military airport, so they’d be safe in Inga in less than an hour, their Río Salado office closed until everything settled down.

She arrived home smelling of burning rubber, eyes stinging from the teargas, wishing she could also fly out of the hellhole Río Salado was quickly becoming. The running, the teargas, the chaos: it all brought back images of her childhood, of the days before she and her mother fled over the border into Río Salado. And it all triggered the same anxiety, the same fear, and the same awareness of being in a hopeless place.

Over lunch Leidy watched Fusta speaking on live television from Inga’s police hospital, denouncing the coup against him, calling on the people to defend the Good Revolution. Like in Inga, people all over the country were marching. Most demanded Fusta’s liberation, some supported the police and still others took advantage of the situation to make their own demands. It could be a while before things got back to normal, Leidy thought.

Meanwhile, there’d be busy days ahead at work, because refugees already settled in Río Salado would rely solely on the Pastoral for assistance that was usually shared with the UN office. She just hoped that the guerrilla and paramilitary from the other side of the border wouldn’t capitalize on the chaos and chase down refugees in Río Salado. In that case, only the UN could help them.

Over the years, Leidy had watched the UN send a small number of refugee families to another country, because — even after having managed to escape death and extortion in Colombia — they were still at risk in Río Salado. For these refugees, Leidy thought, their tragedy had turned into something better than winning the lottery: fully paid, legal, resettlement in the US, Canada or Europe. As a lawyer at the Pastoral, she'd often assisted the UN office with these cases, doing her best to be happy for those who got to live her dream while she stayed behind and continued being the model refugee she'd worked so hard to become.

Leidy turned off the television and spent the next hour looking through handouts and notes she'd kept from every UN training workshop she'd ever attended. When she was done, she went to see if Don Napo would help her out with her plan.

He'd help her get out, he said, because she'd always helped him. She'd kept quiet about the prostitutes he sometimes brought in, backed up his story of kids breaking in to steal bottles from the wine cellar inside the big house, and taken care of his grandchildren when they visited him.

So if the UN lawyers asked Don Napo why he thought guerrilla or paramilitary from the other side of the border had set fire to Leidy's house that evening, he'd say she'd been under threat for a few weeks already, that he'd received threat letters against her at his house, and that “men with a Colombian accent” had shown up looking for her.

To set her own house on fire, Don Napo said, Leidy could use the fuel and paint thinner he kept in the shed at the back of his house. Then, while she joined the protest to secure herself an alibi, he'd put out the fire before it spread to the rest of the property.

Satisfied, Leidy went back to her house, to take some time to think of an alibi. It was turning dark outside before the afternoon rain, so she turned on the white paper floor lamp and

sat on the soft red couch she'd bought with Giuseppe in Inga. She laughed softly, remembering he'd had a go at the embalmed-looking shop owner because she practically ignored Leidy, even when she put down the cash for the couch. But Leidy hadn't cared; she was just happy to be getting rid of the sticky pleather couch Sandra Milena and her had sweated on for so long in the Río Salado heat.

She could take nothing with her, she knew, so she took pictures of what she loved the most: the sofa, of course; the Ikea-style paper lamp; twenty-nine of "*Le Monde's* 100 Books of the Century"; the three vintage posters her friend Margaux had brought from Paris; and the open cupboard Don Napo had made for Leidy to display the kind of food and cooking ingredients she'd never known when she was growing up: olive oil, aceto, Barilla pasta, sun-dried tomatoes, anchovy-filled olives, homemade granola. The only thing she put in her purse was the incense Margaux had brought her from Bali, which made her house smell like sandalwood, not like the nausea inducing shit everyone else in Río Salado plugged into an outlet.

Late that afternoon, Leidy sent a message to Nuno saying she'd changed her mind and would be joining the march that would be leaving the Prefectura at six in the afternoon. Her legs didn't even tremble as she walked towards the shed at the back of her house. She knew Sandra Milena would approve.

When she failed to find the fuel and paint thinner Don Napo had talked about, Leidy cursed him under her breath and ran all the way to his house. She found him with a woman on the verandah, sipping aguardiente in small shot glasses. The woman's black mesh top, a paunch that revealed at least one previous pregnancy, and sun-spotted skin that made her look well beyond forty when she was probably in her early thirties, reminded Leidy of Sandra Milena.

