

To a Girl I Didn't Love on the Last Bus Home

Guanacaste, Costa Rica

by Jeremy B. Jones

If it hadn't been for you, I would have stared at those fences for hours as the bus rumbled through grazing land from the coast. *Cercas vivas*, everyone called them: living fences. In truth, they were merely branches chopped from trees, stuck in the ground and strung with barbed wire. And yet those limbs sprouted buds, tiny branches reaching out and up. I loved the audacity of those living fences, so when I took the only open seat on the bus, beside you, I fixed my eyes on the window. I'd brought a novel by Fernando Contreras Castro and you noticed: *Única Mirando al Mar* was a book you loved.

You were studying to be a teacher, on your way back to your village. I was on my way back to the exhaust-filled capital city, after a weekend at the beach. My Spanish must have been middling, the pages of my novel lined with translation like bad midrash. But I bumbled along as we talked about literature and the strangeness of language. You schooled me on all the ways I could use *echar* —to throw, to grab, to chase, to pour, to to to. I told you about the endless flexibility of *get* —get on, get out, get going, get lost.

We were young—early twenties—and soon talking about the beautiful complexity of your country. A place with giant oropendola birds weaving baskets in trees and chopped branches growing from the soil and whole communities living in trash dumps. A country without an army, fighting no one's wars. I envied that you knew where you were going: back to a small town where you were born and would one day be a teacher.

I was running, away from my own small town in the North Carolina mountains, where everyone told me I would be a teacher—like my dad before me, like my grandmothers before him. I may have told you about my people. About how they'd been holed up in those mountains for 250 years. About how I'd grown up on 100 acres of land passed down for generations. Or maybe I simply told you I was a university student, studying sustainable development and seeing the world.

I didn't have the language to explain that I felt squeezed by the generational weight of my family's land—the predestination of staying put, of abiding. I wish I could have told you about my great-great grandparents' house, about how if you stand on the hill beside it, you can see clear across the creek to the cemetery where we all end up. Everyone is in that ground—Ray and Betty and Albert and Azalee and William and Clara—sinking back generations. The smallness of living a whole life on one piece of land and then being buried in it terrified me. So I left. I caught that bus running through Costa Rica to get lost.

The sun was setting. Do you remember? The whole world seemed awash in sepia, the wide-reaching trees and the humped brahman cows all yellow. I don't know how it happened, but you fell asleep, leaning your whole body into me. Your head on my shoulder. Your leg pressed perfectly into mine.

I liked it. I shifted my body to make it softer, fashioned it to hold you better. You were pretty, but it wasn't just that. We hadn't flirted—I couldn't flirt; it required a fluency I hadn't acquired. Did I even know your name? What I liked was settling into my seat with you. I imagined we were on our way back to your town together, where your mother would teach me to make tortillas and tease me about rolling my r's and you would read to wide-eyed students beneath a mango tree. You and I would sit on a porch—in just this position—after a not-so-long day, talking about nothing while that very same sun dropped behind those cows and displaced branches. We'd go inside to our small bed in our small house in our small town and fall asleep until birds called us up. Then we'd start all over.

I shouldn't have wanted that. I was young and free and on my way back to a city of museums and clubs and sparkling 20-something girls, but as we bumped along, suddenly all I wanted in the world was to climb off that bus when we reached the dirt road to your town. To carry your bag for you and never look back.

You know the moral, I'm sure. I didn't love you. You didn't love me. You woke up and we made small talk and you carried your own bag down that road to your house. But in the hour that you let your body rest on mine, I could see the future: I would go back to that land along Clear Creek, the land from which I'd been grown. Not then and not for some years, but I would return. I would graft my branch back onto the trunk instead of enjoying the small buds on the road alone. *Echar de menos*, isn't it? To pine for? I pined for a porch and a falling sun.

I hope that you have that now. I hope your students write you notes, that your kids gather at your feet, that your mother teaches some other man to make tortillas. Here in the Blue Ridge Mountains, my boys are blowing bubbles in the yard. Lightning bugs are easing out. My wife has settled into a chair beside me, and the headstone of my great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather up the road calls out to me like an old song I'll never tire of hearing. I lean back, get comfortable. I let me body rest, just the way you showed me to.

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