

# When a Tree Falls

IF YOU LIVED  
HERE YOU WOULD  
BE HOME BY NOW

TUNNEL

EZPASS

CASH - EZPASS

CASH - EZPASS

BEATRIZ  
RIVERA

*When a  
Tree Falls*

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## **Also by Beatriz Rivera**

*African Passions*

*Do Not Pass Go*

*Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express*

*Playing with Light*

# *When a Tree Falls*

**BEATRIZ  
RIVERA**



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“When a tree falls, it can create in microcosm the same kind of disruption caused by a strong storm. [. . .] The overall effect is that the forest is perpetually off kilter, in a continual state of recovery but never quite returning to some inanimate state—a condition that opens up opportunities and lets no organism settle too comfortably into a static niche.”

*The Burning Season*  
Andrew Revkin

## Prologue

A black Lexus SUV with New Jersey license plates veered off Route 9 onto Springbrook Avenue. Caked in road salt, the vehicle resembled Lot's wife, after she looked back. In this case, there were no sinful burning cities, only deciduous trees in their icicled fixity and roads of black ice. Everything was still and cold on that Saturday, January 5, 2008. Much like a hearse, the SUV noise disturbed the frigid landscape. It was trespassing, bringing and leaving a briny wake of disruption.

Something about the way the car was being driven—what could only be described as a tentative hurry seemed to indicate that the driver was heading for Northern Dutchess Hospital. The person driving didn't seem to be coming from Saturday morning food shopping or a fancy fusion brunch in the village of Rhinebeck. No, this driver seemed to be reassuring the passenger. It became obvious the driver was a man. He was using his hands in a frantic *everything's going to be all right* manner. After a slight hesitation, the brake lights went on. They had to be looking for the emergency entrance. Maybe there was a pregnant woman inside the car or an intrepid student from the nearby culinary institute who had been trying to juggle the veggies and a sharp knife.

Under an ominous metallic sky, the glass foyer was just up ahead, showy with brand-newness still reminiscent of the exclusive gala that had feted each one of the names whose wallets had contributed to this *dernier cri* in community and architecture, the entrance.

An ambulance parked in the circle in front of the grandiose glass doors caused more distress. The black car parked right behind the ambulance. The back door on the passenger side was the first to swing open and a red-haired young man leaped out, slammed it shut and proceeded to open the front passenger door.



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He could have been the Archangel Gabriel in attitude and appearance.

The driver's door opened and the driver stuck one foot out, then a cane, then the other foot and finally the rest of him emerged painfully. But this was not emergency-room pain. It lacked an element of newness. The driver was used to walking with his pain: it was an old companion.

If they were there, it was obviously because of the passenger—a woman with long brown hair. Apparently suffering unbearable pain, she seemed to have use of only one leg. The Archangel Gabriel helped her out of the front seat. She was weeping desperately and repeating the word “Please!” The driver walked with a cane over to them, and the two men proceeded to escort the weeping woman past the ambulance and into the glass foyer.

She was half wrapped in a signature L.L. Bean Hudson Bay blanket, winter white with red and green stripes at each end. She was in such desperate pain that it was almost embarrassing. The driver's pain, on the contrary, although just as acute, was perhaps a bit more bearable.

The woman kept asking, “What's going to happen to me?” Everything she said was punctuated with that pleading, “I made a mistake, I know . . . please!” She had very long brown hair—the kind that gets in the middle of everything—and she could have been judged beautiful except that her pain now defined her. She was nothing but pain.

Inside the glass foyer, the driver yelled something about being a doctor and this being a life-or-death situation and something about gangrene. The hospital staff must have believed him, for the woman was not made to wait. They put her in a wheelchair and rushed to triage.

It was life or death, or life *and* death—a little bit of both perhaps, a sampler. An hour later, one of the physicians asked the driver and the younger man if they were related to the patient. The driver explained that they had already been through all that with the business office.

“I'm Dr. Chanca, and this is my son Duncan,” said the driver.



