Spiderweb

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It's harder to breathe in the humid north, up there so close to Brazil and Paraguay, the rushing river guarded by mosquito sentinels and a sky that can turn from limpid blue to stormy black in minutes. You start to struggle as soon as you arrive, as if a brutal arm were wound around your chest, squeezing. And everything is slower; during siesta there is only a rare bicycle in the empty streets, the ice-cream shops seem abandoned, with their ceiling fans spinning for no one, and the *chicharras* shriek hysterically in their hiding places. I've never seen a *chicharra*. My aunt says they're horrible creatures, spectacular flies with green wings that vibrate and smooth black eyes that seem to look right at you. I don't like the word *chicharra.* They're also called cicadas, which I think has a smoother sound. If they were always cicadas, their summer noise would remind me of the violet flowers of the jacaranda trees along the Paraná, or of the white stone mansions with their staircases and their willows. But as *chicharras* they make me think of the heat, rotting meat, blackouts, drunks who stare with bloodshot eyes from their benches in the park.

In February I went to visit my aunt and uncle in Corrientes, because I was tired of their reproaches: "You got married and we haven't even met your husband! How is that possible? You're hiding him from us."

"No," I'd say, laughing, over the phone. "How could I be hiding him? I'd love for you to meet him—we'll come soon."

But they were right: I was hiding him.

My aunt and my uncle were the custodians of the memory of my mother, their favorite sister, who was killed in a stupid accident when I was seventeen. During the first months of mourning, they offered to have me come live with them in the north; I said no. They came to visit me often. They gave me money, called me every day. My cousins stayed to keep me company on weekends. But I still felt abandoned, and because of that solitude I fell in love too quickly, I got married impetuously, and now I was living with Juan Martín, who irritated and bored me.

Finally, I decided to take him to meet my aunt and uncle to find out if seeing him through other eyes could transform him in mine. One meal on the wide porch of their big house was enough to dispel that hope. Juan Martín squealed when a spider brushed his leg ("If it doesn't have a pink cross, don't worry," my Uncle Carlos told him, a cigarette between his lips. "Those are the only poisonous ones"), drank too much beer, spoke with zero modesty about how well his business was going, and commented several times on the "underdevelopment" that he saw in the province.

After we ate he sat with Carlos, drinking whiskey, while I helped my aunt in the kitchen.

“Well, child, it could be worse,” she told me when I started to cry. “He could be like Walter, who raised his hand to me.”

I nodded. Juan Martín wasn’t violent; he wasn’t even jealous. But he repelled me. How many years was I going to spend that way, disgusted when I heard his voice, pained when we had sex, silent when he confided his plans to have a child and renovate the house? I wiped away my tears with hands covered in soapsuds that burned my eyes and made me cry even harder. My aunt pushed my head under the faucet and let the water wash my eyes out for ten minutes. That was how we were when Natalia came in. Natalia was my aunt’s oldest daughter and my favorite cousin. Natalia, tanned as always, wearing a loose white dress, her hair long and dark and dishevelled—I saw her through the fog of my irritated eyes, which I couldn’t stop blinking. She was carrying a flowerpot and smoking.

Natalia placed the flowerpot on the kitchen table, told my aunt, her mother, that she had planted the azalea, and greeted me with a kiss on the head. My husband didn’t like Natalia. He didn’t find her physically attractive, which was practically insane on his part—I had never seen a woman as beautiful as her. He also looked down on Natalia because she read cards, knew home remedies, and, worst of all, communicated with spirits. “Your cousin is ignorant,” Juan Martín told me, and I hated him. I even thought about calling Natalia and asking her to give me a recipe for one of her potions, maybe a poison. But I let it go, the way I let every petty little thing pass while a white stone grew in my stomach that left very little room for air or food.

“Tomorrow I’m going to Asunción,” Natalia told me. “I need to buy some *ñandutí* cloth.”

To earn money, Natalia had a small business selling crafts on the city’s main street, and she was famous for her exquisite taste in choosing the finest *ñandutí*, the traditional Paraguayan lace that the women weave on a frame, spiderwebs of delicate, colorful thread. In the back part of her shop she had a small table where she read cards, Spanish or tarot, whichever the customer preferred. People said she was very good. I couldn’t say for sure, because I’d never wanted her to read cards for me.