“Come here, mija,” Don Napo told her. “Let me introduce you to Shirley Dayana, who’s visiting me for a couple of hours.”

Leidy smiled and extended her trembling hand towards the prostitute Don Napo had evidently brought in to make a point. She mumbled, “Nice to meet you,” and walked off, nausea coming as fast and as inevitable as the glyphosate that used to be sprayed from the sky back in her village in Colombia.

Once she showered and had some coffee, Leidy pulled out a drawing she’d made the first time Sandra Milena and her visited the UN office in Río Salado. Under the kind gaze of an Argentinian psychologist, Leidy had drawn children playing in in a river full of dead fish, waving goodbye to aerial crop dusters flying over the fields.

Leidy dusted off the drawing and put it up on her small fridge, to remind herself how far she’d come and how far she still had to go.

Then she left to join the protest.

Chapter Twenty-One: Undercurrent

Matilde
Inga
30 April 2015

“There’s at least twenty times more people on Fusta’s side, Mati!” Darwin screamed over the uproar as he and Matilde, together with the university student federation’s group of about one hundred and fifty people, approached the police hospital. “But we’re on the right side, Darwin!” Matilde screamed back.

More people poured in from side streets onto Narcisa de Dios Avenue, until Matilde’s feet were barely touching the ground and it felt like an undercurrent pushing them toward the street in front of the hospital. “Save the President” chants boomed over the barely audible “Down with the President” chants, but Matilde swallowed to hold back tears of excitement and chanted as loud as she could. Though the sun was setting and the cold was advancing, her forehead dripped with sweat.

“We fucking need to get out of here,” Darwin said, just as Matilde felt the sting of tear gas in her eyes and throat. She lit a cigarette and puffed as quickly as she could, trying to get as much smoke into her eyes as possible, like someone had shown her years ago at a middle school basketball game. Back then, tear gas launched in response to fighting between a few dozen of Matilde’s classmates and hundreds of the home team’s supporters had engulfed the public school’s indoor arena.

“Shit, Matilde, smoking doesn’t help! Pull up your hair and put this on!” Darwin handed her a handkerchief and tied his own around his face. “Follow me!” He put his arm around her and pushed hard in between people, seeming to aim for one of the side streets where the crowds

thinned out a little. Barely able to open her eyes from the sting and trying to keep the nausea down, Matilde tripped and brought both of them down. As they floundered to get up, they heard the shots. Then the stampede started.

Before she could even cover her head with her arms to protect herself from the trampling, Matilde passed out.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Blood Sausage Soup

Cynthia
Inga
30 April 2015

Once the military stormed the police hospital in Inga and rescued Fusta, once the shooting between military and the police killed a few men from both sides and a couple of idealistic civilians, once an unhurt and ever more blooming Fusta gave a speech from the Presidential Palace balcony that ended with “Hasta la victoria siempre, compañeros!” Cynthia and Nuno excused themselves from the celebrations and went home to rest. She had to take care of herself and their baby.

Early the next morning, Nuno shook Cynthia gently. He was off to a meeting, he said, and he left a breakfast tray on the bedside table with papaya juice, fried plantain drizzled in sugar cane honey and fresh cheese. He fixed the mosquito net around the bed, reminded her dengue cases were increasing and she should be extra careful, and he left.

Cynthia went shopping to buy baby clothes on the main avenue in town. She wanted to distract herself while she waited to hear from Nuno, sure he already knew about the contracts and hoping Tío Jefferson’s story would hold up. When she got Nuno’s call to meet for lunch at La Churonita, their favorite restaurant, she rushed over, craving blood sausage soup almost as much as she hoped he’d bought Tío Jefferson’s explanations.

She found him at a table by the door, staring at the karaoke videos playing overhead, but waited for him to talk first.

“Remember Matilde?”

Cynthia, startled by the question, stopped to think for a minute. At least Nuno didn't seem to have found out yet. "The girl from Inga? The one from Acción Futuro you had that thing with?"

"That thing...yeah," he said, frowning. "Darwin called to tell me she was killed in the demonstrations last night in Inga."

