

The Walk to Guanajuato
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Rain had forsaken La Bodega that summer, and the men of the village feared the drought. The women, who had grown tired of the men's complaints, resented the lack of thunderclouds. There would be no harvest if things continued this way. Children fired *canicas* around the circles they drew in the dirt, and the glass marbles kicked up bigger clouds of dust each day the sun glared from above.

When the cows and the pigs began to fall over and die like wilted flowers, fear spread through the town. Some of the older women, whose faces were mapped with wrinkles, worried about the drought the most. Without rain, death would spread through the village without discretion.

The older women were the first to take action. They met in secret, in the back streets of the village, away from their husbands, daughters and sons. They began secret deliberations on the subject of the barren fields and useless wells. The older women prayed to Tlaloc, the rain god, who in these parts was alive and well in the prayers. Tlaloc could turn an innocent white cloud into a turgid grey rain cloud, transforming the cracked earth into rivers and streams. Yet the old women held on to their fervent punctuality at Sunday mass, because a prayer to God was just as important as prayer to Tlaloc.

The women agreed to meet in the weathered hut capped with a rusting tin roof outside the village in the slopes of the gentle hills. The hut was so pathetic and threadbare that even the town drunks went out of their way to avoid it. The women walked with creaking joints in the afternoon, and they reached the hut just as began to contemplate setting. Inside the shack, they looked around at each other, forming a half circle pitted brown faces and salt and pepper manes of hair, and though they greeted each other. *Comadre*. They spoke. *Comadre*. None of the women was sure why the drought was so long and intense this year. None of the *comadres* could recall a summer that had ever been as dry as this. They were exhausted from the cries of hungry children, dying dogs and the irritable husbands and sons-in law coming home from the fields.

They traded stories about the dry earth of their years, when their hair was still black and their bosoms ample and full of youth, before horses and before carriages, and they agreed: This was the worst drought in the pool of their memories.

Each of the women pulled out her rosary beads from the folds of her *rebozo*. Though the hunched old women looked alike, as older women often do, each woman's rosary beads were unique. Some beads were made of sweet fragrant pine, some were tiny tears of pink glass, some of red coral from Veracruz. The women's veined claws curled around the beads and crucifix, preparing to move through the series of prayers. Unfortunately,

several of the women could no longer turn the beads in their arthritic fingers, which had spent too many days on the *metate* grinding corn to make tortillas.

As the setting sun poked its orange rays through the miserable slats of the windows, the women prayed, but they did not utter a single Hail Mary or Our Father. Instead they spoke in the Old Tongue, taking turns, deciding, opining, arguing, presenting the advantages and disadvantages of the options before them. Intervening in the cycles of the seasons was a serious matter. Each of the *comadres* wanted the rains to come, but none was sure they wanted to deal with the consequences of using the old ways to put an end to the pale blue skies that were slowly killing the village. Eyebrows turned up in cynicism, doubt erupted, and tempers flared. Their collective efforts as *comadres* was not enough to end the drought. They needed help from someone with more power.

More beads turned, tongues spoke again, and eventually, a vote was taken using the numbering system in the old tongue.

As the sun plunged behind the mountains and the blooming sapphire curtain of night rose, the women made a decision. Aida, the oldest member of their group, stepped from the edge of the half circle into the center. She would act as a messenger in the effort to alleviate the drought. There was only one place where her task would lead her, and that was Guanajuato. Aida, 98 years old and hunched over like a knobby tree, nodded to each of the women, who tucked their rosaries back in their red *rebozos* and sighed as they prepared to walk back to the village.

While the *comadres* walked west toward their homes, Aida walked east, alone. Of course, the *comadres* had warned her not to travel at night, to wait for the following day. But Aida did as she saw fit, as she had done all her life. The curving footpath that led from the village to the east was rocky, and the nocturnal dangers of coyotes, wild cats and thieves kept most men from the road at night.

Aida was a snail on a moist black leaf on the road. She inched slowly, hunched, her shawl forming a dark green shell around her shoulders, her footprints leaving a faint trail of dust behind her. She smacked her lips, wishing for more water for her trek, but she pushed those thoughts aside like the small scorpions she brushed off the path with her stick. She heard strange noises behind her through the night, and sometimes pairs of strange eyes would stare at her from the hills. If the eyes belonged to wolves or men, she did not know. She walked straight ahead, her stick clicking in front of her.

