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Fiction

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Rain

During the tightening, the pulling, all I hear is white. An ocean inside my skull, wave after wave of trapped screams. I can feel them vibrating in my sinuses. On either side of the screaming there is a stillness, a quiet, a not-peace, and it is then that I can hear myself. Between the stalks and the fibrous green sentries above me I can see the sky but not the sun, and the sky has refused to change, so it is in this way that I now measure time. Breaths. My breaths. And the screaming.

From this height, they look like a matched set. Matryoschka. Made to fit inside each other, as once they did. Small, medium, large; though they are all short by most standards, so perhaps it is better if we say small, smaller, smallest. Even the butterfly scales of their cortes are faded in graduation, according to age, use, and wear; white-grey-black, blue, bluer, bluest; red, redder, reddest. They move single file along the path, and if we were closer you could see that even the lines on their faces are similar, as if they are somehow connected, only the same spider has had more time to spin her web beneath the white hair than the grey.

There is a bridge, but the quickest way is beneath it, across the stream that is sometimes a river. The water is no longer clear, but it is thought to be safe; at least for bathing if not for drinking. The women pause on the bank, balancing on the stiff grass, and remove their sandals. Deft fingers go to straps; bright pink for the youngest, with a flower—even the grandmother has a neat black heel. The water is not deep, and it pools, cloudy, around their ankles, cool and somehow reassuring. The stones beneath feel unforgiving but not unkind.

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From the stream that is sometimes a river it is a 15 minute walk up the yellow dirt road, through the dust that never seems to settle. It is as heavy as brick dust, but more soluble, and in the afternoons it coats your tongue and makes everything taste the way old books smell. The women walk the path in comforting silence, erect, their shoulder blades drawn together as if by strings. On the way up they pass a group of men; blue jeans, faded t-shirts, shovels, and machetes slung over their shoulders, and the men whistle in greeting, more songbirds than wolves. The eldest and the youngest nod their acknowledgement. Smaller, the grey, smiles.

Twenty, thirty more yards up the mountain and we pass the missionary's house, rambling, white, with an electric pink bougainvillea in the front yard that is itself the size of a small church. It seems blessed, that bougainvillea, so healthy, when everything else is so dry. Past the missionary's house, on our right and up a natural staircase built by tree roots and runoff, there is a tiendita. The clenched fist of partido patriotica is handpainted on the recycled wood-slat walls of the small one-room store, next to a series of glossy Pepsi posters. There is always Pepsi at the tienditas. The Pepsi trucks come daily, braving the unpaved mountain roads, outfitted more like all-terrain military vehicles than commercial trucks. Sometimes Pepsi also comes via the camiones, the busses named after women and painted in bright primary colors that started their lives as Blue Birds in New Jersey, filled with American middle schoolers. On these, the vendedores scramble up and down the ladders on the back, loading and offloading bags, bundles, and boxes in the scant seconds they have before the bus moves on. From a distance, they look like ants. Busy, busy.

Everybody brings Pepsi, and the bolsitas of junk food, neon-orange powder over baked white flour puffs, fried slips of potato; ranch, bar-b-cue, original. They bring them because there is demand. Cincuenta centavos, one quetzal. Jun, ka'i', oxi', kaji', nada más. The sugar kills the hunger. Here, in the mountains, Pepsi is cheaper than water, cheaper even than the water that comes in the clear plastic bags that have happy seals on them and make even the chilliest water, drunk from a hole bitten in one corner, taste faintly of soap bubbles. You milk these bags, squeezing them like breasts, and the plastic edges cut into your palm.

Small, smaller, smallest stand on the brushed packed dirt in front of the tiendita and peer through the shop window. A spotted piglet, escaped and trailing a blue plastic clothesline behind it, noses at their ankles. Featherless teenage chickens dart between the shadows. Almost all the chickens are sick now and have stopped laying. Even the adults are mostly naked, all pink papery skin, and the few pin feathers they have left dangle from them, looking uncomfortable and inflamed, as if they had been jabbed into the skin rather than sprouting from underneath it. People say it is the water, the clouds in the water.

A wire cage is screwed into the shop wall, where a pet pigeon perches on a severed branch, the wood bent sideways and fitted between slits in the wire bars. They think it has a name, the bird, but they cannot remember it. It coos, announcing its presence to its owner.

In the darkness inside the shop, there are more shelves than food. The yellow dust has made friends with the wood; they have known each other a long time.

