

One

And She Left the Dying World

The year the war ended, Gabriela led her sick mother out of Tepeñixtlahuaca. The bones of the villagers still had meat on them then, and the hearths still had fire in them, but the retreating soldiers had chased away the skinny dogs and burned the houses. Scattered in the jungle, the bodies of young women—always the first to pay—had been left to rot. The young men had been killed or turned into soldiers who had, in their own time, committed atrocities.

The path down off the mountain to Paso de la Reina was stony and hard. The journey took eight hours. Gabriela had walked it only three times in her fourteen years, but this time she had the feeling that it would not end well because every few meters along the way, she caught sight of jungle toads staring at her. They were giants, their gray-green bodies covered with warts, their bellies white as cotton. One of them flicked his tongue at Gabriela. When she saw a toad eating a small bird she knew that her mother would not live to see the doctor in Jamiltepec.

At the edge of Paso de la Reina, in sight of the huts and houses and the Rio Verde, her mother begged for a longer rest. Gabriela sat her on a large stone alongside the path in the evening light and there her mother died.

With no one to help her and no one to keep her dead mother company or tell her what to do, Gabriela waited on the path until morning. The men of Paso de la Reina went to work in the fields and the women, on their way to chores, stopped to tell her that she was in luck: the priest—who came once a year to baptize babies, to marry the young, to bless the already interred and to shrive the dying—was in the village.

The priest came and blessed the dead mother. Handing Gabriela a stake, he told her to bury her mother in the red earth beside the path.

With the stake she dug a grave. Not a deep grave but deep enough. She wrapped her mother in the two handwoven huipiles, one dyed deep blue, the other crimson—the only objects her mother had salvaged from the ruins—and buried the body.

At fourteen, she was alone. Her village no longer existed. Her mother was dead. Her murdered father had left a Bible that the soldiers had torn apart, burned, then pissed on, along with a small cache of coins that the soldiers stole before leaving the village to the dead. She was alone and she did not know what to do and she had no place to go.

The priest, a man weary of death but not unhappy to send souls to heaven, told Gabriela that God would provide for her.

Two

La Patrona Who as a Girl Gave Herself to a Priest

Gabriela waited for God to provide. She waited because she did not know what to do or where to go. Everywhere she looked, she saw no evidence of God's provision until the women, returning in the evening, told her that La Patrona, the wife of the Headman of Paso de la Reina often took in mountain girls. Gabriela, that night, found her way to the house of La Patrona where, in her bed, La Patrona was eating her dinner of papaya, boiled eggs, chicken and white corn tortillas. Gabriela, like a supplicant at the feet of a saint, bowed her head and whispered, her voice the barest of threads, asking if La Patrona wanted a servant.

“What can you do?” La Patrona replied.

“I can cook.”

“Are you a thief?”

“I am not. I can sew. I can read the Bible in Mixtec and in Spanish and I can write.”

La Patrona licked the yolk of boiled egg from her fingers, sucked the meat from a chicken leg and said,

“Your mother is dead?”

“Sí, Señora.”

“And your family?”

“All dead, Señora.”

“And you are a virgin?”

Gabriela, embarrassed, bowed her head the way the vergonzosas, the little prayer plants on the path from Tepeñixtlahuaca to Paso de la Reina, bowed their heads when she brushed them, and covered her belly with her hands where she felt a burning sensation. La Patrona said,

“Good. You are now my property. You will do what I say and if I ask you to wipe the shit off my ass, you will not snuffle or complain. Do you understand?”

“Sí, Señora.”

“In the morning, when I piss in the bed pan, you will not wrinkle your nose. While you are my servant, you will not dress like an Indian. Do you see what I mean?”

“But I am an Indian, Señora.”

“I mean, you stupid child, you will not wear a falda, such as the one you have on. You will wear a blue pinafore and you will give me that piece of garbage covering your body and I will burn it. You will wear your hair braided because to let it loose tells the men you’re a whore. And if you become pregnant, you must blame the priest, not the new judge in Jamiltepec nor my husband. Do you understand?”

Gabriela agreed, even though she didn’t understand. At fourteen, one day after her Mother died, Gabriela became La Patrona’s personal servant. That same day she was given a new dress—a blue pinafore. She presented to her patrona not only her own handwoven skirt with its flowers and bands of color and her two huipiles woven in the style of her village but also the cotton blouse embroidered by hand in the faint light of the evening fire.

In Paso, as all the villagers called it, Gabriela had a certain status as La Patrona’s servant, not only because she was the servant but because she was very tall. She was taller than the Headman himself and taller than La Patrona who, she learned from the village gossip, was a spoiled woman. As a girl she had given herself to a priest—though not the same priest who had blessed Gabriela’s dead mother. She had also given herself to a marijuanero who later died at the hands of the Headman in a minor war for possession of the drug routes, and she had given herself to the judge who found the Headman not guilty of murder in exchange for La Patrona’s sexual favors on a bimonthly basis until he died of a stroke while shaving one morning. Because she was taller than the tallest man in Paso de la Reina, and because she read and wrote, Gabriela’s status grew so that when any of the Mixtec women needed a favor, they did not go straight to La Patrona but instead cornered Gabriela to ask her help. It was there that Gabriela learned the power of writing.