Aida walked for three days, stopping just a few times for a nap under the shade of a tree. These days, she slept and ate little, but she still needed sustenance to complete the trip. Some of the bits of dry tortilla in her pockets helped her walk through the valley and over the mountain. Sometimes she took a lobe of *nopal* from the hills, and shaved off the needles. She ate the *nopal* raw, letting its moist green flesh fill her with energy and its precious water before walking again.

The dust from the droughts stuck to her dry cheeks and her feet crusted over with light flecks of the quartz crystals in the dust. On the third day, she entered the city of Guanajuato just as the sun began to set behind the buildings of the crooked city.

Guanajuato was not a city for old knees and tired eyes. Its streets wound up for several blocks, and without notice, would then turn toward the ground. Each crest and valley of the cobblestone streets hurt Aida's joints, but she was glad to see the fruit vendors hollering at the corners, and the familiar sights of the churches in the corners of the dark city.

She did not know where she was going, but she knew who she was looking for. She stopped in front of a young man, no older than twenty, selling tortillas out of a large basket. Aida could feel her stomach twist like rope as the steam rose off the basket and the smell of maize entered her nose.

"Muchacho, can you tell me where to find La Bodega?"

The young man stared at Aida like he would a passing cloud.

"It's at the northern end of the city. Why do you go there?" he said.

"I'm looking for a man named Verde."

"I don't know any Verde, but if your feet take you to La Bodega, you may find the Quetzal."

"I am not looking for a quetzal bird, I am looking for a man."

"Well the man in La Bodega, they call him el Quetzal."

"I'm looking for a man named Verde," Aida reminded the boy.

"Well, if you have enough breath in your lungs to get to La Bodega, you may find El Avispón."

"The wasp? No, I am looking for a man."

"Well the man in La Bodega, they also call him El Avispón."

"I'm looking for a man named Verde," Aida reminded the boy.

"Well, if the sun doesn't burn your face and the soles of your feet don't blister when you walk up the streets, you may find El Profesor."

"I'm not looking for a teacher. I am looking for a man named Verde."

“Well, the man in La Bodega, they also call him El Profesor.”

Aida had grown impatient, and hungrier.

“I have a single coin. Can I get a tortilla?” the woman asked the boy. The boy’s black eyes inspected her as they would a rain cloud. He took the coin and gave her three tortillas. She ate them standing. She had never felt so hungry in her life.

“So this man in la Bodega, what are his other names?” She asked the boy.

“I don’t know. Some of his names are so old, no one remembers them. Some of his names are probably older than you.”

“The man I am looking for is named Verde.”

“Maybe that’s one of his names. I wouldn’t know,” the boy said.

Her back burned like hot grease, and her eyes were blinded by the sun as she walked north. She did not sweat. She was too old to sweat anymore.

She felt she was close, but the curving alleys, and the heavy iron doors confused her.

She spotted a priest fanning himself outside of a church, eating a bolillo with cajeta. The thick sweet goo stuck to his chubby fingers, which he licked as Aida yanked on his robes.

“Padre, buenos dias,” she said.

“Buenos dias, hija.”

“I am looking for a man named Verde.”

“Oh you must mean El Obispo.”

“Obispo? No, I am not looking for the Bishop.”

“Oh my lamb, no, El Obispo is not really a bishop. But everyone in Guanajuato knows him as El Obispo. Obispo Verde. The Green Bishop.”

“Is it true he is also called El Quetzal, and El Avispón, El Profesor?” Aida said.

“I am not sure about that hija. I don’t follow much gossip, though you may be right.” The priest forced a large chunk of the thick bread into his mouth, choking a little. He cleared his throat and clasped his sticky hands underneath his round belly.

“Senor Verde has lived long in Guanajuato,” Aida said. Her words were flat and dry. The priest wasn’t sure if she was posing a question or making a statement.

“Well, no one really knows for sure, my dear. He has been in Guanajuato as far back as anyone can remember. He was married three different times. But his young brides always died young. Some people say he was exiled from Spain for crimes against the church. Some say he wanders La Bodega, lost and forlorn, like a ghost. He’s the most powerful man in the city, that’s for sure. And he’s been up in that monster of a building as long as anyone can remember.”

“Can you tell me how to get to La Bodega, then?” Aida asked.

“Easy. Just follow the jagged peak of that church about a half mile up. La Bodega lies beyond it.”

Aida glanced at the swirls of sticky *cajeta* caked on the priest’s face, and she remembered a distant memory from her days as a girl. The memory flashed away, like a beetle taking flight. She bowed to the priest and walked.