“Why don’t you come with me? We can take your husband. Has he been to Asunción?”

“No—as if.”

Natalia flip-flopped her way to the patio and greeted Uncle Carlos and Juan Martín with kisses on the cheek. She poured a whiskey with a lot of ice and stretched her toes. I emerged from the kitchen with swollen eyes, and Juan Martín asked how I could be so dumb. “If you’d injured your corneas we’d have to rush back to Buenos Aires by plane.”

“Why?” Natalia asked, and as she shook the ice in her glass it sounded like little bells in the afternoon heat. “The hospital here is very good.”

“It doesn’t compare.”

“Well, aren’t you a citified little prick.” And after she said that she invited him to Asunción. “I’m driving,” she told him. “You can buy stuff if you have money—everything’s cheap. It’s three hundred kilometres; we can go and come back the same day if we leave early.”

He accepted. Then he went to take a nap and didn’t even suggest that I join him. I was grateful. I stayed with my cousin out on the hot porch, she with her whiskey, me with a cold beer. I couldn’t drink anything stronger. She told me about her new boyfriend, the son of the owner of the province’s largest supermarket chain. She always had rich boyfriends. This one mattered to her as little as the others, emotionally speaking, but she was interested in him because he had a plane. He’d taken her up in it the week before. “Beautiful,” she told me, “except it shakes a bit. The smaller the plane, the more it shakes.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Me, neither. Aren’t we dumb, cousin? Because it makes sense.” I shrugged.

“Something terrifying happened to me while I was up there,” she went on. “We were flying over fields to the north, and suddenly I saw a very big fire. A house was burning, bright-orange flames and a black cloud of smoke, and you could see the house collapsing in on itself. I stared and stared at the fire until he turned the plane and I lost sight of it. But ten minutes later we passed over the same spot and the fire had disappeared.”

“You must have got the place wrong. It’s not like you’re up in planes all the time and can recognize the terrain from above.”

“You don’t understand. There was a patch of burned earth and the ruins of the house.”

“It went out, then.”

“How? Did the firefighters get there in five minutes? We’re talking wilderness here, babe, and the flames were really high when I saw them, and it wasn’t raining or anything! It could never have been put out in ten minutes.”

“Did you tell your boyfriend?”

“Sure, but he says I’m crazy, he never saw any fire.”

Our eyes met. I almost always believed Natalia. Once, she’d told me not to go into my grandmother’s room because the old woman was in there, smoking. Our grandmother had been dead for ten years. I listened to my cousin. I didn’t go in, but I smelled the penetrating odor of the Havana cigarillos that had been my grandmother’s favorites, though there was no smoke in the air.

“You have to find out, then, ask around.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know if the fire already happened or if it’s going to happen.”

It was still dark when we left for Asunción, five in the morning. Juan Martín almost let us go alone, because according to him he’d barely slept, thanks to the heat and the power outage that had left him without a fan. But lying in the darkness, awake, I had listened to him snoring and talking in his sleep. He lied and complained, and every day was the same as the last. Natalia had a Renault 12, the most common car there was during the eighties. When the sun started to come out over Route 11, I saw that trapped under the windshield wipers were the bodies of many dead damselflies. A lot of people get them confused with dragonflies, but damselflies are different, though they’re in the same family. They are less graceful, their horrible eyes are farther apart, and their straight and vaguely phallic body is longer. I was always afraid of both of them, and I never understood when they came into fashion years later with teen-agers, who tattooed themselves with sentimental designs of dolphins and butterflies, and also those awful dragonflies with their blind eyes.

The road to Asunción is boring and monotonous. Juan Martín slept in the back seat, and sometimes I looked at him in the rearview mirror: he was attractive in his privileged way, with his elegant haircut and his Lacoste shirt. Natalia was smoking her long Benson & Hedges, and we didn’t talk, because she was driving very fast and the noise would have forced us to shout. I wanted to tell her more things about my marriage. About how Juan Martín constantly chastised me. If I took too long to serve a meal I was useless, just “standing there doing nothing, as always.” If I took too long to choose something, I was wasting his time—he was always so decisive and detached. If I deliberated for ten minutes about which restaurant to go to, it meant a night of his sighing and contrary replies. I always apologized so we wouldn’t fight, so that things wouldn’t get worse. I never told him all the things that bothered me about him, like the way he belched after eating, how he never cleaned the bathroom even though I begged him to, how he was always criticizing the quality of things, how when I asked him to have a sense of humor about something he always said it was too late for that, he’d already lost patience. I just kept quiet. When we stopped for lunch I split a polenta with my cousin while Juan Martín ate steak with salad, as he did every day. He never wanted anything else; at best he’d try cutlets or shepherd’s pie. And pizza, but only on weekends.

