

MIGRATIONS

AND OTHER STORIES



LISA HERNANDEZ

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For Louise Sevilla and Kay Murphy

Special thanks to my writers' group, Euphronia Awakuni,
and Eric Wat

And to Scott

Si te quiero es porque sos mi amor, mi cómplice y todo.

M. Benedetti

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Migrations | 1 |
| The Neighbor | 23 |
| Count the Raindrops | 33 |
| The Cross | 51 |
| My Little Tyrant Heart | |
| <i>Corazoncito tirano</i> | 65 |
| The Red Curtain | 87 |
| The Swap Meet | 109 |
| Ojitos | 119 |
| The Catholic Girl | 133 |
| Pinky Sandoval | 143 |
| Somewhere Between Santa Monica, and Incarnación de Cristo | 155 |

Migrations

I spent two weeks in Mexico because I was still burdened by my love for him. Holidays were just too difficult. So on December 24th, I left with a friend, though he really wasn't my friend at the time. Just an acquaintance. In fact, he was my neighbor, Reynaldo, an older man who lived in a converted garage behind my bungalow.

Reynaldo had his own reason for going to Mexico. He hadn't seen his daughter since he left Guadalajara nineteen years ago. Pride had kept him away.

It seemed appropriate to me that I should go to Mexico to forget my past, once and for all, and that he'd go to reconnect to it, and so we bonded through pain like humans do. For this reason, I felt he was my friend, my good friend.

We took separate flights to Guadalajara. He said it was better that way since we weren't lovers, and there was no reason to pretend to be. He would get there first, locate a hotel for us both, and then pick me up at the airport. For two weeks, I could see the sights, while he endeavored to win back his daughter.

I took the red-eye and arrived at four in the morning, Guadalajara time, and realized only after I had claimed my baggage that I had made a mistake and had told him to pick me up at six. For an hour or so, the airport was full of peo-

ple giving each other holiday hugs and kisses, but after that the airport was completely empty and cold, and I felt very lonely. I began to question whether I had come to Guadalajara for the right reason, but when I saw Reynaldo walking toward me with open arms, I took that as a sign from my guardian angel.

I was sixteen when I took my first plane ride. Since I wasn't part of the Clique, I got stuck sitting next to my history instructor on the flight to Santa Fe. The other girls were having a good time playing charades, but they were making too much noise, and after the second warning, Sister Mary Helen told them that they would not be allowed to leave the retreat house if they continued misbehaving.

I wanted to say something to my history teacher, but I didn't have the nerve since he looked so consumed with his crossword puzzle. His hands were covered in freckles, and he had red hair coming out from under the cuff of his shirt. He had, in fact, red hair all over, and I thought that he was handsome in a weird sort of way.

The week before, the girls had taken a letter out of his desk that he had written to his girlfriend. He wrote that he missed her, that he missed Boston, that he was miserable, that teaching at an all-girls school wasn't all that it seemed, that the pay sucked, and that, all jokes aside, being the only male among a horde of pubescent women was mortifying. Copies were made of the letter and distributed to all the girls. Those in the Clique hadn't decided what exactly they were going to do to Mr. Keeley to mortify him some more.

I waited for my two suitcases at the baggage claim. One was a solid black Samsonite case with a yellow ribbon. The other was a beat-up, small blue valise that had a rope tied around it. I had argued helplessly with my mother to leave it, but my mother insisted that the notice that Sister Mary

Helen sent home said that the girls would need extra food since the retreat house only provided the essentials. I told my mother that it was too much food and that the Clique wouldn't like it anyway, but my mother said that white people loved tortillas, that her *frijoles* were the best, and not to worry so much about what the other girls thought of me. When the valise passed by on the conveyer belt, I let it pass because Mr. Keeley was right next to me, but when all the suitcases started disappearing, it only became more prominent. "Let's go, let's go, let's go," he kept yelling, so I grabbed the valise and ran behind him.

As I was running, the rope busted and the valise flew open. Plastic bags full of rice and beans fell out and Gerbers bottles full of salsa splattered on the floor. A thick, five-dozen tortilla bag rolled by Mr. Keeley's feet.

