

The Robbery

Looking over the daunting pile of grocery bags, Erika considered, momentarily, asking the taxista to wait for her while she made the deposit. The problem was that she'd been in such a hurry that she'd taken a street cab instead of an Uber, meaning that she was lucky not to have been driven out to the dusty wasteland of the Costa Verde and robbed beneath a burnt-out lamp post. She decided not to push it. As the cab pulled up to the curb, she stuffed a pair of three-liter soda bottles – one of Inca Kola and one of Coke – into her backpack. Then she slid the four remaining grocery bags – containing homemade tequeños, another three-liter Inca Kola bottle, and family-sized portions of Piqueo Snax, Lays, and off-brand Oreos – up the length of her arms. Finally, she bent forward, rounded her weighted arms like a ballet dancer turning a pirouette, and balanced the platters of sliced meats and cheeses on top.

“Are you sure you don't need any help?” the taxista called out.

“I got it,” she said, kicking the door shut with her heel.

The taxi pulled away, and Erika began to walk. The corner of the Lays bag bounced into her armpit each time her left heel clicked against the cement. The feeling bothered her, but not because it hurt. What she didn't like was not being able to decide if the bag was sticking her like a needle, or if was more like the pleasant prick of her cat's claws when she stretched across Erika's lap and kneaded her splayed thighs. It was the same way she'd felt when Mario finally admitted that he *did* want to have children, just not with her. After three years of ambiguous excuses and evasiveness, she could never decide if finally hearing the words come out of his mouth had felt more like a knife going into her chest or the relief of finally pulling it out.

She decided to reorganize the bags. She stooped down to set the platters on the ground, but the vacancy produced when her heels stopped clicking and the Lays stopped pricking conjured a new image. Patty and Carmen had gotten robbed outside of the theater after their last performance, she remembered. A van had pulled up, and a couple of kids dressed in black had jumped out wielding kitchen knives. They'd handed Patty a piece of paper and told she and Carmen to write down the passwords for their phones. "A couple of malcriado chibolos," Carmen had called them, the look on her face so pained you'd think teenage delinquency was the cause of global warming and asbestos additives in tampons. "They're a new breed, this generation," she'd said, shaking her head back and forward like a dog, "You know they even checked the passwords on our phones? They laughed in my face when I told them I didn't have one, as if that made me some kind of an idiot."

I should've made the cab go around, thought Erika. The street was a one way, and she was already late to 'Welcome Night' for new students and their parents. Not a good look for the director of K-12. Patty was always pulling this type of shit, though. She'd agreed to do the magic show for the new elementary schoolers after the magician canceled. And then she'd called Erika in a panic just as she was walking out the door. "I forgot to pay the deposit at the theater," she'd whimpered, "If I don't pay today they'll cancel next month's show. I'd go myself but I'm supposed to do the show here in twenty minutes."

How convenient, Erika thought. *So I'll pay the deposit and then who knows when I'll see that money again.*

When she stood back up, this time with the bag of potato chips hanging off of her wrist, she realized that the street was empty. There was no traffic. Nor were there any lights. Suddenly, she became very conscious of the fact that she was hobbling down the street in stilettos, carrying ten kilos of junk-food and eight-hundred soles in cash. She scanned for white vans and teenage delinquents. Nothing. She started to walk faster.

What had Mario's face looked like when he finally admitted it, she wondered. She tried to conjure his image in the dark. He looked so much younger than he was, something which she'd envied him for until envy screwed up its face and started looking like resentment. People were always elbowing her in the gut when she introduced him. "Rompe cunas," they'd mouth, grinning stupidly. In reality, he was only eight months her junior. And that was about how long it took her to get tired of the sentiment. After all, she was the one who cooked and cleaned in *both* of their apartments, finally accepting after months of his indifference that she'd either do it herself or accept living like a Paleolithic hominid - dirt on the floors and food permanently incrusting in the dishes. She was the one who'd gulped down her shame and Googled 'the kama sutra' after she'd caught him masturbating in the bathroom one night while she lay naked in the bed. She'd reminded him of his mother and sister's birthdays every year, and got him a signed copy of Daniel Alarcon's book at the Feria Internacional del Libro when he had to work overtime. But he turned heads, and she couldn't shake her averageness with a clown-masks worth of makeup or a ten-thousand-sol gown.