He was boring, and I was stupid. I felt like asking one of the truckers eating at the other tables to run me over and leave me gutted on the road, split open like the dogs I saw occasionally lying dead on the asphalt. Some of them had been pregnant, too heavy to run fast enough to escape the murderous wheels, and their puppies lay agonizing around them.

When we were less than an hour from the border with Paraguay, we got our passports ready. The immigration officials were tall, dark soldiers. One of them was drunk. They let us through without paying us much attention, though they checked out our asses and made crude

comments, laughing. Their attitude was predictable and relatively respectful; they were there to instill fear, to dissuade any challenge. Juan Martín said—once we were far from the checkpoint—that we had to file a complaint.

“And who are you going to complain to, buddy, when those guys are the government?” Natalia asked him, and I, who could read her well, heard something more than teasing in her voice; it held contempt. She threw me an incredulous look. But none of us said anything more. Natalia, who knew her way around Asunción well, took us straight to Market 4 and left the car locked two blocks away. We walked, accosted by watch and tablecloth venders, begging children, a mother and her wheelchair-bound daughter—all under the vigilant eyes of the soldiers, with their greenish-brown uniforms and their enormous guns that looked ancient, little used.

The heat and the smell of the market were a physical blow, and I came to a stop near an orange stand. In Paraguay they’re called *toronjas* instead of *naranjas*, and they have a kind of deformed belly button and a bland flavor. The ones at the market stand were circled by those tiny flies that I hate, not because they disgust me but simply because I don’t know how to kill them. They’re like little flying fragments of darkness; they have to be very close to your eyes for you to see wings or legs or buglike characteristics. I didn’t buy any oranges, even though the vender lowered her price again and again: three *guaraníes*, two *guaraníes*, one *guaraní*. The porters ran down aisles pushing trolleys with boxes, some full of fruit, others filled with televisions and two-deck cassette players, still others with clothes. Juan Martín was silent, and Natalia was walking decisively straight ahead, in her white dress and flat leather sandals; she had tied her hair back in the heat, and her ponytail swayed from side to side as if the wind blew only for her.

“This is all contraband,” Juan Martín said suddenly, loud enough for some stallholders and wandering venders to turn and look at him. I stopped short and grabbed his arm. “Don’t talk like that,” I said into his ear.

“They’re all criminals. Where have you brought me? This is your family?” I felt nauseated or like crying, but I told him that we were going to talk later, that he should shut up now, that yes, there were probably some criminals there and they were going to kill us if he kept provoking them. I looked him up and down: his boat shoes, the sweat stains in his armpits, the sunglasses pushed up over his hair. I didn’t love him anymore, I didn’t desire him, and, if I could, I would have handed him right over to Stroessner’s soldiers and let them do as they pleased with him.

I hurried to catch up with Natalia, who was already at the stand of the woman who sold *ñandutí*. A younger woman was weaving the cloth with vibrant colors. It was the only place in that interminable and noisy market where there was something like calm. People stopped and asked about prices, and the woman answered in a quiet voice, but they heard her in spite of the radios, the *chamamé* music, even a man who was playing the harp for the few tourists who’d braved the trip into Asunción that hot morning to buy on the cheap. Natalia

took her time. She deliberated over several tablecloths and finally chose five sets with their napkins. She also bought some thirty table runners, and many details to sew onto dresses and shirts, especially on guayaberas, which she bought at another stand deeper into the market. I followed her and didn't even check to see whether Juan Martín was following me. I thought about why *ñandutí* was called "spiderweb" cloth. It must have had to do with the weaving technique, because the end result looked more like a peacock's tail: feathers with eyes, beautiful but disturbing.

"Wouldn't you like a guayabera for yourself, Martín?" Natalia asked; she didn't use his full name.

