

IT WAS THE ONLY WAY

BY

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by *Samuel Snoek-Brown*

Once, when she'd felt much younger, Lupe had fallen asleep in a raft on the Gulf of Mexico, her second husband drinking cans of beer on the shore. She rose and fell on the waves, her limp body rolling and bobbing in the gentle surf. She stayed out too long, then spent the next three days soaking in cold baths of milk and green tea. She peeled for a week and when she was finished, she looked almost white. Her husband loved it, but she did not.

Now, riding a Greyhound south through Texas, she felt as she had on the Gulf, rocking with the bumps in the road, the sun hot and flat through the wide bus window. She'd gone a long way, an undertow dragging her and no one to bring her back when she awoke.

Even at the Mexican bus terminal, on her feet, she drifted. Some uncanny current dragged her through the huge building and over the dry streets of Piedras Negras and into a convenience store. The sharp pungency of bleach burned in her nostrils—it seemed a part of the air itself. Bleach and sweat and dust. Her hips ached from

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too much sitting. She walked to a counter and poured herself a cup of burnt coffee. She looked at her feet, noticed how her heels made no echo on the painted concrete floor. The store had collected a grainy skin of dust, blown in through the sliding doors. In place of an echo, the scratch of grit under the soles of everyone's shoes. *Los pies. Perdido pie.* The coffee smelled of exhaust fumes, and its surface swirled with an oily sheen.

At the counter, she handed the wide-hipped woman behind the register three American dollars. The woman looked the way Lupe would have looked, her hips spread, her arms strong, her demeanor indifferent. But this woman was not like Lupe, who had spent hours at the gym keeping thin, who was dark only when she tanned. Lupe had dyed burgundy highlights in her black, black hair; she carried a blue leather pocketbook with a snap and a strap and a little calculator inside. She looked into it, at her Texas driver's license: Guadalupe Flynn. A little square photo with her make-up and her power blouse, the laminating film glossy in the lights of the store. A legal

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license for a fake woman, Mrs. Flynn no more. Now that she was back in Mexico, she would go by Caballero. It was her mother's name. *Caballero. Caballo.* No man's *caballito* anymore.

The woman at the counter said something in Spanish—Lupe hadn't been paying attention, but the woman's voice was sharp and Lupe gathered her sandwich and change; she receded from the counter. She drifted to the back of the store and sank into a small booth there, still juggling her lunch, her pocketbook, and her Mexican change.

She snapped open the coin section to drop in the change, then she unfolded the pocketbook on the table. Photos stared at her that she could hardly bear to look at: Danny Flynn, her ex-husband. Her two small children, her Pedro (Pete, when Danny was around) and her little Miguel. Their tiny suits, dressed by their professional father. The miracle of still children—Pedro had scared Miguel to tears by whispering tales of camera blindness, the umbrella-hooded flash that would burn his eyeballs

black. Pete so like his father, who had laughed behind the photographer. Lupe, half in tears herself, had lunged in with little cubes of Hubba Bubba to pacify Miguel and distract Pedro's jaws.

Somehow, in spite of genetics, both Pedro and Miguel inherited Danny's auburn hair and his impossibly light skin. So little to do with her brown skin and her natural hair black as polished shoes. Nothing to do with her at all, now—Danny had seen to that.

She took the little photos from their sleeves and set them on the table like playing cards. In the sleeve behind her children, she kept a photo of her parents and her siblings down south, from years ago, the colors faded and dry. Her father standing solemn behind everyone, her mother seated by his side. Lupe and her five siblings arrayed around the parents. Her uncle had come all the way from Chihuahua to take the photo; it was the year of Frida's *quinceñera*. Lupe was twelve that year. Three years later, she celebrated her own *quinceñera*, and two years after that, she married Emilio.

She slipped her old family portrait photo out of its sleeve, too, knowing what photo was stuck to the back of it. She plucked at the two photos with her painted fingernails and peeled away the hand-trimmed copy of her first wedding photo. She in her simple dress, all the beauty not in lace or pearls but in the weave of the fabric. Her Emilio, her *esposo primero*. The verb meant to handcuff, and with Danny she rarely forgot it. But Emilio had only ever been her love. Emilio in his fine brown suit, beaming a ridiculous belt of teeth. His eyes nearly disappeared in his cheeks. He'd been a good man.