Small, smaller, and smallest squint into the grey-brown black and greet the owner. They chat, exchanging pleasantries and gossip, which is itself a pleasantry. The owner is plaiting her waist-length damp hair; it is still early. She smells of shampoo.

There is no need to discuss the inventory, it is almost always the same. Aluminum cans of black refried beans, Ducal brand, several sizes. Plastic-wrapped bricks of raffia-like dried noodles, your choice of "shrimp" or "chicken," which taste like neither shrimp nor chicken but become supple and bounce on your tongue when boiled. Paper strips of powdered bouillon, a plastic jug of foil-wrapped round candies that look like soccer balls, 25 centavos each. And, of course, the bolsitas, brightly colored and dangling from clips in the ceiling like party decorations. In the corner, there are three cans of sardines. The women know that beneath the counter there are bags of fortified atol; Incaparina, Quaker Mux, Corazón de Trigo. These bags have smiling families printed on them, and they promise to help children grow—everyone knows the children are too small, too short, and they get sick too often. But small, smaller, and smallest do not ask to see them, and the woman with the damp dark hair does not bring them out anymore. At nine and ten quetzales a bag, they are too expensive. It is a good thing they do not molder inside the dusty red plastic; everything is too dry now to rot.

Smaller, the grey, smiles and asks for two of the 9oz. cans of Ducal. These she will feed to her three-year-old and her four-year-old, one spoon each, swirled into warm water; agua de frijol. Her one year old is still at the breast, so he requires no planning. She will serve the sopa as she serves everything, with fresh corn tortillas and salt, and as she plans the evening meal in her head, her mind supplies the staccato palm slaps of tortillando, and her stomach tightens underneath her faja. She is unsure, for a moment, if the movement in her belly is due to hunger or to the mood of the newest child within. Either way, she is strong, and for now, she can wait.

There is no wind, which is a shame, because I want to watch the corn sway above me. I want anything that will break the monotony of the unchanging sky. How can it stay so blue and so cheerful? Does it not hear the screaming? I hear the screaming. There is nothing but sky for a long while—seconds? Minutes? Hours? But the screaming always returns. They have found someone. It is not me. I am not sure I can tell the women from the men, when they scream, but sometimes the screaming changes, despair and terror and pain together. Screaming sounds different when tears are involved—thick, watery, like ghosts and rain together. I know what it means when a scream-sob is forever and then at once isn't, and then I am glad that I can see nothing but leaves and sky.

In these seconds? Minutes? Hours? I have taught myself to swallow my cries. They scratch at the back of my throat and burn the roof of my mouth, but I will not let them out. The earth smells dry beneath my head, but my thighs are wet, and stick together. I am afraid to move, lest the leaves move with me, so I lie between the rows and try to ignore the fingers of pain that stroke my spine. I can

feel the tide pulling inside me, and bile fills my mouth. I turn my head and let it slide, warm, down my cheek. It tastes better than the dust, and at least it is wet.

Last time, I was fourteen. A child. I can do this again.

They have not found me.

Erlinda perches on the blue plastic stool, her corte pulled so tightly across her abdomen that I can see the nature of the dimpled fat beneath the layers of tightly woven fabric. She smiles, and I hate her for it, and then I hate myself for hating her. One child suckles at her breast, while two others fight for a place on her thighs and two more hide behind her, yojkix in front of the tall white doctor. Her oldest girl tries to corral two others, sweeping them back into the gray concrete sanctuary of the clinic with shushing noises. Eight children present, leaving two at home, and five, that I know of, buried in the village cemetery. All of her children are severely stunted; some are so badly malnourished that they may never learn to speak.

Around Erlinda and her brood I am always angry, and I hate myself for it.

Because of my experiences with Erlinda and other women like her at the coastal clinic I had lost my temper with one of my tijonela'; an almost unforgivable move, given his status. He was, is, a "Ma," a "Don," a "Señor"—I have never heard his name spoken without being preceded by some kind of signifier of respect. he is older, relatively wealthy, well-educated, and in almost all respects, kind and brave and incredibly well-spoken, a gifted orator. For years, I had almost always agreed with him, and we circled each other with mutual well-intentioned ambivalence, never really clashing, never really having the opportunity to do so.

