

Rainy Season

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Une courte histoire d'une femme âgée qui redécouvre sa sexualité. Elle brode autour des thèmes de l'Amérique latine, le savoir des femmes, les relations interculturelles, le réalisme dans la magie, le sexe et le corps, les expériences du mitan de la vie et le réveil sexuel.

It wasn't until she was standing inside the airport, just past customs, her feet approximately twenty centimeters apart to keep the pressure off her back, that Doña Maria Lucia realized no one had offered her anything to drink in fifteen days, and that in fact, she had not taken a drink of any liquid other than coffee for five weeks or perhaps longer. She had not been thirsty for many months. Throughout the entire rainy season, for it was now November, her stomach had rejected water. At times she was quite pleased with her ability to sit in her rocking chair on the back terrazza, her lap full of yarn, her hands looping and pulling it through each crochet stitch while talking with her grandchildren, Nathalia and Pablo, for the entire afternoon without any need to tell the children to stay outside while she went to the toilet. The sun would be setting on San Joaquín de flores when Yessenia would make drinks with papaya *en leche* for the children and offer her mother one that she would have to reject, for what was the point of drinking milk when there was so much rain? She had never liked papaya anyway; so many drink it every day, claiming its health benefits, but to Doña Maria Lucia, it was never ripe enough and instead too hard and dry to have a taste that was sweet like other fruits she knew. Soon Yessenia had stopped asking, and saw that although her mother's tongue had turned black from thirst, she still could not drink, as she was unable to even put a cup near her mouth.

She would take coffee, but only drink it thick enough to look like sap from the mango trees so it did not have the flow of liquid at all.

Coffee is what Doña Maria Lucia drank at night, Yessenia knew, when she was suffering from her foot swells. It was an affliction passed from mother to daughter and Yessenia, only after she had given birth to Nathalia almost six years ago, began to suffer from the swellings as well. Both women would get to the kitchen each night after midnight, feet swollen to the size of *pipa* fruit and full of the same sweet water. Both would have lain in bed without sleeping for hours, for it is impossible to sleep with the feeling of water rushing to one's feet. The two would get up, grind the beans with the stone *molino* and pour hot water on the thick grounds. Both would sit outside in the cool air with their china cups full of the black syrup, listen to the dogs howl in the streets of *San Joaquín de flores*, and wait for their feet to shrink down to their usual size. It would take an hour, sometimes two, for the women to walk silently toward their beds again.

As Doña Maria Lucia stood outside the airport this day toward the end of November, she thought that her feet had begun to swell again, as they sometimes did in the early mornings when she slept too long. She was not nervous to be in the airport, since she had been here one time before, and she remembered the colours and positions of the remarkable items around her well: the long desk of the customs station, the x-ray machine, the voices that come from grey circles in the ceiling, the lines of shouting *taxistas* waiting eagerly outside the sliding glass door. This morning, she had stayed in her bed longer than necessary, dreaming of water turning to liquid and then

rising into dark clouds and then, shortly after, bitterly freezing into ice, but that time, twenty-eight years ago, she had flown directly from the much larger airport in Bogotá and landed here.

Doña Maria Lucia preferred not to think back to her arrival, for the customs agent had not been friendly and had accused her of carrying the white powder of coca plants in her stomach. She purposefully moved her mind to something else, for she had the ability to do that when she needed to, and thought instead of how delighted

though it were still alive, Doña Maria Lucia dropped the bone to her plate, watched the broth splatter onto the floor, said out loud that she could not eat any more. At first, she worried that her mouth would not take food now, as it could not take water, but then Yessenia asked if three years had already passed since Harry left and since yes, it had been three years, and women looked at each other and went about preparing fresh coffee, for both knew that in the morning, Doña Maria Lucia had to go and stand and wait in the airport.