Because she wrote both Mixtec and Spanish—the Bible had been her mentor and her guide—she was called upon to write letters to the absent ones—the cousins, the sisters, the brothers of the village women who had gone to Oaxaca and beyond to escape the war and its devastation. Upon receiving letters from far away, the Indian women, who couldn’t read, brought them to Gabriela. From the letters she became aware of the vast country she lived in. She learned the names of towns and cities. In one of

the letters, she heard first of El Norte—a place that one brother described as magical, a place where, in a single day, he earned more than he earned in a month in the mountains around Paso de la Reina. They drink their beer cold, he wrote. This made the women smile.

La Patrona, in the dry season, took weekly trips into Jamiltepec—a highway town accessed two hours by truck over a rutted, winding road from Paso de la Reina. One day Gabriela accompanied her, only to watch La Patrona sell Gabriela's huipiles, falda and blouse as Indian items handcrafted by native villagers to a Norteña passing through from Acapulco to the stone cities in Guatemala.

Gabriela said nothing as she watched the last connection to her dead village and family disappear. To her dismay she learned that what La Patrona had called garbage brought more money than she, Gabriela, had seen in her entire life.

Three

When Gabriela Lost a Sandal

In May, at the beginning of her second year with La Patrona, at the end of the dry season, a sudden rainstorm caught Gabriela as she walked across the zócalo in Jamiltepec. The cobblestones were wet, their tops round and worn, slick with the afternoon rain that had come out of a dark cloud like a hammer. Gabriela, running, skidded on the stones, the soles of her leather sandals slippery as soap. She stopped under the tent of the toad-skin seller where the huge jungle toads, strung like living beads on leather thongs, bled from their mouths, the thongs like horrid brown tongues protruding from their ruptured anuses. The scent of the toads clung thick in Gabriela's throat. She shuddered, arms folded over her belly as the toad-skin seller talked to a tall young man with black hair who looked very neat in his white guayabera shirt. He glanced at Gabriela over the seller's shoulder and he smiled. Gabriela looked away, into the still falling rain that was turning to mist as the thick cloud rolled past, opening a gash of blue in the sky. From that gash came the sun and on the stones of the zócalo the heat turned the rain to a steamy veil of thin wispy sheets. Gabriela glanced at the man in the guayabera shirt and he waved one hand at her. In the other he gripped a string of toad-skins—each one as big as a tlayuda, the enormous tortillas women cooked on the fire-stones—and their green skins were dotted with warts. Gabriela again shivered before running across the zócalo to the fountain where La Patrona stood talking to a man with a scar on his face and deep pockmarks in his cheeks. He wore a white hat and very dark sun glasses.

In the heat that day, the smells of the market rose up thick as *mole*—a feast of banana and papaya, a banquet of chirimoya and mango—juices flowing in the heat and, on the air, thick scents mingled with the chirp of parrots in cages and the whine of frightened monkeys on chains squatting in cast-off orange peels and pineapple husks, mixing with the brown shells of coconuts. By the fountain that day, the trickle of water lay like a snake skin on the roiling smells and in that cleft, at the corner of the church, Gabriela watched her elegant patrona in her short black

dress, a jade necklace gleaming in the light, an elegance that brought happiness to Gabriela's cheeks because she worked for that fancy woman. But Gabriela held back as the man with the scar on his face waved his hand as if swatting a fly. She heard La Patrona say,

"Not enough."

Gabriela crept closer wondering—is this man another of La Patrona's lovers like the marijuanero? Like the judge? Slipping into the shadow of the church with the barest breath of a breeze, Gabriela slinked closer. She heard La Patrona's words over the trickling of the water in the fountain—words she did not want to hear—

"She does what I tell her. And she's chaste enough for a dog like you."

"A virgin? In your house?"

"I saved her for you."

The voice of La Patrona high and shrill and tight as the wings of an insect thundered in Gabriela's ears. She didn't yet know what it meant, but she heard the Scar-Faced man say,

"Ten thousand, that's all. She has no meat. No tits. Skinny. Too tall."

"She's a virgin, idiot. I know you like them to bleed."

Gabriela looked at the man, at his pockmarked skin like that of a jungle toad. Just below his left ear and running from earlobe to lips glimmered a thick white scar familiar in shape. The fire in Gabriela's womb flared up again with a sharp pain. She had seen scars like it before—it was the flower of a machete cut, now healed but still ripe with the residue of violence. Gabriela shuddered as the man licked his lips, his tongue flicking out of his red mouth like the tongue of a toad snaring an insect. La Patrona said,

"The last virgin I sold you brought fifty thousand from the German. So. Fifteen thousand or I sell her to Chalo."