No, they were not related to the patient. However, his son—the driver pointed to the Archangel Gabriel—had been trying to reach the patient’s sister, but had only spoken to the patient’s sister’s ex-husband. Apparently, the patient’s sister was on her way to Connecticut and had left her cell phone at home, so there was no way to reach the patient’s sister until she returned from Connecticut.

This was too much information. The physician gave Dr. Chanca a blank stare. His beeper beeped, a loyal parakeet, and with his eyes and his brow he took leave of Dr. Chanca and his son, Gabriel the Archangel.

Ten minutes later, another physician approached Dr. Chanca and his son, and, obviously unaware of the conversation that had taken place with her colleague, the physician said, “She says you’re next of kin.”

Dr. Chanca asked, “How is she?”

The physician was terse. “She’ll make it, but we can’t save the leg.”

“Oh, dear me!” Dr. Chanca sighed and looked away.

She had waited too long. Duncan explained that for the past month, Amber (that was her name) had wanted to tend to her wound with natural products such as aloe and baking soda because she didn’t believe in antibiotics, but it had steadily gotten worse, even when she kept insisting it was, in fact, getting better. All this time, Dr. Chanca was looking down at the floor and shaking his head, a slow *no*.

Duncan also mentioned he was the patient’s assistant and that for the past month they had argued about this every day until today, when the leg started to swell so badly and smelled like rotting meat. His first reaction was to call his dad, who had just returned from Central America and was there for the weekend. He pointed to Dr. Chanca, who was looking disappointed in life. He said he had consulted Amber’s list of *emergency* contact names and numbers that was attached to her refrigerator with a Ban Pesticides magnet and found the number for Amber’s older sister Marta. Duncan was about to go into more detail when the cell phone he was holding in his hand started playing The Doors’ *This is the end! My only friend, the end!*

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Dr. Chanca looked puzzled, as if he were trying to remember all the words to that song.

And as if it were a lizard in his hand, Duncan stared at the cell phone before he exclaimed, "It's her!"

While Duncan was talking, the physician turned to Dr. Chanca and said, "So, you're not next of kin?"

"No, ma'am."

"Oh," said the physician as she reached for her silent beeper.

Dr. Chanca was left alone while Duncan talked on the phone explaining to someone that he was Amber's handyman or assistant and that Amber was in the hospital with a bad wound. "That was her sister Marta," Duncan said to his father after the phone conversation was over. "As it turns out she isn't in Connecticut after all. She's on her way here. I gave her the number here. She says she'll be here pretty soon."

Dr. Chanca consulted his watch and said he had to get back to what he was doing, that it simply couldn't wait. Amber's sister could take it from here and drive Duncan back to Amber's. He waited for Duncan's approval before he proceeded to walk through the glass doors to leave.

"See you later, Dad," Duncan said.

Dr. Chanca's reply was, "It was her turn, I guess. In the end, we all lose." He didn't look back.

Duncan stared through the glass foyer, saw his dad getting into the road-salt-caked car and wondered about his attitude. He seemed depressed or distant. Duncan shrugged, went back to the waiting room and leafed through magazines for the next few hours until a disheveled woman stormed into the emergency waiting room yelling his name. Duncan raised his hand.

She was beside herself. "I spoke to her doctor. I hate doctors. How could this happen?" she kept asking no one in particular and punctuating that with, "Things like this don't happen to me!" She seemed to be feeling disempowered, and this made her angry. "This can't be!" Duncan scrutinized her and decided that no matter what Amber had said in the past few years, in a way, Amber's sister was much like Amber.

Three days later, Amber's right leg was amputated right below the knee. A thirty-seven-year-old originally from West New York, New Jersey, Amber Delrío was the owner of the Sacred Greens Farm right outside Rhinebeck and a yoga studio in the village of Rhinebeck. She had been a Rhinebeck resident for the past eleven years, and she was totally committed to the preservation of the Earth's animals and natural resources, and she was a fervent believer in everything natural.