The wind blew a circle around her shoulders. She stopped beside a 'no parking' sign and propped up the sliced-meat platters between the rigid metal and her bulking chest. She dropped her left hand down and tightened the loose strap on her back-pack. The plastic bags rippled in the wind, and she spun around, her eyes darting nervously about the street. *I should've never worn these shoes*, she thought. She considered taking them off and walking barefoot to the theater, but decided that would only make her look more ridiculous. *Anyway*, she thought, *I have no way of carrying them*. Instead, she straightened her spine, rolled her shoulders back, and took a step forward.

A rough hand grabbed her by the left shoulder and pulled. Suddenly, she was falling backwards like Alice into the rabbit hole. Sliced ham and cubed cabanossi rained down,

and Erika caught a glimpse of the future between their untethered movements. In a few hours, packs of street dogs would convene in the street to fight and feast. They'd lap up the soda and tear open the paper bag of tequeños, mindlessly devouring the fruits of her labor. Masked by the odors of plastics and chemical additives, they'd leave the unopened bags of chips and the box of knockoff Oreos alone, lunging instead for the cured pig flesh. Still stumbling backwards, the point of Erika's stiletto plunged into a crack in the sidewalk, and as her leg approached the horizontal plane, a loud crack rang out in the silence. It was the start of the horse-race, the sound that ripples through the beasts' spines and sends them running for their lives. All at once, Erika knew what to do.

"Get off of me," she screamed, lunging forward with all of her might. The thief still had a hold on her backpack, and she felt it split open at the zipper as she pulled away. But she wasn't going to lose it. Her wallet, with the old picture of Mario turned backwards so that only the date was visible, was stuffed in the zip-shut compartment in the main pocket, underneath her blue scarf and the bottles of soda. On the day she'd taken it, they'd bought hamburgers from the Lucha and sat in the grass in Parque Kennedy to eat them. Erika hated Parque Kennedy.

"Of course all the rich wannabe gringos of Miraflores name their park after some gringo president whose greatest accomplishment was getting a pin-up girl to sing him happy birthday in front of fifteen thousand people."

"Who?" Mario asked, raising his left brow up like a bad improv actor doing 'confused.'

"Marilyn Monroe," she scoffed, just as annoyed by Mario's overstated facial expressions as she was by his feigned ignorance.

"Never heard of her," he said with a shrug.

“Oh, please, I’m sure you’ve heard of her. ‘Give a girl the right pair of shoes and she’ll conquer the world?’”

He laughed. “Now who’s the gringo lover, eh?”

“Concha su madre,” Erika giggled, and she shook her head and lay back in the grass, accepting her defeat.

Mario abandoned his burger and let his head come to rest on her chest. They both closed their eyes and breathed in the scent of the clean grass, a welcome repose from the sweet stench of putrefying fruit skins, sweat, and plastered dog shit that electrified the Magdalena market, which was the center point between the clinic where Mario worked as a radiographer and the colegio, and thus the place they met for cheap lomo saltado and ceviche during their weekday lunchbreaks.

Something pulled at Erika’s hair and she jerked awake. A cat had gotten its claw stuck in her braid. She lifted its paw out and sat up. Unprotected in the grass, Mario’s half-eaten burger had drawn a herd of Parque Kennedy’s famous feral cats. Most of them were tabbies, though there were a few smaller ones that looked like they were from the same litter, white with black spots and glassy blue eyes. Erika took hold of her bag and stepped carefully over a couple of striped tabbies that had fallen asleep near Mario’s outstretched arm. She fished around until she found her phone, quickly flipped the volume switch to silent, and snapped the photo – Mario, curled up in a fetal position beside his empty burger wrapper, with no less than eighteen unabashed street cats drawing a circle around him.