Aida found La Bodega easily, falling under its blue shadow as she walked toward it and the sun set behind the building. Its colonial turrets of stone and fortress walls provided soft shade to the fountains and crooked alleyways that surrounded it, even as the gas street lights were lit all around the small old woman. La Bodega loomed high thanks to its four steep towers, each inset with so many windows that the glass surface shone in the afternoon light like the scales on a silvery fish.

The air began to cool as the sun continued to hide behind the horizon, and Aida could feel the chill rattle her teeth as she approached the wooden doors. She knocked once.

A man answered the door. He leaned forward, and with his dark beard and wide, round belly, he examined Aida as if he might just eat her on the very spot. He spoke in a severe and calculated tone, demanding she declare her business. Aida could see a touch of cruelty dance behind his eyes like a new flame in the fire.

"Why have you come to disturb me today?" he asked.

“I am looking for a man named Verde,” Aida said.

The man squinted down at the small shape of the old woman at his doorstep. Aida, old and exhausted, leaned forward herself, and her face came within an inch of the man’s round belly. She knocked on its taught, drum-like surface two times.

“I am Obispo Verde. Who wants to know?” he said. After a brief pause, he chuckled, though his laughter was black and cracked, like spent gunpowder.

"Do you have anything to eat? I would like to have some warm tortillas and a little water before we talk." She said.

Obispo Verde, disgusted at Aida's insolence, let out an explosive cloud of hot pipe smoke down onto her face and snorted.

"Fine. Come in. You speak, then you leave." He said.

"We need rain," Aida said.

"Then pray to God."

"We already did that. He's working on it. But we need rain,"

"And who are you?"

"No one important. I represent my village, is all."

Obispo Verde scratched his beard.

Aida meant to stay for an hour, but she found she was tired and hungry. And she had much to say about the drought. The small woman negotiated with Obispo Verde over the course of the night, aided by a dozen tortillas for Aida, a slaughtered lamb for el Obispo Verde, coffee, a bottle of mezcal, and a steady rumble of screams from the macaws in the patio.

Finally, she made him a deal. "In exchange for meteorological favors, we can give you the following: two pigs, half of our crop of beans for next year, our village's sundial, my obsidian rosary, and the life of my youngest great-grandchild." She spoke plainly, looking at Obispo Verde right in the eye.

"I see," he said. "Why would I need those things. I have everything I want, and more."

"That's all I've got to give."

"As a general rule, I don't collect children as payment, though I have been known to dine on their flesh. You are sure you would give me your great-grandchild?"

She nodded. "In return, you will use your secret knowledge and *influence* to bring back the rain to the village."

An hour passed as they stared at each other.

"Fine," he said.

El Obispo Verde agreed to the short woman's terms, laughing in huge clap-like bellows, shaking her knobby hand as they struck their deal. His eyes darkened like smoke, and he crossed his arms. He then threw the old woman out into the dark street.

“You can count on some rain, woman,” he said.

She gathered her *rebozo* around her bony shoulders. She looked back at the hulking double doors of La Bodega, and she felt in her rebozo for her rosary beads. She remembered she had already given them away, and shook her head. She began her three-day walk back toward the village.

Rain didn't come back to Aida's village. The earth swallowed more of the sun each day, and the chickens were now dying, and the poppies were wilting into red pulp. And then, on a Monday morning in August, the sky knitted itself into a black boulder, and without warning, delivered rain without end. The following day, the sky poured more of its water onto the fields. It did so every day, and each day the earth sprang back stronger and more fertile.

In autumn, the men of the village held a great party, lasting more than a week, to celebrate the murky clouds full of rain that returned to the village shortly after Aida's return. The wives congratulated their husband for their hard work in the fields, and they showered kisses on their sun-creased faces and stubbly chins. Children feasted on the giant *cazuela* of blood-black mole, and the *comadres* of the village gave their thanks early every morning in the small chapel by the river.

Even on sunny days, rain arrived at least once. Its thick transparent water felt dark, black and intoxicating when it touched the skin or when it was collected and drunk. The ground swelled with moisture, and the crops bore fruit. The birds became quiet in the weeks of the rain, and the trees began to drop their branches toward the earth as the rain continued to pour.

The harvest was plentiful and the men stored the crops with pride. Many babies were born that winter, including a dark, bald baby boy who smiled with glee in Aida's 13th granddaughter's arms. The baby's soft skin glistened like the dark soil of the field.

Aida took delight in short walks to the well in the mornings. To reach the well she had to climb a hill, and when she reached its top, she would stop for a few moments to breathe in the syrupy sweetness of the trees. She would wash her hands all the way up to her elbows with water from the well, then make her way down to her house. She took this walk every single day, and without notice, fall gave way to winter, and winter gave way to spring.