"How on earth did she end up—"

"I don't know. Darwin and she were together. Then he lost her in the crowd. He was crying, not making much sense."

"Mi flaco," she stroked his hand, "I'm so sorry."

A waitress brought the blood sausage soup, but Cynthia pushed it away. Nuno ate in silence.

"She always seemed so nice," she tried saying.

"She was nice, yeah."

"Leidy and she were good friends. Do you think Leidy knows?"

"Shit," he shook his head. "I have to tell her. But I can't do that over the phone."

"Of course, flaco. Do whatever you need to do."

Nuno turned his head when Cynthia tried to kiss him goodbye. She nodded and lowered her eyes, to show him she understood he was hurting.

From the restaurant door he turned to face her. "One other thing — your Tío Jefferson tried his best to clear your name. I'm sure he'll manage it with everyone else, but I've known you since you were in diapers, Cynthia. You should have warned me."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Rainbow-hued Kite

Esperanza
Inga
October 2015

Esperanza pressed rewind yet again and lay back on the king-sized bed to wait for Matilde to appear on the video. It was only Matilde's hand, and her red sweater sleeve, but it was the last image there'd ever be of Matilde alive. Esperanza could clearly see Matilde's ex-boss, Darwin, though, pushing up against the policemen. Then, when the camera turned to a policeman beating up a young man, almost a boy, the voiceover started its sickening propaganda.

"Compañeros, when our beloved President was taken to the Police Hospital in an alleged gesture of solidarity, it resulted in the betrayal of the nation: armed Police held him hostage for over ten hours, plotting to kill him! Compañeros, on that ignominious day our country stood on the verge of chaos once again, the kind we thought the Good Revolution had forever destroyed. These weren't honest, hardworking policemen demanding their rights, they were the dark hand of the opposition, of neoliberalism staging a coup d'état to bring down our President!"

The Good Revolution's babbling dragged on and on, so once Esperanza had seen Matilde's red sweater and hand enough times — thinking about contacting Darwin but deciding against it again and again — she turned off the TV.

Nothing had changed, she thought as she dozed off for the third time that day. Fusta was bigger than ever, the small country's fifteen minutes of fame were over, and Matilde was dead.

The telephone woke her.

"Esperanza, querida!" Pilar, a second cousin she hadn't heard from in a while was on the phone. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay, Pilar." She took a sip of chamomile tea and a deep breath.

“Ignacio getting married must have reopened the wounds.”

Esperanza imagined herself choking Pilar’s long, pale neck.

“Pilar, dear, I was actually getting ready to go out for a doctor’s appointment.”

“Okay then, I’ll go straight to the point,” she said. “Do you know a maid you could recommend to me?”

The last maid Esperanza had recommended, Mariuxi’s cousin, had complained bitterly about Pilar.

“I’ll let you know if I find anything, Pili.”

“Espe, hold on a second,” she said. “What I really need is company. I don’t mean someone to live with. God knows I’ve been cured of that.” She laughed. “But someone I can have coffee with, have a good conversation with or even just go take a walk with.”

“Company? You mean a man?”

“Maybe you know someone?”

Maybe the rumors were true, Esperanza thought, maybe Pili *was* losing her mind. Probably malicious gossip, though.

“How about Martín Alsua, Pili?” Esperanza asked. “He might be ready to spend time with someone — Carmensita passed away more than two years ago.”

“Carmensita,” Pilar said, “such a good woman.”

“Yes, she was. A lovely person. Stunning as a young woman.” She paused. “Then again, we all were, weren’t we, Pili?”

“Can you look into it for me, Espe?”

“Look into what, Pili?”

“Martín Alsua. I think I might see eye to eye with him, and my children would like him,” she said. “But even if they don’t, I don’t care. I’m holding onto the rope to everything they’ve gotten from me, the land, the business, the properties, the money...and as long as I’m alive, I can always pull it all back,” she laughed.

That night, Esperanza dreamed of Pilar, the haughty woman with an ugly sort of beauty that she used to be, stuck in a room with giant maids who never respected her enough, small men whom she’d never consider, and children who never visited her. In the dream, Esperanza wrote what she saw in a black day planner that was running out of pages.