After the surgery, Amber remained in the hospital for nearly a month. In the beginning, the morphine was not enough; she needed nerve block after nerve block. There was no pain, no feeling, and what was left of her left leg was totally tuned off this broken world. Each time, it lasted seventy-two hours. Then it was back to morphine, with a promise of Percocet, and hopefully, someday soon, Advil.

Everything was broken, but the meds made her talkative. When she was awake, she didn't want to be alone. She wanted to talk. She asked Duncan about Dr. Chanca. *Where is he?*

"He won't be coming to visit?"

"No."

Her sister Marta took three weeks off from work. Together, they ate health-food store junk food: sesame honey crunch; raw bars made of chocolate and coconut: Dutch chocolate; blue corn tortilla chips; cinnamon seaweed and curried cashews. They agreed there was nothing better than dark chocolate covered blueberries and disagreed over Marta's loyalties. Amber insisted Marta owed it to her to be there on February 13 when she was to be discharged from Northern Dutchess with a temporary prosthesis. Marta was torn. She couldn't be in two places at the same time, and on February 13, of all days, one of her clients was being released from the Federal Correctional Facility in Danbury after serving a sentence of nearly two years. Marta surely had to be there to drive her client back to New Jersey.

## One

Slightly above the entrance to the Holland Tunnel and at the same time gather up the money for the toll, there is a time-worn high rise with a sign across it that reads:

IF YOU LIVED HERE  
YOU'D BE HOME NOW

It's as reliable or as unreliable as the conclusion to Aristotle's AAA categorical syllogism: All those who are reading the sign are away from home now. The high-rent feeling has to be uttered three times in upper case: Location, Location, Location. Never mind the low ceilings, the roach problem or the thin walls. The Location is supposed to make people from The Oranges, Montclair or Ramapo feel envious about not having bought into that address and also a bit nostalgic about the pastoral pre-commuter epoch of their human existence when they roamed free, totally free, unmindful of traffic jams, of getting there on time, of E-Z Pass and of having to gamble at the last minute between the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway.

Perhaps such a trope really can exist, because there is someone here who does not suffer from any of those conflictive commuter problems and that someone is our own, our very own, Otilia Mancuso, aka *Oh Three* or O. Zone because of her political stance on the ozone issue. No soul-searching when it comes to Location. Otilia does not work in New York City. She works, sleeps, breathes, loves and bribes in Hudson County, and she also happens to live in the boastful building that towers over the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. As a matter of fact, Otilia is home now, even if it's on borrowed time. She knows it, and she is feeling very dramatic. It is indeed simply a matter of months, but that's jumping ahead.

Looking back, Otilia Mancuso has lived at the Jersey City YOU'D BE HOME NOW address ever since she was elected to the Hudson County Board of Chosen Freeholders in a hotly contested election in 1986 to fill the unexpired term of Rich Verdugo, who had died of natural causes in a Tonnelle Avenue motel called The Starlite. This sudden and unexpected victory in the political arena made Otilia not only the first woman to be elected legislator at the county level, but also the first Hispanic woman with a green agenda who promised change in critical areas, such as environment and open space.

The other wannabe freeholders, in other words the losers, took such offense over the election results that they went as far as to question Otilia's morals, her so-called green agenda and even her ethnicity. She had made the mistake of saying that "pollution makes spectacular sunsets," but she did take that statement back, and she was forgiven. However, Ozone (*Oh Three* for short) soon became her nickname.

The defamation did not end there. One slandering conditional sentence after the other, *they* tried to spread the rumor that she was *one of those*, to no avail. Of course, if she wasn't *one of those*, then she had to be a loose woman, but never mind her conjectured nymphomania. Was she really all that Hispanic? She was, after all, born and raised in Union City. So how good was her Spanish? Was it simply *house* Spanish meant only for the ears of old aunts and *abuelas*? Just how Puerto Rican was she?

And if she was indeed as Puerto Rican as she claimed to be, did that mean she frowned upon Dominicans and bowed to Cubans? Deep down inside, was she a racist or a social climber? Did she really care about the other Hispanics in the area? Did she know anything about Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador? And had she ever taken the trouble of at least visiting the isle of enchantment, *la isla del encanto*? (*A propos*, was this an insinuation that the other islands were devoid of enchantment?)