"Carajo, fifteen thousand, bruja, let me give you my blood instead."

La Patrona gripped his arm. Her hair glistened black as the back of a tarantula. She said,

"Fifteen thousand."

"Done," he said.

Gabriela's belly tightened, the sudden grip of a beast clutching at her. She imagined going with the man in the white hat—the man with the scar and hands like spider legs—and she wanted to run fast and far. She crouched beside the fountain and her Patrona walked away, her short legs flailing like the limbs of a centipede. Behind her the Scar-Faced Man said,

“Before you depart today, deliver your virgin to my truck.”

“And the money?” La Patrona said.

La Patrona melted into the crush of men in the market selling chilis and fence posts, selling stalks of bananas and bundles of spices and bags of cacao. Gabriela heard La Patrona calling for her, her voice as piercing as the sting of a wasp. Gabriela! Gabriela! Each shout a knife tearing at Gabriela until she felt weak and helpless and fearful that she was going to bleed to death in the water of the fountain. In her blue pinafore, head spinning, she felt the tongue of despair ball up in her because she had heard the girls in Paso talk about the disappeared ones who had fallen into the hands of other men with scars, girls who never came back, girls who went with the Headmen into the jungle never to return, girls who did come back but with scars on their backs, girls who never wrote. She heard the words *fifteen thousand* pound through her brain over and over. And then, a hand on her shoulder caused her to gasp.

She turned. The young man from the toad-seller’s stall stood over her.

He was smiling. He said,

“Why are you afraid of her?”

Gabriela, recoiling from the weight of his hand on her shoulder, wanted to run. He released her and stood facing her, waiting, and then he said,

“The woman, there, the woman talking to the *coquero*?”

“My patrona,” she said. “She has sold me.”

“Then come with me. To Oaxaca,” he said.

He told her that he visited Jamiltepec now and then to buy native handicrafts for his patron, who ran a tourist shop in that city. He said that he came also to buy the skins of the huge toads that his patron turned into purses with leather straps. These he sold to women with bare legs who traveled down from El Norte looking for exotic bargains and strange objects to add to their collections.

“You buy toads?” Gabriela said.

“The hides, yes. How tall are you?”

“What?”

“A meter eighty? Ninety? You’re the tallest woman I’ve ever seen. Come with me. The bus leaves in ten minutes.”

“I can’t.”

“You want to be sold?”

She looked into his eyes, into the darkness there but that darkness did not make her skin hurt. What did he want? Who was he? Why did he

want to save her from the pockmarked Scar-Faced Man?

“Gabriela! Where are you? Come here.”

La Patrona’s screeching voice set Gabriela on fire. She ran, but as she ran, the thong of her sandal broke and the sandal flew off. She hung back but the man pulled her along. She said,

“My sandal.”

He yanked harder and Gabriela remembered the man with the white scar on his face and felt the shame of vergonzosas weaken her thighs. Knowing that if she stayed she would die, she let her savior drag her to the highway, where he loaded her—along with his strings of toads—onto the bus. She huddled beside him in the stench of sweat and the sweet aroma of banana peels and the tang of the flesh of oranges. As the bus started, her savior’s arm snaked across her shoulders and he whispered, lips to her ear,

“Now you’re mine and you will give me sons, many tall sons.”

Four

Oaxaca

In Oaxaca, Gabriela fell in love—in love with the lights, in love with the cars and buses, in love with the sounds and sights and smells of the city, in love with the bells of the cathedral, in love with the movies and the zócalo where the Norteñas came to buy Oaxacan blackware and toad purses, the skins of monkeys and the feathers of slaughtered birds. She loved to walk through the flower stalls where the blossoms suffused the air with their perfumes mixing in a tangle of smells so rich that sometimes she felt faint with the thickness. Walking through the zócalo Gabriela recalled reading the Bible by the flickering light of the fire in her village on moonless nights. She had felt like she was floating through the veil of the heavens with the stars as her only dress. In the blackness, after the fire died, she had lain awake on her mat, diving into the underworld of the stories Las Viejas told from the shadows while they embroidered at the hearth.

In the city it was never dark but often so bright she couldn't see the stars. Evenings, after work in the shop with Nando, she liked to walk on the concrete sidewalks, feeling the city under her feet and looking into the shop windows.

For weeks she had stopped to admire a blue dress with white flowers that lay folded on a stack of dresses in a shop.

In the shop window, she watched tourists on the street behind her passing over the glass—not in it, not beyond it, but, as if by magic, on it. She had never seen such a thing in her village, not in Paso de la Reina, not even in Jamiltepec—people floating on the surface of the glass like mist then disappearing.

She watched a tall blond Norteña stop behind her. Even at dusk, la Norteña wore sunglasses so that in the window her eyes hid behind dark patches. She was thin but full breasted. Against her white shorts her honey-colored legs glistened. She wore a pair of white Nike running shoes—the kind Gabriela had seen in a stall in the market, the kind all