Juan Martín was uncomfortable, but he tried to smile. I knew that expression. It was his tough-guy face that said *I'm doing all I can*, so that later, when everything went to hell, he could rub it in my face, smear it all over my mouth: *I tried, but you didn't help at all. You never help*. He bought the guayabera but didn't want to try it on. "I have to wash it first," he told me reproachfully, as if the shirt might be poisoned. He carried one of Natalia's plastic bags for her—they weren't even that heavy, it was only cloth—and he said, "Please, can we get out of this hellhole?" Since the exit wasn't marked, he had no choice but to follow us. To follow Natalia, really, and I saw the revulsion and resentment in his eyes.

My cousin linked arms with me and pretended to admire a bracelet of silver and lapis lazuli that Juan Martín had given me on our honeymoon in Valparaíso.

"We all make mistakes," she told me. "The important thing is to fix them."

"And how does this get fixed?"

"Babe, death is the only problem without a solution."

Juan Martín didn't like the trip from the market to the Costanera, along the bay; he thought the city looked dirty and poor. He didn't like the Presidential palace, and later, on the beach along the river, he started practically shouting at us: How could we be so anesthetized? Didn't we see the potbellied kids eating watermelon under the blazing sun, and only metres from the house of government? Please, what a shitty country! We didn't want to argue with him. The city was poor, and in the heat it smelled like garbage. But he wasn't disgusted with Asunción; he was mad at us. I didn't even feel like crying anymore. To placate him we looked for a restaurant in that area, where the ministries were, the private schools, the embassies and hotels: Paraguay's rich. We quickly came to the Munich, on Calle Presidente Franco. "Is it named after Franco the dictator?" Juan Martín asked, but it was a rhetorical question. In the restaurant courtyard there was an enormous effigy of St. Rita, and the tables were all empty, except the one in the middle, where three soldiers sat. We chose a table far from them, so they wouldn't overhear Juan Martín, and also because it is always preferable to sit far away from soldiers in Asunción. The colonial walls around the patio cut out a square of cloudless sky, but in spite of the heat we had shade there. We ordered Paraguayan-style

corn bread, and Juan Martín got a sandwich. The soldiers, drunk on beer—there were several empty bottles on the table and under their chairs—told the waitress that she was beautiful, and then one of them touched her ass, and it was like a tacky movie, a bad joke: the man with his uniform jacket unbuttoned over his distended belly, a toothpick between his teeth, grotesque laughter, and the girl, who tried to brush them off by asking, “Can I get you anything else?” But she didn’t dare insult them, because they had their guns at their waists and others were leaning against the flower bed behind them.

Juan Martín got up and I could just imagine what was going to happen. He was going to yell at them to leave her alone; he was going to play the hero, and then they would arrest all three of us. They would rape Natalia and me in the dictator’s dungeons, day and night, and they would torture me with electric shocks on my pubic hair, which was as blond as the hair on my head, and they would drool as they said, *Fucking little gringa, fucking Argentine*, and maybe they would kill Natalia quickly, for being dark, for being a witch, for being insolent. And all because he needed to be a hero and prove who knows what. Anyway, he would have it easy, because they killed men with a bullet through the back of the skull and were done with it. They weren’t fags, the Paraguayan soldiers—of course they weren’t.

Natalia stopped him. “But don’t you see what they’re doing?” he asked. “They’re going to rape her.”

“I see it all,” Natalia said, “but we can’t do anything. We’re leaving now.” She left money on the table and dragged Juan Martín toward the car; the soldiers didn’t even notice us, they were so focussed on tormenting the girl. In the car, Juan Martín told us everything he thought about our cowardice and how sick and ashamed we made him. It was six in the afternoon. Natalia wanted to get back in time to have dinner in Corrientes, so she started the car and we headed out of Asunción as the sun was turning red and the fruit venders were sitting down to drink something cool under their umbrellas.

The car stalled on the way back, somewhere in Formosa. It started bucking like a rebellious horse, and then it suddenly stopped. When Natalia tried to start it again, I recognized the impotent sound of the motor, suffocated and exhausted. If it was going to turn over at all, it would be a while. The darkness was complete; along that stretch of the road there was no illumination. But the worst thing was the silence, barely cut by some nocturnal bird, by the sounds of creatures sliding through the plants—it was jungle there, thick vegetation—or by the occasional truck that sounded very far away and wasn’t going to come and save us.