It was the perfect photo, the only one she’d bothered to get printed during the last five years, and the only one from their relationship that she hadn’t gotten rid of in the days following Mario’s painful admittance. So she wasn’t going to lose it now, especially not

to some chibolo who fancied himself a man for carrying a knife and robbing stiletto-yielding middle-aged women on unlit street corners.

Though her bag had torn open, Erika could still feel the thief holding her back like a dog on a leash. She bent her knees, threw her right shoulder forward, and whirled left, trying to break away. A hollow bang sounded. It was so loud that Erika's ears began to ring, the sound vibrating along her cochlea like a broken record skipping desperately over the same word, mutating the musician's voice until it sounded like some sort of dystopian alarm clock. A school of pigeons took flight. *Oh my god*, Erika suddenly realized, *he shot me*. She drew her left hand across her abdomen and wrapped it behind her back. The back of her shirt was wet, already soaked in blood.

She tried again to remember what Mario's face had looked like when he finally admitted it - the quivering curve of his mouth, his big avoidant eyes, the cowlick in his beard whose center was sparse and empty - but the harder she tried to place each piece in relation to the others, the farther away they all drifted, until all she could imagine was a sheet of tannin brown coloring paper with a different facial feature drawn in each corner. She let it fade out, turning instead to the conversation that she'd had with Patty two days later.

"It's a good thing, you know," Patty had said.

They were sitting on the ugly green couch in her apartment. Erika let her tears drip into the upholstery, knowing that when they dried the salt would become encrusted in the layers of ancient cat-hair that served as the couch's throw-over blanket and maybe, just maybe, Patty would finally be moved to get rid of the rancid thing.

"Why?" Erika whimpered, not seeing how, in any way, this could be considered a good thing.

"Pues," Patty started, hesitating.

Erika straightened her spine and looked Patty in the eye.

“What,” she asked, her heart pumping full of adrenaline, “What do you know, Patty?”

“I wanted to tell you,” she started, “But it just never felt like the right time. Now that it’s over, though,” she reasoned, more to herself than to Erika, “maybe it’ll help you get over him.”

“Say it,” Erika demanded, her heart swelling up and filling her throat.

“It was a couple years ago,” Patty stuttered, “You guys had only been dating a few months, so I guess things weren’t as serious yet. We’d all gone out together – you, me, Mario, Jose, Evelyn, Carmencita and that musician she was dating at the time-“

“Sergio,” said Erika.

“Yeah, Sergio, and...Berta. We were at a folk club, De Rompe y Raja, and they had some kind of special that night – buy three beers, get one free – so we were drinking Cusqueñas like they were water. But for some reason you couldn’t keep your eyes open – I think you’d just finished parent-teacher conference week or something. You started falling asleep at the table, so we called you a cab, and you went home. Anyway, the rest of us stayed out all night, and after a while we switched the beers in for Pisco Sours and tequila shots. I was so drunk that I didn’t notice the way Mario and Berta were huddled together all night, whispering in each other’s ears. I swear I didn’t even realize until Evelyn and I got up to dance and saw them pressed up against the far wall, kissing-“

“Did they go home together,” Erika demanded, the swirling blood turning her cheeks hot and red.

“Pues, I don’t know. They went in a cab with Carmencita and the musician.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Carmencita and Mario are practically neighbors! If Berta was going back to her place, she’d have gone with you and Evelyn.”

“I don’t know,” Patty stuttered, “I thought maybe Carmencita was going to the musician’s place. I don’t know where he lives but I figured if they were taking the Marina they might drop Mario off near Fuacett so he could walk back to your place.”

“Oh my god,” Erika breathed, and suddenly she began to wail, her words coming out in long, rasping gasps, “All of you knew. *All of you*. Carmencita and Jose, Evelyn and you, my own puta sister. You all knew and none of you said a word. How humiliating-“

“Erika, that’s not what we-“

“And now no wonder he doesn’t want to have my children, Patty. How could anyone love a woman whose own friends, whose own damn sister, doesn’t love her enough to tell her the truth?”