Guadalajara was cold. The hotel room smelled of Pine-Sol, and since I hated the smell, I opened the window, but the draft was unbearable. The hotel room wasn't in the center of the city, and it was going to be a problem getting around. The busboy insisted that Guadalajara had great public transportation, that the taxis were very reliable, and that he could, in fact, refer a taxi driver if I needed one. I smirked, but gave him a nice tip anyway. He was just trying to earn a buck like everybody else, I thought.

I decided to walk down the street and find out what was nearby while I waited for Reynaldo to return from his old neighborhood. He had gone there to confirm his daughter's address. I wanted to see the murals of Orozco, visit the Mercado and the Lago de Chapala, and maybe take a day trip to Tequila and light a candle in the Basilica. At the corner, I saw a street market full of food vendors with steaming pots of *caldos* and *cocidos*. When I sat down to expand my list of

things to see and eat a bowl of menudo, I saw Reynaldo crossing the street.

His eyes were red and a little puffy. The collar of his jacket was pulled up, and he shrugged when he saw me as if the cold was too much for him. He wiped his nose with his handkerchief.

“I fucking hate this city,” he said as he sat down. “It’s a shit town and I’m happy I left it when I did.”

“Why?”

“It’s too fucking cold.”

“It’s pretty cold,” I replied. I waited for him to explain, but he said nothing. “So what happened?”

“Not only did the bitch completely blow me off, she threw me out of the pharmacy. She told me it would be a cold day in hell before she’d let me meet my grandchildren, that she had told them I was dead, anyway, and as far as she was concerned I was. Can you fucking believe that?”

I took in the intense smell of the steaming bowl of menudo in front of me. “What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know,” he said, defeated.

I struggled to chew the large pieces of tripe. The soup was extremely hot and so spicy it grabbed at my throat and sent tears to my eyes.

“How’s the menudo?” Reynaldo asked.

“Pretty good,” I replied. “Have some.” I pushed the bowl toward him.

He raised his hand. “Listen, let’s go to Guanajuato. It’s a better town, more history, cleaner, nicer people. Things aren’t so goddamn far apart.”

“Tonight?”

“Now. The bus station is only five minutes away.”

By nine that night it was raining hard, and we were on a bus to Guanajuato. Reynaldo fell asleep the moment he sat in his seat. His hand was still clutching the white handker-

chief. I was sorry that the day had gone so terribly for him, and I felt like placing my hand on his, but I resisted the feeling because it would only complicate things, and anyway, the fact that I was there next to him on this third-rate bus in the middle of nowhere in the fucking cold pretty much said it all.

As soon as we left the city, everyone on the bus dropped their curtains and got ready to watch a Van Damme movie. It was some ridiculous, plotless adventure flick that I was compelled to watch because the TV monitor was right in front of me. A boy sitting behind me was practicing his Van Damme kicks right up my back. I thought of turning around and smacking him hard on the forehead and knocking him out for the night, but instead I closed my eyes, shut out all noise, and thought of him.

It had been sixteen months since I last saw him. One fight after another—the jealousies, the money problems (I didn't have any, and he did), the age difference—ended in my packing my stuff into my Volkswagen and leaving without a place to go. I spent two nights at a cheap hotel on Sunset before I found the bungalow.

I remembered one morning when we were washing dishes together and he casually said that all immigrants who crossed the border illegally were criminals, knowing full well that my parents were immigrants who had crossed the border illegally. I swore that I'd never forgive him for saying that, for having such a mean streak, for being such an utter asshole, but I did the moment he apologized. Later that day, he brought me sunflowers and two books—anthologies on Chicano literature. As I paged through the books, I told him that when I was a kid I couldn't defend myself and that I thought that as I grew older it would be easier, but that he always made me feel helpless.

That night we made love, and I felt as though my body had risen above the bed. He said that he'd felt the same, but I didn't believe him until he was able to describe the same feeling of suspension, the lightness, the exact moment when it happened. Why I felt that that one time, I wasn't sure. Maybe because I knew it was over, that it was the beginning of the end.