She fitted this photo into the front sleeve, her family portrait in the second, her children hidden in the back. Only when alone, at night, in tears—she could look at them no other time. Then, Danny. She decided not to rip the photo. He deserved no such effort. She laid it face down on the table instead, then slid it away from herself. She lifted the sandwich and began unwrapping it, but then she closed her eyes instead, let herself drift as she had those years ago on the Gulf.

The talk in the store was a cross-current of words she couldn't quite make out. She could hear it echoing around the diagonal aisles, by the big glass cooler, by the coffee area, by the register, but the conversation eddied up front and came only indistinctly into Lupe's shadowy section of booths. She could barely follow any of it anyway—it had been so long since she'd spoken Spanish to anyone but her children, and then only when Danny had not been home.

Here, the talk was always about politics. Nothing had changed since she'd left with beaming Emilio. She sipped her bitter coffee. Her sandwich tasted stale, but it was substantial, not soft or machined like the ones in Texas. A hard, real sandwich, no pumpernickel here.

Things got quiet, like a wave rolling out. Then it rolled back in—talk went on. She sat with her back turned, so she didn't know the cause of the lull, but the conversation was shifting. Something about the local elections, and the indistinct but confident voice of a man who was running. Shaking hands, passing out flyers (*Take*

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one, he said in Spanish, *take one; vote for me, vote for me*).

They all ignored him, she could tell.

There was another wave receding, and then a quieter rush of talk:

He has okay ideas, I think, but he's not PRI.

I hear he has some family.

Yes, his family comes from Spain and from Italy.

Good Spain or bad Spain?

Oh, his family all were patriots.

Yes but look at him. Do you not know where else he comes from?

He is El Chino. He has Chinese family, too.

I thought his color looked odd. And that hair.

Blood matters. He might as well be a gabacho.

He has little hope, then.

He is young. He will go to Texas, or to Detroit. Try to be a politician elsewhere.

This was the consensus.

Lupe ate her sandwich and dozed.

Several minutes later, a hand alit on her table,

near Danny's overturned photo. Beside the table, clean brown shoes. She looked up at the man, at his clean hair and his clean brown suit, his narrow yellow tie. He was carrying a sheaf of leaflets.

Hello, miss, he said in a soft voice, accented English. May I sit here please?

She smiled not at him but at his mistake. She waved him away and said in Spanish, No, please. I'm eating alone. For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, she spoke her native tongue and not some garbled Texican mix.

He said, I'm sorry. I thought— But he did not finish.

You thought I was an Americana, she said without looking at him. It's okay. I guess I was.

He sat anyway. He looked at her closely. He said, When did you get back?

Today. Then she said, I'm sorry, but really, I'd rather—

Will you live here?

In Piedras Negras? No. But listen—

I'm running for office here, he said.

I heard. But I'm not staying here. You don't need my vote.

No. I'm sorry, you just looked a little tired.

Overwhelmed, maybe? I thought perhaps I could help, maybe you needed someone to talk to.

She watched the table, closed her eyes, shook her head. I'm sorry, she said.

She heard him slide from the booth, his leaflets rustling. He said, No, ma'am, I am sorry, I didn't mean to bother you. Nothing happened for a long moment, but when she opened her eyes again he was still there. He smiled at her and said, Have a good day, ma'am, and he was gone.

Her father had been in politics, local elections and bureaucracy. He'd bought her a drivers license when she was only fourteen though they had just the two cars for the whole family and her older brothers shared the second. He had done it simply because he liked his

influence. She was glad to have escaped it.

Danny had been a politician, too, in his way, paying people for favors and charming his way out of speeding tickets. It was never politics in the conventional sense but it always felt that way to her, and she used to wonder how she'd fallen in love with such a man.

Emilio had been simpler, a carpenter with ambitions only for family and children. Her father had never liked Emilio but would have hated Danny, and now she had to return to the land of her father. She had nowhere else to go.

She finished her sandwich and balled the plastic, stuffed it into her paper coffee cup, and shoved in the photo of Danny as well. She threw it all away as she walked out into the bright, hot day.