“Why don’t you take a look under the hood?” I said to my husband. I’d already been annoyed when he hadn’t offered to drive on the way back; he hadn’t even asked my cousin if she was tired. I didn’t know how to drive. Why was I so useless? Had I been so spoiled by my dead mother? Had it occurred to no one that I would ever have to solve problems by myself? Had I married this imbecile because I didn’t know how to do anything else? In the darkness, the

fireflies shone. I hate when people call them lightning bugs; “firefly” is a beautiful word. If you look at them up close in a jar, you realize how ugly they really are. Grounded, they look like cockroaches, but when they fly and light up they are the closest thing to magic.

Juan Martín asked for a flashlight and got out of the car without griping. Looking at his face in the car’s weak interior light, I realized that he was scared. He raised the hood, and we turned off the light so as not to waste the battery. We couldn’t see what he was doing, but suddenly we heard him slam the hood down and run to get back into the car, sweat streaming down his neck.

“A snake went over my foot!” he shouted, and his voice broke as if he had phlegm in his throat. Natalia didn’t feel like pretending anymore and laughed at him, pounding the steering wheel with her fists.

“You’re a real idiot,” she told him, as she dried the tears from her laughter.

“An idiot!” yelled Juan Martín. “What if it had bit me, and it was poisonous, what would we do then, huh? We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“Nothing’s going to bite you, take it easy.”

“What do you know?”

“More than you.”

The three of us were silent. I listened to Juan Martín’s breathing and silently swore that I was never going to have sex with him again, not even if he held a gun to my head. Natalia got out of the car and told us to keep the windows rolled up if we didn’t want bugs to get in. “You’ll die of heat, but it’s one thing or the other.” Juan Martín grabbed his head and told me, “Never again, we’re never coming here again, you understand me?” Natalia was pacing the empty road, and I shined the flashlight on her from inside the car. She was smoking and thinking; I knew her. Juan Martín tried to start the car again, but it sounded even slower and more labored than before. “I’m sure your cousin forgot to put water in it,” he told me. “No,” I replied. “The car isn’t overheated. Didn’t you see that when you looked at the motor? What *did* you see, huh? You don’t know anything, Juan Martín.” And I stretched out in the back seat, took off my shirt, and lay there in only my bra.

Once, I had made this trip with my Uncle Carlos and my mom. I don’t remember why they were going to Asunción. They’d sung songs the whole way there. I remembered that for sure: local songs about legend, love, and loss. On the way I had to pee, and I couldn’t bring myself to pull down my shorts behind a tree. We stopped at a service station, my uncle asked the attendant for the key, and I went into the little bathroom at the side of the building, the one the truckers used. That little bathroom still haunts my dreams. The smell was brutal. There were fingerprints of shit on the sky-blue tiles; with no toilet paper in sight, many people had used their hands to wipe. How could they do such a thing? The black lid of the toilet was

full of bugs. Locusts, mostly, and crickets. They made a terrible noise, a buzzing that sounded like a refrigerator motor. I ran out crying, and I pulled down my shorts and peed beside the service station. I didn't say a word about it to my uncle or my mother. I never told them about the stagnant shit in the toilet, the handle filthy with brown fingerprints, the green locusts that covered the single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. After the bathroom, I don't remember anything about that trip. My mother used to talk about how we'd stayed at an old colonial hotel that was beautiful, but at night you could see rats running around in the yard. I have absolutely no memory of that hotel, or of the rain and hail that burst above us afterward and delayed our return. That trip, for me, ended in the locust-filled bathroom.

Juan Martín was saying that he could walk down the road to who knows what place he had seen lit up, but I didn't answer. If he was afraid of snakes, how was he ever going to get there? Natalia had finished her cigarette—at least, I could no longer see its tip burning in the darkness, like one more firefly—but she didn't get back into the car. She wanted to wait outside in case a car passed, probably. Someone who would take her to a phone so that she could call the automobile club. Plus, she can't have felt much like being in the car with the two of us, and who could blame her after she'd tolerated a whole day of Juan Martín, not to mention me and my passivity?