It was three in the morning when we arrived in Guanajuato. There was some festival going on and all the hotel rooms were booked. Reynaldo insisted that the tourist agents at the bus depot find us a room. He hugged me tight, apologized a hundred times, and said that if we found even one room he'd sleep on the floor, but after calling every hotel in the vicinity, we finally gave up.

We slept in the hard, orange depot seats for two hours, but it was unbearable, so we left Guanajuato and went to Leon, which was about an hour away. Everyone assured us that we could find a room there.

I wasn't going to get into the pool anyway, I thought, when Mr. Keeley knocked on my door and requested that I follow him to the lounge. Some girls were watching *Breakfast at Tiffany's* with Sister Mary Helen, who stood up dramatically as soon as she saw me and explained that I needed to pack immediately and catch the next flight out, that my grandmother was seriously ill, that my family would meet me at the airport, and that I should remember that the grace of God was always with me. Mr. Keeley drove me to the airport in the campus ministry van without saying a word.

When we got to the airport, he took my suitcase, walked me to the gate, and then gave me a tight hug. I felt my face flush. No man outside my family had ever hugged me that tight before.

"I'll miss you," I said without thinking.

“Me, too,” he smiled. Mr. Keeley was a good man.

While in line at the gate, I turned back to see if he was still there. He waved to me. I stared into his kind eyes, and it made me want to cry.

When I got to Los Angeles my father and sister were waiting for me at the gate. I asked about my grandmother. She was very ill. They didn’t know any more than that.

My grandmother lived alone in a ranch near Lerdo. It was a really small town in northern Mexico, and there was only one flight out twice a week. My mother, two sisters, and my uncle had taken a flight out that morning. The rest had waited for me to come home, so we could drive there. The drive was twenty-three hours. We would arrive ten hours before the second flight to Lerdo if we drove nonstop. Five people—my sister, two cousins, my father, and me—would drive there in my sister’s Cherokee.

As soon as we started driving south on the 405 freeway, I remembered why I hadn’t gotten in the pool. I felt the moisture of my period starting.

“Can we go back home?” I asked. “I forgot something.” I needed sanitary napkins and fuller fitting underwear.

“What did you forget?” my father asked.

“Clothes and some other stuff,” I replied.

“What is wrong with you?” my sister yelled at me. “Didn’t you hear that grandmother is really sick? We’re eating in the car and stopping only to get gas. And you better use the restroom then.”

“Can we stop at the next gas station?” I insisted.

My sister threw up her hand, and my father adjusted the rearview mirror to look at me. I could feel the weight of his eyes observing me. “I’ll stop as soon as I see something,” he said.

Because Leon is the leather capital of Mexico, Reynaldo insisted that I purchase a leather jacket or a pair of boots. We shopped all morning until we found a camel-colored jacket that I liked very much. He paid for it without asking my permission, insisting that it was the cost of spending those horrible hours at the bus depot.

We left at noon and headed for Guanajuato, and there we spent the rest of the day visiting the mummy museum, a silver mine, and a monastery with a torture chamber in the basement that had been used during the Inquisition. Encased in glass was a metal chastity belt with protruding, jagged metal spikes down the front in the shape of a vagina. Reynaldo said that every woman has one of these belts but that she won't show it until a man has fallen in love with her. He said, "And once he goes in, he'll never be able to get out again." I rolled my eyes and asked him to stand by the encasement so I could take his picture. He faked a look of horror for the camera.

We took a taxi to a church that was, according to the taxi driver, the great Basilica of Guanajuato, but we felt little inspiration. The inspiration came later that night from a bottle of *mezcal* we drank in his hotel room.

"She was so cute when she was a baby," he said. "She had big, rosy cheeks and long, curly hair, and her nose was petite. Look at my nose. It's not a bad nose, is it?"

"Long and thin. It's a nice nose," I agreed.

"Well now she's fat. And she cropped her hair. And that nose looks like a snout. Identical. Identical. Identical. A big snout!"

"There isn't any resemblance of when she was a baby?"

"None. Absolutely none. I want my money back," he said, smiling. He became silent, and I could see his sadness.

"Do you regret leaving?"

"Not really," he said. "Sometimes."