After Doña Maria Lucia asked Harry if he wanted to spend the night at Yessenia's house, that he would very much like to, and that he desired her very much, but that he could offer her nothing more and would return to Colorado the next morning. At the time, Doña Maria Lucia respected this, what he thought was his American truthfulness.

Yessenia had been when they had not long acquired their new refrigerator. Although the electricity in *San Joaquín de flores* was unsteady, it always kept the water frozen. On one cold night just a month before, Doña Maria Lucia had spent an entire evening with the door to the golden box open, teaching Nathalia to enjoy the sound of ice crackling when it is placed in the glass before the fruit juice, but she could only hand the child the glass to drink and never take a sip herself. Surprisingly, for one's turn from water frequently means a turn from food as well, Doña Maria Lucia had no problem eating. Earlier that morning and before she was standing, waiting, just outside of customs, feet twenty centimeters apart, she had eaten an enormous plate of Yessenia's *gallo pinto*, with red beans this morning instead of black, for Yessenia knew that her mother had been waiting for this day for three years, and she let the red beans soak all evening and boil on the fire all night. Doña Maria Lucia had looked at the plate in front of her early that morning, sprinkled a handful of *chile* into her left palm from the jar on the table, and asked for tortillas, but Yessenia had not made any that day. She instead made juice with *naranjitas* from the garden, but had not offered her mother any, for again, Doña Maria Lucia had not been thirsty.

The evening before, when the family was eating their *caldo* with rice and boiled chicken and had been talking about how red the coffee cherries were but how it would mean a loss to pick them, Yessenia lifted the last drumstick from the broth still warming on the fire and placed it in her mother's hands. Doña Maria Lucia lifted it to her mouth and suddenly had a vision that she was chewing on the flesh of Harry's leg. When the chicken began to bleed as

Yessenia had stopped eating and had risen from her stool and at once filled a pitcher of cool water and brought it to her mother. She lifted a glass from where it was drying in the *pila* and thought to instruct Doña Maria Lucia to drink a cup of water because Yessenia remembered how poor her own time in bed with her husband had been when she could not drink for days, but found that she could not, for just as her mother was unable to hold water, the word for water would not come from Yessenia's mouth.

Doña Maria Lucia was still standing in the airport, waiting, feet twenty centimeters apart and unaware of the custom guard's close watch on her when she placed three fingers from her right hand alongside her left breast. She had found a hard tumor there just the day before, about two centimeters and shaped like a black seed from a *guanabana* and high enough to practically reach her armpit. Doña Maria Lucia washed her breasts with warm milk every day and thought of them as the part of her that entered a room first ever since they had begun to form, earlier than her sisters', when she was ten. It had never occurred to her that her armpits had been near her breasts or that they were of any importance at all until she found the two-centimeter hard bit of flesh, and for this, she thought of it as the seed in her breast, for how could a *guanabana* seed grow in her armpit?

When finally Harry arrived in the airport that morning, he took Doña Maria Lucia's arm, just past customs where she had been standing, and said to her in broken sentences, "I am very happy to see you. I have been thinking of you in this moment since I left three years ago." Doña Maria Lucia understood because she was used to talking to gringos.

Although he made many mistakes in Spanish, Harry did not speak loudly or with an obvious accent like the rest of them, and she let herself be pressed up against him. They both thought to go immediately to the American hotel just across from the airport, and they waved to one of the taxi drivers from the long line to transport them, for Harry carried a long suitcase, and soon after they arrived and checked under the pillows for scorpions, they made love on the bed with the window open. Harry did not find the *guanabana* seed in Doña Maria Lucia's left breast, but only because he was not looking. Harry said then that they would leave for Yessenia's house after the afternoon rains to say hello to her grandchildren, but the clouds never passed and the rain carried on through the evening, and when they fell asleep to the sound of the water on the tin roof and woke again, they saw that the smoke in the distance from the stoves of *San Joaquín de flores* had already risen to meet the night mist and they made love again.

