

TEPOZTECO'S BELLY



JOSÉ AGUSTÍN

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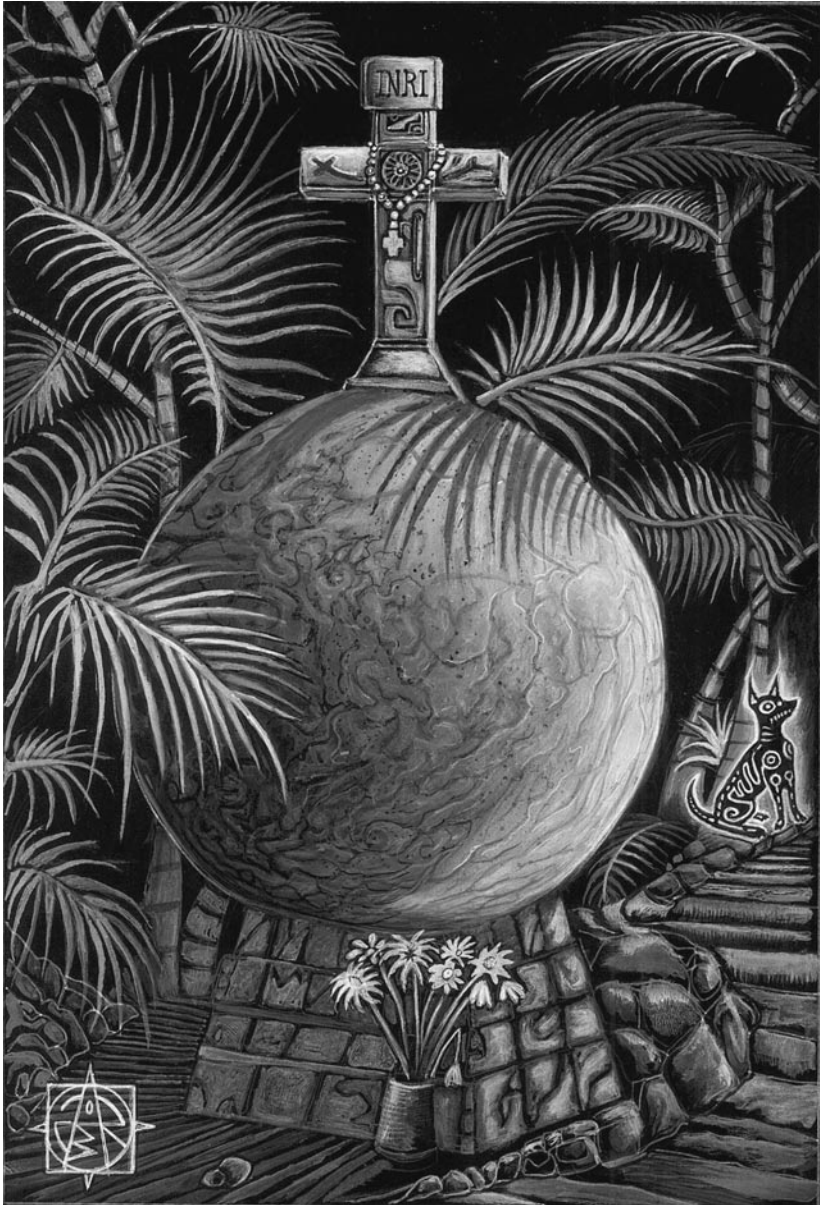
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*For Tino who recently emerged from these territories, and for
Carlitos Frontera Lloreda*



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I

“Look at this, they’re packed like sardines,” Yanira exclaimed, pouting. “I told you we should have bought the tickets yesterday!”

“Right, what a downer,” chubby Thor said, snorting.

The seven kids had just arrived at the southern bus terminal, which was crowded with travelers.

“It’s because of the holiday,” Erika explained matter-of-factly. “These days are beautiful and everyone wants to get out of the city.”

“Jeez,” Alaín squealed, “any tickets left?”

All seven of them looked around as they sped up, carrying their luggage through the crowd of people standing in long lines at each ticket counter. Homero was bringing up the rear, listening to his Walkman. They reached the other side of the terminal, where they sold tickets for the Cristóbal Colón bus line.

“Ach!” Yanira exclaimed, “look at that line!”

“Yep, it’s unending!” Erika said. “You all need to get in line while I go ask what times the buses are leaving. Selene, you get in line,” she instructed the youngest of the group, an eight-year-old.

“Me, by myself?” Selene asked, looking at the mass of people.

“I’ll stay with her,” Thor volunteered. “I’ll take care of her. I’ll take care of you, kiddo.”

Selene nodded in agreement and pulled out a stick of gum. “You want a some?” she asked Thor.

“Of course.”

“I’ll go ask what time the buses are leaving,” Alaín said.

“No, I’ll go,” Erika butted in.

“Well, let’s the both of us go,” Alaín settled it.