She stood in the street, the buses and cars trickling through the Mexican checkpoint and rounding the street. Behind her, she could hear the bustle and laughter of the Mercado, and ahead, behind all the buildings and the wide, angled roof of the checkpoint, she

could just make out the sounds of construction vehicles and workmen near the Rio Grande, where they labored to reinforce the bridge. She thought of going down to see the river, which she'd barely glanced at as the bus carried her over it, but she didn't want to see Eagle Pass across it. She didn't want to look anymore on Texas. She closed her eyes, the sunlight orange through the skin of her eyelids. The smell of bleach was strong even out here in the street.

Where are you going?

She opened her eyes on El Chino, grinning in the street.

Sorry, he said. I don't mean to keep bothering you, but you seem unsure where to go. You said you weren't living in Piedras Negras. Where are you going?

I'm not going yet, she said. My family is down south, so I'll stay the night here. She didn't know why she was talking to this man, but she heard herself saying, Maybe a while longer.

Oh, he said. Well, where are you staying?

I don't know yet, she said. I haven't much money.

El Chino smiled at her, a blush in his pale cheeks. Maybe I can help, he said. He rolled his leaflets into a tube, stood down from the curb and offered her his arm. There's a house a few blocks down around the corner. The woman rents rooms to Mexicans coming home—it's her way of helping the immigrants and the ones who bring money home. I think if we explain your situation she'll give you a good rate.

She looked at his arm, then at him. She sighed and stepped down to join him.

As they walked, he used his tube of flyers to point down the street.

I helped build that church, you know. A group of Americanos came down on a bus, a church group, and they built it here for the people. I joined them to help. It's Presbyterian, but it's still a church.

Lupe nodded. He had a good walk, assertive, always moving forward. He had a good voice.

They came to the house, a two-story home of stucco and light brick with two ancient live oaks and a palm tree. A small, dense garden flourished behind an ornate iron fence. The house had blue curtains. He said, This is the place I told you about. The owner is Consuela. Just tell her about your situation, and she will help you.

He opened the gate for her, but before she started up the walk, she turned to him, looked him over. His skin was pale, and his hair lacked the lush oily dark of good Mexican men; it was a dry, flat black, straight and fine the way Chinese hair could look. He seemed too small in his brown suit, too. He had skinny arms, narrow shoulders. Mexican men could be short, but the ones who won elections could always show their power. Her father was short but powerful—she knew how things worked.

The man looked at her, and she looked back, right into his eyes. She could see reflected in their Chinese black the clouds burning out of the pale blue sky.

She said, Let me see your flyers. He unrolled them and handed her one. Your name is Jorge Li Cruz?

He nodded. But people know you as El Chino. He nodded again. You should go by El Chino always. On the flyers, everything.

You think so? he said.

She nodded, then turned toward the house.

The next day, she returned to the bus station, studied the schedule on the long wall and the remaining cash in her wallet. Consuela had charged very little for the room and prepared a huge breakfast of eggs and tortillas, so she was full and had enough money to stay a few days longer. She bought a ticket for Friday, two days away, then walked the streets of the town. The day was hot, the streets were dusty, and that bleach smell remained in the air no matter where she went. The town offered little to distinguish itself from anything she'd known in Texas. Fewer wheelchair ramps, perhaps. A slower pace even in the busy Mercado. But the town felt familiar, comfortable. When she grew hungry she returned to the convenience

store for another sandwich and a cola, cold in her hand and syrupy on her tongue. She sat in the back, at the same table, and she was not surprised when El Chino slid into the booth across from her.

Hello again, he said. You're still here?

I have a bus ticket for Friday.

I hope you didn't pay too much. I might have been able to get you a discount.

It's fine, she said.

They sat like that for several minutes, she eating and he watching her. He was staring at her hands. Then he apologized, and said, I hope you didn't think I was being inappropriate.

She looked at her hands and saw what he had seen, the bright tan line on her fourth finger.

No, she said, no, I'm not married. Not anymore.

Oh, he said. Pardon me. Is that why you're here, for the funeral?

No, she said. She laughed, even. A quiet, unexpected thing. No, I mean, my first husband died, but

Danny, my second husband, he divorced me.

El Chino looked at her.