It was there, in this American hotel, that Doña Maria Lucia woke just past midnight to the sound of the roosters crowing, for it has long been a myth that they only crow when the sun is rising, and felt the force of the bed shaking. She turned to her side to look at Harry's shadow in the darkness, her eyes wide as though she thought the man might be touching himself with enough force to make the bed shake, but she saw that he was still asleep. Only when Harry's book, *Touring Central America on Forty Dollars a Day*, fell from the night table onto the floor, did Doña Maria Lucia realize that it was an earthquake that had woken her. Harry's suitcase toppled onto its side next to the bed, but nothing woke him. When the light fixture over the bed stopped swinging, Doña Maria Lucia stepped onto the cool tile floor and walked to the bathroom to make a pot of coffee from the plastic package in the hotel room and very little water from the bathroom sink. She sat outside on the patio, her feet steadied on the railing, watched the cars on the Interamerican highway pass in front of the hotel, and waited for the swelling in her feet to go down.

Harry had less hair now than when they had met at the school. He had not written her in all that time, and so, without letters to read, time seemed to pass quickly for Doña Maria Lucia. Harry was a man with a wife and adult children older than Yessenia in Colorado. He had said to Doña Maria Lucia, on his last night in *San Joaquín de flores*, after they had had dinner with a friend of Harry's and his wife, another *colombiana*, and after Doña Maria Lucia asked Harry if he wanted to spend the night at Yessenia's house, that he would very much like to, and that he desired her very much, but that he could offer her nothing more and would return to Colorado the next

morning. At the time, Doña Maria Lucia respected this, what he thought was his American truthfulness. He said that he would be back soon to study in *San Joaquín de flores* again in the school where Doña Maria Lucia taught, and when they kissed good-bye, he said she was the best Spanish teacher he had ever had and how could he not come back to see her in three years?

Doña Maria Lucia's husband had left her three years before Harry arrived to study at the Spanish school in *San Joaquín de flores*. For much of her marriage, she had been waiting to find them in bed together, her husband and one of his women. She had imagined pulling the bed cover back and throwing a bucket of cold water over them as if they were dogs, her husband wet and naked and crying and falling all over this other woman to protect her, and looking up to see her, Doña Maria Lucia walking out the door alone and proud and well-dressed into the coffee field. But, like many things when one begins waiting, it had been taking too long. And one day when Daniela, her youngest daughter, named for her father and younger than Yessenia by eighteen years, had been sitting at the kitchen table reciting her multiplication tables, three times three is eight, two times seven is fifteen, and Doña Maria Lucia thought she would go mad from the repetition, she packed a small bag, Daniela's school bag, full of cosmetics and scents, mostly, her make-up brushes and a collection of hairpins and mirrors. Everyone would gasp and then whisper about her in the market, she knew, when they found out she had left and not returned to fetch Daniela. Doña Maria Lucia left without considering this for too long because as she did not know where she was going, she was able to leave, and because the day of the multiplication tables, one of Daniela's school books flew open and read its own words out loud to tell Doña Maria Lucia that Daniela would grow up to teach mathematics at the university on the coast and be very content.

The day she left, Doña Maria Lucia had planned to sleep in the coffee fields, but instead she went to Yessenia's and slept in the garden under the mango trees there, and soon after she arrived, Nathalia was born and six months after that, Pablo, and Doña Maria Lucia was busy with the children along the way, for Yessenia was still teaching at the school, and when her feet began to swell, they drank thick coffee together at night.

Doña Maria Lucia did not leave Yessenia's house for fourteen months and when she did, she did not speak to any of the women in *San Joaquín de flores*, she could not because many of them had been with her husband. One day, in fact, when Doña Maria Lucia had been picking out *pipa* fruit for the children to drink and the woman at the fruit stand asked after Danilo and sent him *saludos*,

Doña Maria Lucia grabbed a full-sized orange from her table, sliced it in half easily with her thumbnail, and tossed it over her shoulder into the street.