However, one day our language lesson turned to medicine. We sat on the rooftop of Hotel Iximche, above the noise of the traffic and the tuk-tuks in the street below. He leaned across the pebbly concrete table and lowered his voice, as he always does when making what he believes to be an important point. "But women, you know, should not use birth control," he said, his eyes telling me very clearly that he was speaking directly to me and advising me of my own sins.

I had a sinking feeling that I knew precisely where this conversation was going, but I played the good student, the good female, and bit my lip. "Kitzij?" I asked in Kaqchikel. "Why is that?"

"It is bad for their body, and for their children," he answered. "It weakens their bones."

I knew he was referring to the fact that hormonal birth control, if taken consistently over a period of decades, has been shown to lower bone density on sedentary women more than would be expected by the sheer passage of time. I had heard of physicians (male physicians) latching onto this fact and dissuading women in their care from using birth control. Having witnessed some of the other effects machismo had on women's health and healthcare, this didn't surprise me. I was surprised to hear my teacher, a man whose intelligence I

respected and admired, a man I knew to be politically active and aware of many of the structural issues caused by sexism and racism that had a very real daily effect on his own life and the lives of people around him, echoing this same sentiment.

"But, Ma _____," I continued in bad Mayan. "This only happens after many years, and only if the woman never works or uses her body."

"Still," he said. "Women should not use it. Man ütz ta."

I swallowed and begged myself for patience. "Taq'kuyunumaq, Ma _____, man xq'ax ta. [I am sorry, Ma _____, I do not understand.] Surely it is worse to not use it, than to worry about such a small risk, so far down the road [k'iy q'ij pa b'e]?"

He stared at me, seemingly taken aback at encountering such resistance to such a simple, straightforward statement of common knowledge. "No," he insisted. "It is dangerous. They should not use it." His tone suggested that this line of the conversation was over.

The rough pebbled concrete of the table had left red rounded dimples on my elbows. I had been pressing my arms hard into the table in an effort to keep from speaking. I knew I was about to step outside the bounds set for me as a student, as a gringa, as a woman, and as an ethnographer, but I didn't care. I switched to Spanish, to let him know that I was serious, and to give my words clarity.

"What is dangerous," I said, "is having a child every year for much of your life, until your body is drained of all of its resources. This will also make your bones weak. What is dangerous is watching some of your children die, and all of your children suffer, because there are simply too many mouths to feed. What is dangerous is breastfeeding every moment you are not pregnant, until your body starts to feed on itself to provide nourishment to child after child after child. This will make your bones weak, your body weak, your children weak. This will make your family weak and rob you of your future. This is what is man ütz ta."

He stared at me, shocked, as if a frog had suddenly learned to speak and presumed to lecture him. Then the line of his jaw hardened, and he pressed his lips together.

All of a sudden, I felt terribly embarrassed. What did I know? Who was I to speak up? I felt the skin of my neck and cheeks flush hot and knew I was blushing. Then I remembered my experiences in the clinic, and I remembered watching relief flash behind women's eyes as clinic workers passed them birth control we knew, or guessed, that their husbands did not want them to have. At the very least, I am a woman, and I know what it is to feel trapped by your body. In this one moment, for this one instance, I knew enough. My skin cooled.

"My apologies," I said, mending the breach with my words, even if Ma _____ and the other men were fully aware that both my eyes and my shoulders told a different story. "I'm not feeling well."

My ceramic mug made a small scraping noise as I lifted it from the table. As always, I could feel the men's eyes on me as I made my way across the rooftop, weaving between the sheets and clothing hung across the many clotheslines stretched across the roof of the hotel. Their gaze no longer felt playful, warm, or even lascivious. I had overstepped.

The pulling inside me is becoming more and more insistent. It feels as if my body is trying to turn itself inside out, using my spine as a lever. I remember these sensations, and I turn my mind away from the memories. I do not want to look at the fear straight on. I cannot scream, I cannot cry, I have no outlet, I have no one. So it is best to look away, to pretend that the fear is not there, that I am alone.

Just me and the sky.

I pillow my cheek on my hair. It is warm from the sun, and smells of soap. Moreover, it smells of myself, like the wetness between my legs. It smells of memories, memories of pain, of my other child.

My other child, who I will not think of, cannot think of. I curl into the rising tide and let it take me. I will not look anywhere else.

"How long?" David asked. He palpated the child's abdomen. The child's skin was stretched so tight over the arc of his ribs that I had an irrational fear that David's hands would puncture the child's skin as he performed his examination. I pictured a thumb going through the skin of an old drum, a rising puff of dust, mummies. Dehydration this severe doesn't come from only a few days of diarrhea.