The lights of a truck lit up the road and its wheels raised a cloud of dust; it was strange, because up there in the north there was almost never dry dust in the air—it rained a lot, if not every day. It was always humid, and the dirt stuck fast to the ground. But that was how the truck pulled up, as if carried along on a sandstorm. Natalia had set out the beacon, a triangle that glowed phosphorescent in the night, but she clearly didn't have faith in it, because she yanked open the car door, grabbed the flashlight that was on the driver's seat, and started to wave her arms and shout, "Hey, hey, help, help!" I didn't see the driver's face; it was a trailer truck, and Natalia had to climb up to talk to him when he stopped, without turning off the motor. Two minutes later, she grabbed her purse and her cigarettes and said that the guy was going to take her to the service station to call for help. He'd also told her that we were close to Clorinda, and that he couldn't take all three of us because there wasn't enough room. The truck disappeared along the dark road as suddenly as it had arrived, and I realized all the things I hadn't asked Natalia: how long would it take, was the service station nearby, why didn't they go to Clorinda if it was close, did the trucker seem trustworthy, what should we do if another truck or even a car came by—should we stop it?

"We forgot to ask her to get water," Juan Martín said, and it was the first sensible thing he'd said all day.

My heart started to beat faster: What if we got dehydrated? I rolled down the windows without giving a thought to the bugs. What could there be, other than moths, beetles, crickets? Maybe a bat. Juan Martín said, "Your cousin is irresponsible, bringing us all the way out here where no cars ever pass, without even making sure this wreck ran well."

“How do you know she hasn’t had the car serviced?” I asked him, furious, and it occurred to me that it would be easy to kill him right there; I could get a screwdriver from the trunk and stab it into his neck. I knew that he didn’t want to kill me—he just wanted to treat me badly and break me so that I’d hate my life and wouldn’t even have the guts left to change it. He started to turn on the radio, and I almost stopped him, because we had to conserve the battery, but then I let him do it. I was enjoying his ignorance; how I was going to relish it when the tow truck came and he had to explain that he’d used up the battery looking for who knows what on the radio. What could be on the radio around there at night? *Chamamé* and more *chamamé*, and some lonely people who called in and cried, remembering their children who had died in the Malvinas.

The rescue mechanics arrived an hour later. As I’d predicted, they chastised Juan Martín for having the radio on. He sputtered excuses. The mechanics got to work, and Juan Martín acted like he was supervising them. I got out and took Natalia’s hand.

“You can’t even imagine what a hottie the trucker is. One of those Swedes from Oberá. I mean this guy is smoking. He’s going to spend the night in Clorinda, and I think I’ll stay with him. If the car gets going, that idiot husband of yours can take you to Corrientes,” she said to me in a low voice.

But the car didn’t start, and the mechanics had to tow the three of us to Clorinda, in Formosa. They very kindly took us to the hotel Natalia directed them to, pompously called the Ambassador. It was white and had colonial arches, but I knew, just from looking at it from outside, that it was going to smell of damp and maybe wouldn’t have hot water. It had a restaurant, though, or more like a grill, with white plastic tables where a family and several solitary men were sitting. “We’re going to shower,” I told Juan Martín. “And then let’s get something to eat.”

As the receptionist was handing us the room keys, a man who had to be the trucker came into the lobby. Natalia went skipping over to him like a teen-ager. The guy was two heads taller than her, and had muscled arms and blond hair cut very short. “Hello,” he said to us, and smiled. He seemed charming, but he could have been anything—a degenerate, a wife beater, a rapist. Any girl would rather think of such a hunk as a golden prince of the highway. I greeted him; Juan Martín took the key and looked at me so that I would follow him. I did. Natalia called after me that we’d meet up in an hour to eat, and I thought, How tragic—she gets an hour with that sweet-smiling Viking, while I spend an hour tolerating my husband.

In our room, Juan Martín yelled at me, “Not once, not even once did you take my side, do you realize? Not about anything. All day long.” He shouted that Natalia was a whore, that she went off with the first guy who crossed her path. He shouted that I was a whore, too, because I’d been making eyes at the damn blond brute. I told him that that blond brute had rescued us on the highway, and that he could at least have thanked the man. “You’re rude!” I yelled. “You’re coarse.”

“*I’m* coarse? You fucking little brat,” he cried, and he went into the bathroom and slammed the door. From there he shouted more, and cursed because there was no hot water and because the towels reeked of mildew, and finally he came out and threw himself on the bed. “You have nothing to say.”

“What do you want me to say?” I answered.

“You may want to leave me now,” he said, “but you’ll see when we get back to Buenos Aires, things will be better.”