The answer to at least one of those insidious questions is NO. Otilia has never been to Puerto Rico. But never mind Puerto Rico, this only gets better.

Thus far, Otilia has only ventured away from Hudson County four times in her life, twice to New York City and twice to Rhinebeck, New York. Last week, during *small talk*, Otilia told Marta all about her first visit to New York City when she was a seventh grader at St. Aloysius.

Obviously, mentioning St. Aloysius made them go off on a tangent. Marta wondered out loud if St. Aloysius was one of the five unfortunate schools that the Catholic diocese had decided to close down. Otilia jumped on that. She took it personally and didn't agree. She sighed and gesticulated. Could this be a deliberate attempt to obliterate her past? There are rumors that they are going to tear the building down. But she went to school there! Is anything going to be left of her in Jersey City after . . .

*Oh no!* That little word *after* was a precipice. Suddenly Otilia remembered. She put her hands to her forehead in a gesture of despair. Marta thought this was going too far, so she felt compelled to remind Otilia that she was her attorney. "I'm not your psychiatrist!"

The seven-count indictment that had been handed up Monday charged Otilia with four counts of aiding and abetting extortion and three counts of mail fraud. Remembering was such a disappointment, *for being part of a scheme to defraud Hudson County and its citizens*. Marta noticed Otilia's sudden distress. She cleared her throat and reassured Otilia. "This too shall pass. In the end, you will be exonerated. I'm not your psychiatrist but do tell me about your first trip to Manhattan."

At the Rockefeller Center ice rink, they gave her these crappy rental skates that made her ankles fold inward. She looked down at herself. *Why is it so important to be beautiful?* Marta didn't want to go there. Every time she let go, she'd fall, so she'd pick herself up and slip again, no matter how dearly she held on to the railing. She felt like a squid stuck to the side of a boat. To make matters worse, she was wearing her Catholic school uniform. The St. Aloysius girls lived and learned inside a white polyester blouse under an itchy maroon wool/polyester blend sweater and a maroon and tan boiled wool skort (not a skirt—a skort). To this

day, Otilia swears she spent eight years of her youth walking around with an itchy wedgie.

But she couldn't talk about her first trip without comparing it to the second one almost twenty years later when she returned to New York City for a weekend honeymoon trip that really showed her what stumbling was all about and turned the St. Aloysius fiasco into a good memory. The conversation almost went off on a tangent again. It really is a shame that St. Aloysius is one of the many Catholic schools being closed down by the diocese because of low enrollment. *Pretty soon there will be nothing left of me in Hudson County.* Nothing but seven counts . . .

It was Marta who, just by clearing her throat and glancing at her watch, dragged the conversation back to where it was supposed to be. Otilia gathered her thoughts. After the honeymoon was over, no matter how much New York City had to offer, Otilia swore she'd never go back there for as long as she lived. So far she hadn't, although she had probably stared at New York City every single day of her life except for those few days she spent in Rhinebeck with someone whose name she no longer wished to remember. Just the thought of it was making her feel dramatic all over again.

Otilia stopped, inhaled and remembered that just the other day, during *small talk*, she said to Marta, "Everyone must have a diorama, and I was wondering what ours looks like." She paused before she asked, "What's our landscape? What's our habitat? What's always in the background?" They were rhetorical questions followed by a moment of silence, and then there was the word, "Precisely."

The two women loved talking about real estate. Real estate is important: *it rules our lives*. Up until she married Junior Mancuso, Otilia lived in a large, drafty, moldy apartment on Palisades Avenue in Union City with an eternal view of New York City quite similar to the view she had from the apartment in the Heights where she lived during her married life. Finally, she moved to this building.

IF YOU LIVED HERE  
YOU'D BE HOME NOW

It was not the sign that made her force Junior Mancuso to buy a three-bedroom apartment in what promised to be an eternally new high-rise. Rather, it was the feeling that, much like a diamond-shaped warning sign on a road, a rough road lay ahead, and she was right: a messy divorce from Junior Mancuso in 1988, the year Pita was born, the year she barely evaded scandal and also the year she decided she would be a politician for the rest of her life.