"A few weeks," the woman answered. "Maybe longer."

"Why didn't you come to the clinic?" David asked, and as he lifted a lip to peer at the child's gums, I knew he was focusing his attention on the child to avoid looking at the boy's mother. I had watched him closely for long enough to hear the edge of irritation in his voice.

"Mi suegra," she answered, lowering her gaze. "No me permite."

I sighed. I knew the context of this story. Out of all the communities in which I've observed and volunteered, domestic violence seems to be endemic on the coast. Additionally, it was a breed of interpersonal violence with which I'd only recently become familiar; domestic violence enacted by men, yes, but perpetuated by women.

I was new, the woman did not wish to speak in front of me, nor would she tell David her story, not directly. But he had seen her and her children, on and off, for the past seven years, and between what others had told him, the other clinic workers and the normal gossip of a small town, his own experience, and what we had seen during clinic visits, he had been able to piece together some of the story.

Over lunch that day, the omnipresent lo mein served on the clinic's brand-new front porch, he told me the story, speaking in English to give us both a rest and a measure of anonymity. As David spoke, I tried to foist my chicken off on the visiting medical student.

Like many of the women who came to the clinic, his most recent patient had been beaten, well and often. But that was only when her husband was home; often he was not, off spending what little money he did make on local prostitutes, alcohol, or futbol. The clinic had treated her for STDs more than once, but

asking her to ask her husband to wear a condom was out of the question. While her husband was away, the cycle of violence in the household was perpetuated by her mother-in-law.

I had been privy to more than one kitchen-table conversation among older women, many of them clucking their heads at the state of many of the families in this small town. "Men," they would say, shaking their heads and clucking like old hens. "Always the same. Always so violent and irresponsible. It can't be helped." I knew some of them, perhaps many of them, had been beaten by their husbands. I also knew that some of them, perhaps many of them, enabled and even encouraged their sons to beat their wives.

The child in question had had a bad case of diarrhea for weeks now, hence the severe dehydration. His growth chart wasn't fantastic to begin with, but he had been receiving nutritional supplements and had been making some progress. That progress had been entirely leveled off now, and he would have a hard time recovering. His mother knew that she could have come to the clinic and received a free course of antibiotics for her son, as well as rehydration therapy, had it been needed at the time. But, as she had explained to the clinic workers, if she tried to leave the house for the hour or two it would take to get to the clinic to get the prescription, her suegra would tell her husband that she had left the house, had perhaps been unfaithful, and she would be severely beaten. As things were, she managed to slip out for 15 minutes on the day the local pharmacy was open, where she was able to afford one pill. The pharmacies in rural Guatemala cut open packages of vitamins, NSAIDs, and antibiotics and sell them by the individual pill. She had given the single pill to her child in hopes that it would help stop the diarrhea, but it did nothing. Of course it had done nothing.

I think I have forgotten how to breathe. I have forgotten, but my body has not, and it keeps dragging at the hot air. I resent it for doing so; I resent the distraction. The dry air in my mouth reminds me of my thirst, which reminds me of the pain that has come, will come, is coming, which reminds me of why I am here, of where I am. And Enoch begat Methuselah who begat Lamech who begat Noah. Begat. Begatting. I am in the process of begatting.

Noah and his children survived. Shem, Ham, Japeth. Such odd names. Such an odd thing to hide from, rain.

The sugarcane passes in rolling waves in my view from the Jeep's window, glinting grey-green in the unrelenting sun. I've come to both love and fear the cane fields; passing them means that I am moving away from my sanctuary in the mountains toward the wetter, hotter, coast. I both love and fear the coast. Everything is so much more desperate here; poverty, and its consequences, color everything, and life seems to move at the strangest pace; at once sluggish and frenetic, terrified and resigned. I am not alone in my assessment of the coast; the volunteers who have been here the longest refer to the mud-floored piecemeal structure that is currently the coastal clinic as "the hellbaby."