“What if they aren’t?” I asked him.

“You’re not going to leave me that easy,” he said, and lit a cigarette. I took a cold shower and thought that maybe, when I came out, he would have fallen asleep and the cigarette would have set the sheets on fire and he would die there, in the Clorinda hotel. But when I came out, cold and wet, my blond hair dripping and pathetic, he was waiting for me, dressed and perfumed to go to dinner.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Sometimes I’m impossible.”

“Let’s go eat,” I said. I put on a loose dress and barely dragged a comb through my hair. I wanted the blond trucker to see me like that, freshly bathed and a bit dishevelled. When Juan Martín tried to kiss me, I turned my head. But he didn’t say anything—he’d resigned himself.

Only my cousin, the blond guy, and two other truckers were left at the grill. A dark-haired girl asked us what we wanted and said that there were only short ribs, chorizo (she could make sandwiches), and mixed salad. We said yes to everything and ordered a cold soda. I was more thirsty than hungry, even though at the entrance to Clorinda I’d bought a grapefruit Fanta. It was my favorite soda; you couldn’t get it anymore in Buenos Aires, but it still existed in the interior. Things took longer to disappear up there in the north.

The men were telling ghost stories. Natalia was sitting very close to the blond guy, and they were sharing a cigarette. He had opened his white shirt a little; he was tanned, he was marvellous.

“Something really strange happened to me not long ago,” the splendid blond said.

“Tell us, buddy, no one’s sleeping here!” shouted another one of the truckers, who was drinking beer. Was he going to get back on the road like that, half drunk? There were always accidents out on these roads, and here was the reason. My Uncle Carlos never drove when he was wasted, but he was the exception among his friends and even in our family.

“Should I tell it?” the blond asked, and he looked at my cousin. Natalia smiled at him and nodded.

“O.K.,” he agreed, and he told us that he came from Oberá province, that he lived in Misiones, and that around twenty kilometres away from where we were there was a town called Campo Viera. A creek ran through it, the Yazá. “One afternoon, the middle of the day, right? Don’t get the idea that I imagined this because it was night. I wasn’t drunk, either. Anyway, one afternoon I went out there in the small truck, just to run an errand was all, and as I was driving over the Yazá bridge I saw this woman run across the road. I didn’t have time to swerve, I would’ve killed myself, and I felt the bump from her body, man. I jumped out of the truck and ran to her, cold sweat all down my back, but I didn’t see anyone. No blood, no dented fender, nothing. I went to the cops and they took my statement, but they were in a shitty mood about it. I had to run the errand another day, and when I was in Campo Viera I told the story just like I’m telling you. They told me that the military had built that bridge, and they’d put dead people in the cement, people they’d murdered, to hide their bodies.”

I heard Juan Martín sigh. He didn’t like this kind of story. “You shouldn’t fuck around when it comes to things like that,” he said to the blond guy.

“Excuse me, sir, but I’m not fucking around. The military is perfectly capable of sticking corpses in there.”

Our food came, and Juan Martín started to eat. They brought us wooden plates. I’ve always preferred those to ceramic ones for eating barbecue. The flavor is richer and the oil on the salad is absorbed better and doesn’t coat the meat. It was delicious.

The blond guy said that in Campo Viera they’d told him a lot of other things about the bridge and the stream. “That whole area is strange,” he said. “You see car headlights and then the cars never come, like they’ve disappeared down some road. But there are no drivable roads, it’s all jungle.”

“Speaking of cars that disappear, here’s a funny one,” one of the other truck drivers said, smiling, maybe to defuse the heavy atmosphere. I felt ashamed again and I smiled at the blond truck driver, who had a delicious dimple in his chin, and he smiled back. Hopefully, he’d become Natalia’s boyfriend, and then she’d get bored with him the way she did with all of them, and then he would realize that always, from the very first moment we’d looked into each other’s eyes in the hotel lobby, he’d been in love with me.

“And it happened right here! Well, at the grill off the highway, ten blocks from here. So this guy comes with his mobile home, a real pretty little house. He was with his family—two kids, they told me, and his wife and mother-in-law. So they went to eat some barbecue and they left the mother-in-law in the mobile home. She didn’t feel good, or something like that.”

“Then what?” asked the third truck driver, who looked sleepy.

“Someone swiped the mobile home with the old lady in it!”

