

Maybe All Three

At eight, I sat backwards in my seat on a bus on the dusty, narrow roads of the Guatemalan mountains and watched my cousin peel tender green mangoes. I was fixated on the blade of the small knife when a sudden jerk sent our bodies going one way and the bus another. The knife flew into the air, as if in slow motion, before a bump made it come crashing down who knows where. My head rattled with the sound of my own teeth. Then a woman's scream, and a strange moment of understanding that something bad had happened before knowing what it was.

It was my first trip to my mother's homeland and I'd spent the last ten days marveling at, among other things, how my beat up sneakers and hand-me-downs looked perversely bright and new here. That was also the trip I searched for my dead grandfather. He'd stayed with us in the U.S. for a year before returning to Puerto Barrios and dying within a few months after a bad fall on some sharp rocks. A fatal slip. An accident.

But now I was with him, on the dirt where he'd lived and died.

When I arrived at my aunt's house, I peered into the bedroom that had been his and tried to imagine him there. His straw hat askew. His button-down short sleeve. His dark tender face and light eyes overjoyed at seeing me again. We'd become inseparable that year. With me so young, him so old, we were both useless to the world and lonely. So we had each other. I felt actual, physical pain when he boarded the plane back home to Guatemala.

I wandered my aunt's house exploring, picturing him everywhere. In the living room sat a bucket-and-rope water well my mother warned me not to go near. But I did, and imagined myself walking the rim and falling in.

Could you die? I asked my mother, staring into its darkness, picturing my ghost-self tumbling down.

Yes, she said, covering it up.

From a stairwell I watched my aunt chase chickens before witnessing their final squawk as the hatchet crunched through their necks and their blood spilled. On the patio I was lulled to sleep by the splash of my mother adding warm water to my baby brother's frigid bath and my cousin's fingers gently braiding my hair. In the mornings I woke to roosters crying and a smell of

burning wood that still finds its way to me sometimes, no matter where I am.

The bus has been riding into my mind these past thirty years, traveling endlessly around the same mountain. Inside, faceless occupants ride with me, unaware of the danger I know is ahead. And I sit backwards in my seat, waiting.

In a moment, we will all get off the bus and see an elderly man on the dirt, his head split and bleeding. A bus accident. A common occurrence on those roads, I would learn years later. Like so many things. Like a slip, or children falling into wells.

I stand among the throng of people and we all look at him. And he is still there. After all these years, he is still there.

My mother steps forward with my brother's baby blanket, white with red balloons, to put underneath the man's head, just like she did that day. Now I walk up behind her to get a closer look at the old man. He turns to me and *there* is my grandfather. Sometimes his face is ashen and lifeless. Other times he is smiling, but he is *there*, before being lifted from the ground, swung between two people and tossed into the back of the pickup truck that served as an ambulance that day. It drives silently away, dust trailing behind it.

Sometimes I think about what will happen when the bus rides into my mind forty years from now and I am an old woman with a patchwork of memories. Was it a stranger? Or my grandfather who had just passed? Or my other grandfather, who would pass shortly thereafter, whose funeral I would see only in pictures years later. His bloated body carried in a coffin hoisted in the back of another pickup truck that served as a hearse in another hot, dusty country.

A face will come to mind.

Who was it? I'll wonder.

Who was it on that road?

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