Even with the windows down and the breeze hissing along my skin, I am never dry here. My hair sticks in hot curls to my neck and beads of moisture trickle down my spine, settling in pools at my waistband and between my breasts. I never feel clean on the coast, and when I lick my lips, forever pulled tight and dry at the corners, I taste salt and gritty dust. Dehydration is always a problem. Water isn't easily accessible, and even if it were, as a woman, urinating is always an issue. Local codes of decorum prevent me from squatting in the cacao grove, and the clinic has no plumbing. I envy the men. From experience, I've learned to manage my bladder, keeping my bathroom needs minimal, down to once or twice every 12 hours. The key lies in judging the intensity of the omnipresent dehydration headache; drink just enough to keep the throbbing between your temples from interfering with concentration, but no more. By mid-afternoon, my blood begins to feel like molasses, and the whole world seems to slow down.

My first visit to the coastal clinic was also my first time observing a prenatal exam. I watched as David, the clinic's medical director, helped a heavily pregnant woman to lie down on the clinic's examining table, which, at the time, had been simply a few strips of uneven plywood laid across two heavy-duty plastic buckets filled with water for stability. A child's blanket, fleece Winnie-the-Pooh, was draped across the plywood to protect patients from splinters in the wood.

I listened as he gave the exam, running through the standard battery of questions. How many pregnancies, how many children living, how many dead, how many vaginal deliveries, how many Cesareans? I watch the lines across his forehead deepen as he expertly folds back the heavy layers of her corte and begin the physical exam. He is gentle, afterwards, as he helps her to sit up and then guides he out the door after she has handed me her urine sample (in the styrofoam cup I was drinking from until we realized there were no more sample containers) and I have handed her a bright green package of prenatal vitamins. He gives her advice, and then she thanks him, and then she leaves, waddling heavily down the muddy path away from the makeshift clinic.

I quiz him as he washes his hands between patients. I speak in English, quietly, so none of the waiting patients can hear.

"You referred her to a local midwife, right?"

He grunted in assent, taciturn, as always.

I continued. "But she's had three previous Cesareans!" I protested.

He seems surprised by the little medical knowledge I do have and decides to take my question seriously. "VBAC can be an option. And a midwife is safer than referring her to the nearest Ministry of Health."

"But—three?" I continue. "And we don't even know whether or not they were low transverse."

He shakes his hands to dry them and then holds them in front of his chest, a surgeon in jeans and an intentionally ironic T-shirt. "Still safer," he says, before nodding to the next patient.

Screaming, gunshots, screaming, silence. Screaming, gunshots, screaming, silence. Over and over and over and over until I wonder whether it is still really

happening or whether my mind is playing tricks on me, timing the screaming with my contractions because I will not. Or perhaps I am the one screaming, and the gunshots are only my body pulling itself apart, bone by bone by bone.

It makes sense, this lack of sense. I have nothing, I have no one; perhaps I am nothing, I am no one.

I don't trust myself, so I stop listening.

Descending into the valley of San Antonio at dusk always reminds me of Peter Pan. The outlines of the houses are obscured, reduced to dark smudges against the hillside, and only the orange and gold houselights are visible against the blue-black silhouettes of the mountains. Even packed tighly into the brown plastic seats of the chicken bus, I feel like Wendy or one of her brothers, flying into Never Never Land for the first time. The warm feelings I associate with San Antonio probably stem in part from the fact that my segunda familia lives there; my "second family," as they asked me to call them. They are my home when I am not home, a place for me to rest and feel loved when I need a break from traveling, from the rigors of fieldwork, or from gringo nightlife in Antigua. I walk in the door to the compound and am handed a baby and a list of chores, and even the parrot addresses me by name, squawking "Hola, Cati" and nipping at my shoulders as I pass his perch. Children I watched as they learned to walk grab my calves and pull sticky, sugar-soaked fingers through my hair. Woodsmoke curls skyward from the kitchen fire on the top level, and I can smell the limes on the tree outside my bedroom. Illiana has a new puppy; it growls playfully before planting its forelegs in the dirt and wagging its tail; puppy talk for "come chase me." The shaggy blond puppy, a mutt, is here to help with Iliana's breathing, although everyone says that chihuahuas are the best for asthma. Illiana; playful, smart, clean limbed, and determined. The daughter of the daughter who was born in the milpa when the soldiers came. Small, smaller, smallest.

I am alive. I am alive, and so is my child, still connected to me by the cord that lies slick and hot across my belly. We are both breathing, and there is no one left to hear my daughter's first cries as she greets the milpa.

There is no one left.

We will not be found.

We are alone, my girl and I. Small, smaller, smallest; Japeth to my Noah, and the rain has passed.

I want so badly to be grateful.