They both made their way through the crowd lining up until they reached the ticket counter.

“What time do . . . ?”

“. . . the buses leave for Tepoztlán?” Erika finished Alaín’s sentence.

“At twelve-thirty,” a clerk’s rough voice answered without looking at them.

“At *twelve-thirty*?” Erika and Alaín repeated, aghast.

“Or even later, if you don’t get in line right away,” the clerk threatened. “Get in line, kids, or the schedule may be canceled, and you won’t be able to go nowhere.”

“But, it’s not even eight a.m. yet. It’s more than three hours until twelve-thirty,” Erika complained.

“*Four hours*,” Alaín corrected her.

“Get in line, now, rascals.”

Erika and Alaín slowly returned to the line where the others were waiting.

“Guess what?” Alaín started to say.

“They only have tickets for the twelve-thirty departure,” Erika finished his thought.

“Not until twelve-thirty?” Thor repeated, skeptical. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Nope.”

“What’ll we do?” interjected Erika. “If we wait *here* for four hours, we’ll get to Tepoz who knows when.”

“At two in the afternoon,” Alaín specified.

“*Four hours*?” Thor repeated.

“What do we do?” Erika repeated, deflated.

“Let’s call my dad,” Thor suggested. “He said to call him if we encountered any problems.”

“Oh, the little baby,” Erika said, “he can’t do anything without his daddy.”

“Well, what do you suggest we do?”

“And what about Homer?”

“He’s in back of the line wearing his earphones.”

“You want a piece of bubble gum, Erika?” asked Selene, who had only moved up five centimeters in the long line.

“Sure,” Erika accepted it.

“Listen up, everybody. Wait!” shouted Yanira, who emerged from the crowd.

“Where have you been?” Alaín asked her.

“You can get lost. . . .” Erika added.

“She always disappears,” Thor said.

“It’s the Lone Yanira,” Homero added.

“Oh, be quiet, all of you. Listen to me.”

“Okay, but don’t shout.”

“Look, while all of you were here like sticks in the mud, I went over and found out what we can do.”

They all took a few moments to look at her, and Yanira proudly stood her ground with all eyes on her.

“Well, what?” asked Erika, impatiently.

“What do I get if I tell you?”

“Man, you’re really milking it. . . .”

“Well, we’re going to take a *combi*.”

“A *combi*? What *combi*? Are you crazy?” Alaín said.

“They leave from just outside, down the stairs by the entrance to the Metro. They go to Tepoztlán, Oaxtepec and Cuautla. They depart as soon as they fill up. Each ticket costs twenty pesos. Whad’ya say?” Yanira asked with a beaming smile.

They were all speechless.

“Oh, and they’re not exactly *combis*. . . . They’re minibuses, like the ones you see everywhere these days.”

“Are you sure about this?” Erika asked.

“Yep.”

“How do you know all this?” Alaín asked.

“Because some men in line were talking. I heard them and so I asked, and they explained it all to me. And they’ve already gone to board the minibus. Let’s go, okay?”

“Let’s go,” Thor declared.

“Wait a minute,” Alaín interrupted. “What if it’s bad info? Someone should stay in line here so we don’t lose our place.”

“What for?” Yanira protested. “There’s still seats in the minibuses, and they’re leaving now.”

“Let’s have Selene, Homero, Indra, Thor and Yanira stay in line,” ordered Erika without paying any attention to Yanira. I’ll go check it out.”

“No, I’ll go,” said Alaín.

“Let’s go together,” countered Erika.

“I want to go . . .” Selene begged, “. . . I’m tired of standing here.”

“No, Selene, you’re too small, you stay here,” ordered Erika.

“No way, I want to go.”

“Oh, let her come,” Alaín decided. “I’ll take care of her.”

Erika huffed but accepted it. Alaín took the little girl by the hand, and the three of them made their way through the crowd and into the street.

“People are still arriving, you see that?” Alaín observed.

“Why are there so many people?” Selene asked.

“Because of the holiday,” Alaín explained.

“But why?”

“Oh, Selene, didn’t they teach you anything in school?” Erika asked impatiently.

They were already outside where bunches of cars and buses were passing slowly in front of the terminal. They headed for the minibuses lined up around the Taxqueña Metro station.

“Because September fifteenth and the sixteenth are when Mexican independence is celebrated, and this year they fall on Thursday and Friday,” Alaín explained. “And they’re followed by Saturday and Sunday, so that’s four days in a row when there’s no school and everyone can have plenty of time to party.”

“Just like us, dummy!” Erika said.

They got to where a group of minibuses were parked, along with numerous other passenger vehicles heading to different parts of Mexico City. People were streaming in and out of the Metro station. Indeed that the minibuses were leaving as soon as they filled up, and that they were headed for Cuautla and Oaxtepec. They weren’t going into Tepoztlán proper, but would let passengers off at the bus stop just outside of town.