Matilde had mentioned someone’s daughter was lesbian. But it couldn’t have been the same girl who’d married a man with an indian surname. And it couldn’t be the same girl whose boyfriend had refused to marry her after living together for five years. She’d been forced to go back home, tail between her legs, to wait for another man to give her a chance. The lesbian girl probably didn’t cause as much grief to her family as the girl who’d gotten pregnant a month before her quinceañera party. The mother’s cycle of depression never subsided, even when they sold the house so she didn’t have to look at the 2,000 foot terrace they’d custom built for the quinceañera party, when their daughter had been only five.

Esperanza woke up several times that night, thinking her father was alive. She’d go back to sleep once she realized it was a dream, and then it would happen all over again. She’d had several nights like this since Matilde died

The next day, the maid asked for the day off, so Esperanza had no one to talk to about the awful night she’d had. Chiqui was off in her latest honeymoon with Chalo, in some new lodge in the jungle everyone was raving about, close to where Matilde used to work. She couldn’t even be reached by phone.

To stop dreaming about her father maybe what she needed was some time away in a remote place, somewhere she'd never been. A few days at that lodge could be nice, and maybe she could even visit Río Salado, to see where Matilde had lived. Maybe that way, she'd understand her better. But she couldn't show up in Río Salado without apologizing to Darwin. Leopoldo had kicked him out of Matilde's funeral, alleging he'd saved himself and abandoned her at the protest the day she died. Esperanza, on too many sedatives, had giggled faintly when she saw her brother making a scene, and did nothing to stop him.

She could even call Darwin now, and if he thought she was losing her mind — if she sounded like her cousin Pilar — at least he'd know she tried.

"Matilde told me all about her family," Darwin told Esperanza after she apologized to him over coffee in El Eden, "so you don't need to worry about what your brother did. I wasn't surprised."

This man certainly knew how to state his mind, Esperanza thought.

"You should know, though, I tried to stop Matilde from joining the march against Fusta — as much as we want him out, we all knew that what happened that day was senseless. But collecting signatures for the referendum had transformed her. Everything involving Fusta became a cause. She *had* to join the demonstration outside the hospital. I went with her so she wouldn't go alone."

Esperanza put her head in her hands, and then laughed softly. "Once she set her mind to something no one could ever stop her. I tried many times."

Darwin smiled. "She told me the same thing about you."

Esperanza ignored Darwin's comment. "The signature collecting thing, you got her into that, didn't you?" Before he could reply, she held up her hand. "I'm not accusing you of anything."

"Didn't think you were, Esperanza," Darwin smiled. "Yes, I took her to the first meeting and recommended her to Flora Estibalis, but Matilde needed no help after that."

"What do you think she was looking for, Darwin?" Esperanza asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe the same thing she was looking for all those other times you said you tried to stop her from doing something?"

Esperanza wiped an eye and ordered a glass of wine.

"Enough about this, Darwin," she said with a small cough. "Tell me about you," she said, partly because she was curious, partly because she'd had enough of the drama.

When Esperanza and Chiqui came into the hotel cafeteria, Leopoldo was telling off a bored-looking waitress, his blonde hair thicker than ever, and his skin — never once having had Botox done, Esperanza knew for a fact — much smoother than a sixty-year old man's should be.

She hadn't seen him for months, since Matilde's funeral. But it never mattered how much time had gone by, he always reminded her so much of herself — unlike Chiqui, they'd both lived their entire lives for the sake of others. And they'd both commanded everyone else around them to do the same. So she knew perfectly well he'd fight her on using their father's name for the trust fund she'd established with Darwin to help gay youth.

"Ugh, his hair actually shines," Esperanza told Chiqui, there to support her. "The son of a bitch's made a pact with the devil."

"Or Gigi's bedroom antics hold the secret to eternal youth," Chiqui giggled.

“You do the talking, Chiqui. He won’t be able to stand me right now. And he’s always had a soft spot for you.”

They locked arms and approached Leopoldo.

“I just love you suggested meeting in a hotel lobby, ñañito,” Chiqui said. “I feel like we’re in a bad movie.”

“A bad movie in which a rich old lady becomes friends with a bunch of maricones,” he laughed.