To sum it up, Otilia had never been a commuter. She had always been HOME NOW. But the conversation always went around in loops, and she felt there was a deliberate attempt to obliterate her past or a plot to erase her from Hudson County. St Aloysius was just further proof. *Can this really be happening to me?*

Before Otilia and her attorney Marta Maldonado got down to business, back to the drawing board, no matter how urgent matters were and how dramatic Otilia was feeling (with just cause), there had to be some small talk. They invariably get into a light conversation about real estate and how lucky they both felt to have purchased something in this very building before the real estate prices skyrocketed. It was unbelievable, they both agreed, and they both had means, but these days, you practically had to be a millionaire to get to the bottom rung of the Hudson County real estate ladder. Could they afford something today? They both agreed that if they hadn't twisted their ex-husbands arms, they could easily have been forced to move to Paterson. The last item in this conversation concerned the portion of the less economically fortunate Hispanic population moving to places like Scranton, Pennsylvania, so far away from New Jersey.

Marta glanced at her watch, for the small talk was timed. Back to business. They needed a timeline, and for there to be a timeline there must be a Day One.

Otilia scratched her nose and wetted her lips as if playing with fresh lipstick. Day One was one of those ozone alert days: hot, hot, much like today. She tilted her head back and pointed her chin at the window. Just another Thursday that made it difficult to believe in the nature of heat. The faster the molecules move, the hotter it



is supposed to be, but everything in that July 13 atmosphere was so inert that there was nowhere to go and nothing to breathe.

Both Otilia and Marta momentarily stopped talking and gazed outward. The New York City skyline was always on the other side, behind the particles of torpor suspended in the air, reflecting a diffuse, dusty light. The tape recorder was on; Otilia felt she wasn't talking enough, wasting tape and about to start feeling dramatic all over again. Her wrist was throbbing. Mere existence had the feel of a nuclear summer, if there is such a phenomenon: petrified, languorous, living room furniture covered in thick, warm plastic. Otilia wiped some frenetic tears that were stuck at the corner of each eye, inhaled deeply and recommenced.

Day One, that summer day, they had convened on the top floor of the Liberty Science Center at 11 AM to talk to the media about the thinning ozone layer, reasonable alternate sources of energy and why the young and the old should definitely stay indoors on ozone alert days. It must have been June—a very hot June. It was cold inside the Science Center, but maybe it was the contrast from the air-conditioned cars, across the scalding parking lot, into the cool diorama of the museum. Otilia didn't get a chance to trifle with the bottled tornadoes in the gift shop. Before she knew it, she was in the elevator, going up with the others, a smile pinned to her ears, but she had also worked on a concerned frown just in case there was a picture. Smog was no smiling matter.

They were a group of perhaps twenty people: two eco-friendly politicians, the tall director of the Science Center, the assistant to the director, a few eager Science Center staff members, two potential eco-terrorists, three hand-picked high school students wearing Save-the-earth T-shirts, some activists, not enough philanthropists and . . . Otilia paused. No use naming the last person on that crowded elevator list. She stared Marta in the eye and waved her hands awkwardly, as if something hurt.

The minute Otilia saw him—you know who—she tried to figure out where she'd seen him before, and before she knew, it she was obsessed with the thought. *You know who, the Cuban.*

Marta protested, "You're making him sound like Fidel Castro."

“Fidel’s long gone, and he isn’t. So let’s call him the Cuban with the southern mannerisms. Because he doesn’t sound like a Cuban from here, I mean Hudson County.”

“Go on,” Marta said.

Positive that she did indeed know him from somewhere, she kept shooting sideways glances at him, hoping for a clue. No, that time he didn’t utter a single word; he didn’t even try to approach her. *You know who*, the Cuban, simply stood in the crowd, took in every word she said, and stared at her. It was eerie, and it was flattering.