I know, she said. It's bad. I'm afraid to go home.

I'm afraid of my family.

Why? he said.

They didn't want me to go to Texas in the first place, with Emilio, and they certainly wouldn't have approved of my gringo second husband. Now I'm divorced. I'm afraid they'll never take me back. You know how it is here.

Yes, he said, I know how it is. But this Danny, I guess he was an Americano? I guess you got married in the United States?

She said yes.

He said, He was Catholic?

He was Irish, but he wasn't Catholic.

El Chino said, What about your first marriage?

Lupe smiled, looking at the table, her folded pocket book. She said, Emilio was Mexican. We were married in the big church in Guanajuato, then we moved

up to Texas for the jobs. He was a carpenter. He was good and studied a lot, and he could have become a fine architect. He died very soon, though, only the next year. It was on a job—he fell off a catwalk and landed in a cement truck.

El Chino frowned and lowered his eyes, but Lupe laughed.

It's okay to laugh, she said. I know it sounds like the cartoons.

No, El Chino said. It doesn't.

She was quiet.

Then El Chino said, But it's okay, then. The divorce doesn't count. Only the first marriage counts. Only the first marriage was in the Church, and it ended honorably. The second one, to this gringo in Texas, it's nothing.

It wasn't nothing. She'd lost two children to Danny Flynn. And she'd made no friends in Texas, at least none that took her side against Danny. She'd hired a lawyer but wound up with a bus ticket and a few hundred

American dollars and her three rings, the white-gold wedding and engagement set from Danny and her Emilio's simple gold band. She might get some money for Danny's rings, but she could not buy back her children or her self-respect. It was worse than nothing.

El Chino said, This place used to be a cantina. He swept his arm behind him. They made it a gas station about five years ago, but after the Pemex fire in Mexico City, the oil company cut back on the places allowed to sell gas. So it's just the store left now.

She nodded. He leaned across the table and lowered his voice.

But if you know how to ask, they still serve a good drink. Cheaper than the bar across the street, too. Can I get you something?

She shook her head, but she looked at him again, then decided, Yes, I'd like a tequila.

He smiled and slipped away toward the front of the store.

Mexico was all she had left, and if her family

refused to take her in, she would not have even Mexico. Still—with this strange man getting her drinks—she wondered. El Chino had a man's potential for power and a mystery's trick of making people talk, and he used neither for himself. Lupe thought about this.

El Chino returned, two small glasses with the good clear tequila of Mexico, so much sweeter and so much stronger than the amber stuff they exported to the United States. Though it had been a long time, she found she could still drink it without coughing. El Chino talked to her while they drank. He explained his ideas, his passion for what he could do but would never be allowed to do without help.

They could help each other, she thought. She could get back into society, back into her own family, if she could legitimize El Chino and help get him elected. He smiled at her, and now she smiled back, right at him, her eyes small and coy.

I don't think I'll win the election, you know, El Chino was saying. Under the table, his feet tapped softly

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in the dust. He shuffled a new stack of flyers—he'd changed the name on them to *El Chino*—and set them to the side of the table. But I have ideas. I can do things with Piedras Negras. Better relationships with Eagle Pass, better trade. Tourism, even. But not too much—not too many Americanos.

She unfolded her hands, she sat straighter and studied *El Chino*, peered into his eyes. She could see a light down inside the irises. Black eyes lit from behind like volcanic glass.

After their drink, he offered to show her around the town and she walked with him. They turned away from the busy border hub and he ushered her down a few small side streets, between stucco and brick homes and squat, leafy oaks, into a poorer neighborhood. Litter along the sidewalks, bicycles rusting along chain fences. The bleach smell dissipated here; somewhere in the distance, the oily burn of tires shimmered under the sun.

They passed a wide, empty lot full of broken cement blocks among the high, scrubby grass. He threw

an arm out, pointing to it. I want to put a park there, he said. The one in the center of town is nice, but it's only for the rich people and the politicians.

They complain about the children over there, don't they?

They don't like the graffiti. If we could build a park out here, the kids would have some place to play and they could leave the rich park alone.

Lupe nodded.

But no one listens, El Chino said.

Make them listen, Lupe said.

How?