Doña Maria Lucia started her job giving classes to *extranjeros* in the mornings soon after, but it was more than two years until Harry came to study, and finally, after waiting, she had someone to go to the plaza with her to watch the soccer games and buy her *tostadas*. One time they joined a group of students on a trip to Volcán Arenal, just for the day because the red lava had run too close to the hotels, and though Doña Maria Lucia wanted to stay because she could feel the earth shaking beneath her and see the rocks falling from the rumbling force of the volcano, they could not, for the entire town had been covered with a blanket of ash and most of the students became too ill, the dust coming out of their mouths.

After the classes ended the following week, Harry insisted the two of them alone take the bus from the city all the way to *Manuel Antonio* on the Pacific Coast, and on the way Doña Maria Lucia's cosmetic bag was stolen from the slot above her head where it sat, packed with her things. It was only then, when everything was gone and she could not replace it, that she stopped collecting hairpins and mirrors. She and Harry walked into the forest and hiked through the rain and the wet heat to *Puerto Escondido* where they found a bay with only orange crabs running sideways from the sand to the edge of the tide. They stayed there for days and Doña Maria Lucia lay on the sand and cooked crabs over the fire and washed their clothes in the sea while Harry swam in the green water. When finally they turned to go back, they saw that the tide had covered the rocky path where they had climbed down and what remained was only a tall vertical rock where a few orange crabs stayed without moving in order to not be washed away by the sea.

When they were hiking back up and out, looking for footholds and hanging onto the side of the rock, waves splashing up and over Doña Maria Lucia and forcing salt into her eyes, Harry fell and lost his balance and knocked his knee into the cliff. It was only then, when it began to bleed down his leg and the rock and on into the sea, that his face turned purple and he turned to see Doña Maria Lucia wedging her fingers into the red rocks and said to her, "If we do not make it home, I want you to know I had a wonderful time, but if we do make it, and I go all the way back to Colorado, I will come back in three years to visit you." Harry had only come on *viernes santo*, the Friday before Easter, and being that they did climb the cliff well, trying not to crush the orange crabs under their feet, and made it safely back to the humid forest and the bus and *San Joaquín de flores*, he left two weeks later, the morning after the dinner with his friend

and the other Colombian woman, and Doña Maria began her three-year wait for his return.

Now that he had come back and the rain was about to end and the coffee was going to be picked, Doña Maria Lucia felt as though her mouth might again hold water. She put her tongue against the roof of her mouth and imagined the sound of ice in Nathalia's glass, and still sitting with her feet against the railing on the patio of the hotel as the sun turned bright and hot, and after the roosters had stopped crowing, she again pressed three fingers from her right hand against the outside of her left breast.

When the swelling in her feet had gone down, Doña Maria Lucia walked from the patio through the room where Harry was sleeping and in front of the hotel, she waited for the bus that would take her through all of *San Joaquín de flores*. She watched through the bus window as the women picked flowers in the fields to sell in the market, washed clothes along the river, and led their cows to graze in the grasses. She told the driver to let her off just across from the fruit stand and she walked toward Yessenia's house, but then past it, to the muddy road toward the coffee fields full of ripe red berries. The doors of the Spanish school were still closed and it occurred to Doña Maria Lucia that perhaps it was early morning or perhaps it was Saturday and the students had gone up to the mountains of *Monteverde* to see the clouds, she could not remember which. She lay down in the field and waited patiently in the hot midday sun that she knew was the reason for the deep line in her forehead, until finally the mosquitoes stopped humming and the sky turned from grey to black, as it did every afternoon from May to November. When the clouds came and the rains began, Doña Maria Lucia opened her mouth and let it fill with water, but only because she thought of herself as one of the flowers from the mango tree in Yessenia's garden, dark red and almost purple like blood, that grow upward and open and wait for the rains to end so they can turn themselves inside out.

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