Marta Maldonado, Otilia’s attorney, glanced at the time as she reached for her pen. Little did it matter if she charged by the hour. Otilia could tell she was dying to speed things up. When Marta said that she was due back in her office at three, what she really meant was she didn’t have all day to spend sitting in Otilia’s formal, yet second-rate dining room, staring at the World-Trade-Center-less New York City skyline, really wondering about Otilia’s obnoxious pomeranian under the table who growled at her ankles every time she shifted.

“What’s your dog’s name again?”

“Belinda Avellaneda.”

“Well, now that we have established the first truth—that truth being that we’re on each other’s side,” Marta uttered, “and now that we both agree that my purpose is to defend you, perhaps you could make an effort to get to the point. After all, time is of the essence. Translated, that means that we don’t have all the time in the world. *It’s July already, and the trial is in November.*” After she got through saying all that, Marta reminded Otilia that she was facing a maximum of twenty years each on the extortion charges and ten years each for the fraud counts, as well as a maximum fine of \$300,000.

“All of which I don’t have,” Otilia sighed. “Except maybe for the three hundred.”

“So let’s get to work,” Marta said.

The other day, Otilia did mention that she wasn’t feeling quite herself that day three years ago. Just to boost Otilia’s memory, Marta took her hands to her belly.

Of course! Otilia realized what Marta wanted to hear. Day One, standing on the top floor of the Liberty Science Center, being asked by the media if she was for or against alternate sources of energy, Otilia was feeling bloated. To make matters worse, she had chosen to wear a very tight body shaper with a reinforced abdomen in order to look slimmer. (Does it matter that she'd gained something like twenty-five pounds since breaking up with Manny Robles?)

"A body shaper?" Marta asked, intrigued.

"Yes. With reinforced everything, front, back, sides . . . I could barely breathe."

"You don't need one."

"Let's not get sidetracked."

Marta was not hearing what she needed to hear, so she tried to lead Otilia, "When a woman is feeling bloated, she usually . . ." With hopefulness in her voice, Marta repeated the word *usually*.

Otilia explained she had started out that inevitable day by eating a whole stack of silver dollar pancakes smothered in blueberry-flavored syrup at the Union City International House of Pancakes. By the time she got to her office, she felt she was going to burst at the seams. Two unpleasant phone calls later, before she knew it, it was time to go to this event at the Science Center.

Marta, who was so intent on victimizing Otilia, was still trying to make good use of the word *bloated*. Never mind the ozone. Never mind the windmill outside the Science Center and bottled tornadoes and the debate as to whether or not Jersey City should consider wind energy. The only two things that really matter are:

- Dr. Chanca stood there and stared at Otilia (it suggests pre-meditation and stalking).
- Otilia was feeling bloated (it alludes to either PMS, or menstrual cycles, or peri-menopause, or fibroids or polyps or *God-knows-what!*).

After she finished coloring in both bullets with black ink, Marta explained to Otilia, as if she were a child, that the presentation of a case is much like a house, it needs good, solid foundations.

Before putting the dossier away, Marta gently stroked it. They decided to meet again in two days, same time, same place, Door 2008.

“I wish my apartment looked toward Manhattan,” Marta said as she was putting her dossier away.

To make Marta feel better, Otilia uttered, “But you’re on a higher floor, and pollution does make spectacular sunsets.”

IF YOU LIVED HERE

YOU’D BE HOME NOW

And Otilia was home, saying good-bye to Marta, her neighbor and much-needed attorney who lived five floors above her on the other side of the building, looking away from Manhattan. In a very lawyerly way, Marta was keeping her hopes up. She was confident Otilia would be exonerated because she was a victim who was used by greedy individuals.

Was Dr. Chanca (who has not been charged with a crime and denies committing any wrongdoing) stalking Otilia Mancuso? And why did Otilia use the word *inevitable* to describe that day? Marta walked away with those two questions.

“And stop making him sound like Fidel Castro.”

“He’s my own personal Fidel. He *fidel castroed* me.”

“Otilia, you cannot compare yourself to a nation.”