Lupe didn't answer. El Chino shook his head.

I fell asleep in the Gulf of Mexico once, Lupe said. They watched each other, then they looked at each other's feet until Lupe walked on, El Chino beside her. She said, I drifted for almost two hours. The currents carried me almost a mile along the coast, and I was hundreds of yards out when I woke up.

You were in a boat?

A raft, she said. One of those inflatable kinds. No motor, no oars even. My husband—my ex-husband—was supposed to swim out and bring me in.

Were you alone? El Chino said.

Yes, Lupe said. Danny was drinking with his friends on the beach. He didn't know where I'd gone, never looked out into the water. I had to hold hard onto the rope around the raft, I had to lean out over the edge and paddle myself in with one arm. The rope cut into my fist, but it was the only way. It took me two hours.

What did your husband say? Later, when you'd come back?

He asked if I thought my hand would get infected. Because of the insurance. And he wanted to know why I'd let myself drift so far.

It happens, El Chino said. Lupe nodded. El Chino huffed a small laugh. I only went to the Gulf once, you know, when I was a little boy. I can't swim.

You will learn to swim, Lupe said.

El Chino looked at her, then turned his head,

walked on.

Lupe said, Tell me about your family.

El Chino smiled. My father owns a construction company. I manage it for him, and some day I hope to expand it. They had turned and were walking north, back toward the border hub. He gestured ahead with his flyers. The work they're doing on the bridge, across the border? They're repairing it from the riots in February. We should be doing that work.

And your mother?

She died when I was a boy.

I'm sorry.

It's okay. She was never happy here in Mexico. People were slow to accept her, because she was Chinese. It's why I won't win the election—people are slow to accept me as well.

People are slow to accept anyone, anywhere,
Lupe said. You have to change their minds for them.

There's changing minds, and there's changing traditions. That will be the hard part.

Then you will have to be harder, be tougher than the traditions.

When they reached the central hub, he looked at his flyers and then at her. He blushed. He said, I have some work to do, but perhaps we can meet for dinner?

She said, No, thank you, El Chino. That might be a bad idea. I will eat with Consuela tonight.

He nodded as though it had been his own idea, but when he waved goodbye she took his arm.

We can meet again tomorrow, if you like, and you can show me more of the city before I have to catch my bus.

He grinned, his teeth white in the bright sun, and said that it sounded like a fine plan.

* * *

As they walked the next day they talked about their childhoods, about the games each of them liked to play. She told him what she knew of American politics, of

cowboys and Republicans and Reagan's reelection. El Chino listened and nodded and made few comments.

A boy ran across the street from a derelict construction site. He was holding his hands behind his back. He looked at El Chino, but he turned to Lupe instead. Money? he said in English, his eyes big and wet in his dusty face. Money, lady?

She smiled at him, said in Spanish, No, my boy, no money. If Pedro and Miguel had been Emilio's sons, if they'd grown up down here, they would have looked like this boy.

This boy pulled his hands from behind his back. In one little brown fist he held a line of carpentry nails, the heads linked side-by-side in a plastic strip like a bandoleer, the plastic wrapped around his fingers. He showed her the rusty nails and snarled a smile at Lupe, and he said half in English and half in Spanish, *Money*, lady. Money!

She looked at El Chino. El Chino looked back. Lupe said, Well?

El Chino shrugged. The children here are like that.

Lupe looked between them, the boy and the man, then she curled her lips and shouted at the boy, *Pinche payaso!* The words that had got her slapped as a girl came back fierce and easy now. The boy dropped his fist of nails, his head cocked to the side and his eyes wide in wonder. El Chino looked the same.

She knew what she had to do, with both the boy and the man. She raised the back of her hand to the boy and he tossed the nails and ran away. Lupe picked up the nails—she handed them to El Chino.

Put them in your fist, she said.

He held them the way the boy had held them, but they were loose in his fingers.

She snapped at him: Hold them firm.

He squeezed the strip, the nails rising tall and sharp, splayed in a fan.

She said, Raise them up.

He bent his arm, held his fist between

Lupe and himself.

Lupe said, You will win this election.

He looked at her.

She said, Say it.

I will win this election.

She looked him over, the strength in his arm, and she knew that she would be understood.