One night, as her great-grandchild slept, Aida put her hand on his round pale forehead, and she felt the warmth of his skin. She spoke words in the Old Tongue, and she pinched her nose as the room swelled with grey smoke and the crib grew dim like a bird inside a cloud. In that moment, Aida could see the strange face of the god Tlaloc, made of hard

stone that looked wet to the touch, green like sea foam, and rimmed with white eyes that never shut and a mouth full of teeth that were as endless as the sky. She also felt the touch of God somewhere in the black smoke, roving over her like a delicate feather, touching her lips and cheeks for a moment. She walked out of the baby's room before the smoke could dissipate, because she did not want to see what Tlaloc held in store for her great-grandchild. She left the crib smoking as she walked back to her modest house. On her way back, she stopped at a neighbor's house, and she handed him a list written on yellow paper. She bowed and went home to sleep.

The next morning, Aida went to retrieve water at the well. Atop the hill, that Aida saw a pair of men on horseback come up the footpath to the edge of the village. Visitors were always a strange sight around these parts. People left the village, they seldom came in.

Three men from her village approached the riders. Aida could see little in the dim pink light of dawn, and she was much too old to hear what the men were talking about down there. Her eyes were still good enough to see the exchange. She noticed one of the three villagers was the neighbor she visited the night before.

The three men from her village brought the following with them that morning: two pigs, 10 sacks of beans, a stone sundial, a rosary, and a small bundle, no longer than a man's forearm, wrapped in a white cloth.

These things the men turned over to the riders, and they took special care in transferring the white bundle to the men on horses. Her eyes remained clear, but her hearing had faded. The taller rider, dressed in rich velvet and starched lace accepted each gift, inspected it for a few moments, and then he handed it to his shorter companion. He was a man of many names, and Aida wondered, for the first time, what his real name might actually be.

The tall rider shook his bearded face when he took the small bundle. Anger spread through his jowly face. His face furrowed and he raised his fists. He drew his machete on the three villagers, who pointed their rifles back at him, this time shouting so loudly that they could be heard all the way up to the well where Aida stood. He waved the white bundle and tried to return it to the villagers, but they insisted he take it. The tall bearded rider put his machete away, waving his arms in fury as he turned his horse around. He and the short rider galloped away on the foot path, scaring the swallows out of the trees, speeding off in rage as the birds flew by the dozen in opposite directions. He shouted obscenities all the way to the horizon.

Aida gathered her two pails of water and returned to her house, and she never once spoke to her sons or daughters, or her grandsons and granddaughters, about what she saw and heard that morning.

Aida only lived to see the following summer, which brought many hummingbirds to the fields, on days when the rain left a blanket of mist on the ground. She died alone, and in

bed. She was buried and mourned, and she lies in a the family plot, at the hills of her village.

Aida's great-grandchildren married and prospered in the years after she died, but they spoke no words about their youngest sibling, who had disappeared before reaching his first birthday.

The rains returned to the fields as promised, and after some time not even the old women who prayed in the a small hut on the outside of the village with their rosary beads in their gnarled hands did not speak much about Aida and her trip to see el Obispo Verde. It was said that el Obispo Verde never again struck any deals with members of the village. He imposed a mutual severance between his estate in Guanajuato and the village. The villagers never once came to him to ask for favors from him, and in turn, he never went to the village, and neither did his men. But that, was of course, many years later.

Decades passed, and though a few *comadres* remained, they did not meet as often, not like they once did. The old women forgot also about Tlaloc and his hold over the rain, and soon the rosary beads were used only for Hail Marys. The stories of the drought also faded, as stories of drough often do.

In spring, one of the *comadres* came out to the well one day at dawn, pushing her brittle hips to the hill to get water from the well. When she got there, she found the following: two pigs, 10 sacks of beans, a sundial, an obsidian rosary, and a small bundle, no longer than a man's forearm, wrapped in white cloth. The woman, who was much too young to remember anyone by the name of Aida, opened the small bundle, and inside she found the clean white bones of a large fish. The *comadre* pulled out a small note from the white bundle and read. "Little woman, I do not like fish, but a deal is a deal, and I ate what I needed. I disliked fish so much I decided I no longer need any of your payment. Consider all debts cleared."

The comadre shrugged her shoulders and walked back down the hill, careful not to cross the dangerous highway. Her grandchildren might appreciate the corn and the pigs, even though in this village, there was always plenty. She tucked the black rosary in her thin *rebozo* and walked.

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