Everyone laughed hard, even the waitress, who was letting the fire die down. The guy was desperate, the driver told us. He ran to the police, and he spent about a week in Clorinda, with his wife having a nervous breakdown. There was a huge search all over Formosa and they found the mobile home, but it was empty. Everything in it had been stolen, including the mother-in-law.

“How long ago was this?” Natalia wanted to know.

“Hmm . . . must be a year ago now. Time sure flies. A year. It was a crazy case. I’m sure the thieves got into the mobile home and they didn’t realize the old lady was inside and maybe she died from fright, and then they tossed her. Around here you can just toss anyone—there’s no way in hell they’ll find you.”

“The man still calls all the time,” the waitress broke in. “But the woman never turned up.”

“The thieves didn’t, either,” the trucker added. “Poor gal, what a way to go.”

They went on for a while talking about the mother-in-law’s disappearance, and Juan Martín, annoyed, excused himself and went up to the room. *I’ll wait for you*, his look said, and I nodded. But I stayed until very late; my hair dried, and the waitress gave us the key to the fridge so we could help ourselves to beers. Natalia even told the story about the burning house she’d seen from her boyfriend’s plane, although she said he was her cousin. Then she yawned and announced that she was going to bed. The blond trucker followed her. I went after them to the reception desk and asked for another room. I told the woman at the desk—it was all women at that hotel, apparently—that my husband was very tired and that if I went in at that hour I’d wake him. “Sure,” she said. “We hardly have any guests—it’s the low season.”

“Low season is right,” I said to her, and when I laid my head down on the pillow I fell asleep immediately and had nightmares about an old woman who was running, naked and engulfed in flames, through a house that was collapsing. I saw her from outside, but I couldn’t go in and help her because a beam was going to fall and hit my head, or the fire would get to me or the smoke would suffocate me. But I didn’t run for help, either; I just watched her burn.

The auto club brought our car in the morning. The mechanics explained the problem, but in very general terms, taking it as a given that neither Natalia nor I understood anything. The only thing we wanted to know was whether the car would make it to Corrientes, and they told us sure, it was only three hours away. We thanked them and went to have breakfast. There was only toast and coffee—not even a croissant—but it was fine. The blond trucker had left two hours earlier. He’d promised to call Natalia, and she thought he would come through. “He fucks like a god,” she told me. “And he’s the sweetest guy.”

I envied her. I choked down the half-cold coffee with my tears and went to find Juan Martín. But when I went into the room he wasn’t there. The bed wasn’t even unmade, as if he hadn’t slept there. I couldn’t be sure that he had gone up to the room; I hadn’t even seen him go

into the hotel. I went back to the breakfast room and asked Natalia. “I definitely saw him go inside,” she said. The woman at reception assured us that he had taken the key with him; at least, she didn’t have it hanging on the key rack on the wall.

“Maybe he went for a walk,” she murmured.

But of course she hadn’t seen him come down. I got nervous and my hands started shaking. I told Natalia that we had to call the police, but she put her hair back into a ponytail, as she’d done in the market, and told me no. “Don’t be silly,” she said. If he left, he left.”

She stood up and went to her room to get her purse and the bags with yesterday’s purchases.

“You look spooked, babe.”

It was true. I was disconcerted. I went back to the room where Juan Martín should have slept, and I didn’t see his bag or his toothbrush, which he always placed meticulously by the sink when we travelled. The shower was dry. The still damp towels were the ones I had used.

“It’s going to rain,” the front-desk woman said as she waved goodbye. “That’s what the radio says, but it sure doesn’t look like it—the sky’s all clear.”

“I hope it does.” Natalia answered. “This sticky heat is something awful.”

“What about your friend’s husband?” she asked, as if I weren’t right there.

“Oh, there was a misunderstanding.”

I settled into the passenger seat. Before leaving Clorinda, we stopped at the service station; Natalia needed cigarettes, and I needed another grapefruit Fanta. One of the truckers from the night before, the one who’d been sleepy and barely listened to the others’ stories, was gassing up. He waved to us, asked how we were, and looked into the back seat. He was probably looking for Juan Martín, but he didn’t ask about him. We smiled and waved goodbye, and headed out to the highway. On the horizon, along the river, you could already see the black clouds of the gathering storm. ♦

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Megan McDowell.)