“And from there, we can get a taxi or a *combi* into town,” Erika exclaimed. “Let’s do it. We’re seven,” she said as she took out some bills and counted them carefully as she handed them to the minibus driver. “Alaín, hotfoot it over to get the others. Your stay with me, Selene.”

Alaín hesitated for a second. He hated taking orders, especially those coming from Erika, but he took off running through the crowds, the cars and minibuses that were spewing exhaust into the morning air. Erika and Selene boarded the minibus, which already had some passengers: a married couple that looked like they were peasants, a man who looked like a poor teacher—Erika imagined and various other types of people, more accurately old people. One of the senior citizens talked and talked and the other just listened. Erika and Selene

sat down on two seats and informed the people boarding that those other two were “occupied.”

“Yes, those girls paid for seven tickets,” the driver confirmed as he continued to sell tickets at the bus’ door.

Erika gave the young driver a defiant look. She couldn’t stand being called a girl, simply because she no longer considered herself one at thirteen years of age and was already in high school. She was a teenager, as her mother said, and if she wore makeup and her sister Myriam’s high heels, she could get in anywhere.

The minibus had filled up, except for the two benches reserved by Erika and Selene, and neither Alaín nor Thor nor Indra nor Homero nor Yanira had arrived. Some of the passengers were already complaining, “Let’s hit the road” and “It’s getting late” and “Yes, let’s go, let’s go already, driver.”

“No! Wait!” Erika clamored in anguish.

“I’ll go look for them, Erika,” Selene volunteered.

“You? You’ve gotta be kiddin’. You’ll get lost. No, I better go.”

“Let’s go-o-o-o!” passengers were shouting.

“You? And what if you don’t get back?” Selene worried.

“What do you mean *if I don’t get back*? Of course, I’ll get back. Darn! I hate them! What could be taking them so long?”

“Let’s get going!” the passengers were insisting.

The driver, already sitting behind the steering wheel, didn’t pay them any attention and just passively observed the intense movement of the masses of people and the vehicles around the Metro station and the bus terminal.

“Selene, I’m going to go look for them. You wait here, stay calm, and nothing will happen. These adults will watch out for you, and I’ll go like a flash to see what’s going on . . .”

Erika paused because at that moment there seemed to be a ruckus outside, and then Alaín boarded the bus.

"We're here," he announced.

"What a mess," exclaimed Homero.

"It was all because of Indra," Thor pointed a finger.

"It wasn't my fault!"

"Shhhhhhh!"

"I told you we shouldn't have stayed in line. It was dumb. After all, we were going in the *combi*."

"Be quiet already!"

"Pain-in-the-butt kids!"

"Let's go, already!"

"Sit down, now, and don't make so much noise," the driver ordered.

"Uhhhh," some murmured, while others laughed.

The driver ignored them, put the minibus in gear and took off as best he could go into the traffic moving at snail's pace in front of the southern bus terminal.

More and more people were still pouring into the area.

"God!" Indra exclaimed, "I thought we'd never get out of there."

"Well, now you see, we're okay," Alaín said.

"I told you that we should have all come together to the *combi*," Yanira insisted. "There was no reason for us to stay back there in line."

"It's not a *combi*, it's a minibus," Alaín corrected her.

"Hey, Homero, lend me your Walkman," Thor asked.

"He doesn't even hear you," Indra reminded him. "Anyway, you have your own."

"Yes, but not on me."

"Now, can you explain why it took you all so long to get here?" Erika asked.

". . . And anyway, your Walkman is much cooler."

“It was because dumb-head Indra went to make a phone call,” Yanira explained. “I told her not to go, but she always does whatever she wants.”

“It was an important call . . .” murmured Indra with an embarrassed smile.

“And why the heck could you not hurry up?” challenged Thor.

“Language!” someone in back said.

“Shhh, don’t curse,” Yanira said. “Who did you call, Indra?”

“Rubén . . . I promised I’d call him whenever I could.”

“What! I thought it was supposed to be an *important* call!”

“Well, it was important. . . .”

“You get it, Homero?”

“What?” Homero said as he took off the headphones.

“You know why Indra took so long? Because she was talking to her boyfriend,” said Thor.

“She’s so stupid,” Homero said and put the headphones back on.

“But why did you take so long, Indra?” Selene asked. “We waited forever for you, and these people here wanted to kill us.”

“Be QUIET already,” someone in back shouted.

“They sound like a bunch of parakeets!”

“It was because all the telephones in the bus terminal were out of order or had long lines waiting to use them. . . .”

“So, what did you do?”

“I went down to use the telephone at the Metro station.”

“So that’s why we couldn’t find you. . . .” Thor exclaimed.

“ENOUGH!” all the other passengers shouted.

“SHUT UP!”

“Shhhh!”

“Don’t pay attention to them,” Erika told Yanira. “They have also been blabbing, blah, blah, blah.”