“There’s no need for that, ñañito,” Chiqui said. “Let’s have some coffee first.” She signaled the waitress to come back, but she acted as though she didn’t see her.

“No coffee for me, thanks, Chiqui. I don’t have much time.”

“Three cappuccinos, please,” Chiqui told the waitress, when she finally appeared.

“Unlike me though, Esperanza seems to have a lot of time on her hands,” he kept looking only at Chiqui, “but if she does, she should be helping orphans, not homosexuals.”

“Come on, Leocito, no one’s gonna associate you with them.”

“Don’t, Chiqui,” he said, “you know I hate it. Mami always called me that.”

“You hate the idea someone might think you’re fucking gay, Leopoldo?” Esperanza said. “That’s all you’ve ever cared about.”

“She’s cursing now, I see.” Leopoldo looked at Chiqui and pushed his cappuccino away. “Guess it’s part of this skewed effort at turning over a new leaf.”

“Okay, Leopoldo, that’s enough,” Esperanza said, “shut up and listen to me.”

He glared at her, because he also knew that there was no one more like him than Esperanza. As expected he fought her, but Esperanza had something not even Chiqui knew about.

“I’d hoped you’d come around on your own,” Esperanza told Leopoldo, “but since you’re not doing so, I’m going to put it this way: either you authorize me to use our father’s name, or Gigi finds out how much debt you have and starts having nightmares about having a garage sale for all her Louis Vuitton bags and Louboutin shoes.”

Chiqui stifled a giggle and was about to say something, but Leopoldo stood up and left before she could do so.

“As much as I hate her, I’d never do that to Gigi,” Esperanza said. “Maybe I’d do it to him, but not to her.”

“You know he’s going to disappear from our lives now...” Chiqui said.

“He did that years ago, ñañita.” Esperanza took Chiqui’s hand. “You and I, we keep going. Todo llega y todo pasa, like Papi used to say, right?”

Esperanza played with the heavy gold necklace around her neck, not knowing what to do with the rainbow-hued kite Darwin had handed to her before disappearing among the crowd gathered for the launching of the trust fund that would support gay youth. All she could think about were the stories she’d heard about gunpoint robberies and rape here in La Ogacilla, the hill overlooking Inga.

A group of awfully tattooed girls in their early twenties laughed nearby. Afraid they were making fun of her — “rich old lady, what’s she doing here?” — she imagined them snickering — she put the kite down and read the notes for her speech announcing the trust fund, her hands trembling. The girls laughed again. Esperanza peeked at them from under her sunglasses, but they weren’t even looking at her, just laughing at something on their phones. I better calm down, she thought; it’s nearly time for me to speak.

Darwin got on the stage, and after a short speech, introduced Esperanza to the audience.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Esperanza Osoro Muruzábal and I wanted to talk to you about my gay father.”

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Vita

Susana Camacho Vivar hails from Ecuador, though she spent her childhood in Honduras, El Salvador, the ex-Zaire, and Miami. With parents who traveled the world but remained tied to Ecuador, she is proud to have inherited the amplitude of their worldview as well as their love for their country and for the microcosm they belong to in Quito. She is blessed to be the youngest of nine siblings in a blended family that manages to love each other.

An International Relations degree from Florida International University, with internships in Washington DC, Miami, and Bolivia, started Susana on an international career. A Development Studies master's degree from London School of Economics, followed by research on migrant and refugee women, prepared her for the five life-changing years she spent working for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Lago Agrio, Ecuador, and Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Susana has now spent seven years in Timor-Leste with the Basque husband she met in Lago Agrio and their daughter born in 2015. Through working with the government, the United Nations and Spanish non-profits, Susana has had the privilege of seeing the optimism with which the Timorese people continue to build their young country.

Susana's first novel and thesis for her MFA in Creative Writing at UTEP, *Matilde Ros Leaves the Jungle*, is a step in a journey that can be traced back to her Colegio Americano de Quito teachers, to the library of The American School of Kinshasa, to learning how to read with her sister Carla and to having imitated her father's love of reading until it became her own.

Contact Information: susucamacho@gmail.com

This thesis/dissertation was typed by Susana B. Camacho Vivar.