“I love you, Erika,” Patty had whispered, a tear rolling down her cheek, “I didn’t-“

A week after that conversation, Erika remembered, she had sat on the floor of her apartment and dialed her sisters number.

“You know why I was so tired that night,” she had asked, ironing the shakes out of her voice by force of sheer will, “It wasn’t parent-teacher conference week, Patty. It was the week that that tenth grade girl went missing. Her mother called me on Tuesday afternoon to ask if she’d been to school that day. The girl, Sofia, had told her it was non-uniform day and had gone out wearing high heels and a summer dress. Later, we found out from her friends that she’d gone to KFC to meet a guy she’d been talking to online. It was three days before she turned up - I hadn’t slept at all that week because every time I closed my

eyes I remembered the way her mother's voice had dropped when I told her Sofia had been absent that day.”

Erika pressed her palm against the bullet wound and began to run. The thief let go of her backpack and, suddenly unrestrained, she stumbled forward, nearly tripping over the stump of her broken heel. The adrenaline coursed through her veins with such force that she couldn't feel the pain from the bullet wound. Still, she knew that she was losing blood fast. She glanced up to the dark gray sky and began to whisper a Hail Mary. Then, on the far side of the street, a woman pushing a stroller emerged from beneath the shadow of a tree.

“Oh por dios,” Erika screamed, “Run, Señora! I've been shot by a robber! Call the police!”

She stumbled forward for a few more seconds and then glanced back. The street was empty. *He must've gone running in the other direction*, Erika reasoned. Assuring herself that he'd be an idiot to come back now, she let herself collapse onto the sidewalk. She slipped her backpack gingerly off and dug inside until she found her blue scarf and her compact. As she peeled her shirt away from the skin on her back, preparing for the first visual encounter with the bullet wound, Mario's coherent image finally floated across her iris.

It must be true what they say, Erika thought to herself, *death loves a good laugh*. Here she was, memories of the worst days of her life floating around her like wisps on the wind while she bled out on the sidewalk in a pair of broken stilettos that a woman her age should've never been wearing, and all because she hadn't wanted to let go of some stupid picture of her disgustingly handsome ex-boyfriend sleeping in a park that represented everything she hated about Lima.

She leaned forward and angled the compact towards her back, trying to find the entrance wound so that she could wrap it with her scarf. She moved the compact up and down, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out where the bullet had gone in. And then she realized that it wasn't just the bullet wound that had vanished. The blood – her blood – had disappeared as well. She drew her left hand across her body and touched her lower back with the tip of her index finger. It was wet and cold. She brought her finger to her nose and inhaled. The smell was like neon sugar passing straight through her nostrils and into her brain. She licked her sticky finger. *Inca Kola. The bullet must've hit the bottle in my backpack and ricocheted in the other direction*, she reasoned. She drew her backpack into her lap and lifted out the three-liter bottles. Both were still intact.

Leaving the bottles on the sidewalk, she slung her backpack over her right shoulder without bothering to zip it shut. She began to hobble back towards the scene of the attack. The street dogs hadn't arrived yet - tequeños, sliced meats and cubed cheeses collaged around the base of the 'no parking' sign like fallen soldiers on a battle field. The chips and cookies lay still and unaffected, strangely inanimate amongst the wreckage. Erika spotted the other Inca Kola bottle on the far side of the street and took off running. She scooped it up and examined it. Though the top was still on it, the bottle was half empty, and the once clear-yellow liquid inside had gone cloudy. But Erika couldn't find a puncture hole anywhere. *The bottle must've exploded when I dropped it*, she decided. She crossed the street again, her head beginning to pound from all of the confusion. On the other side, she stood staring at the scene of the crime like a detective hunting for clues. *When the police get here, she reassured herself, they'll block off the street until they find the bullet. They'll be able to use it to catch him.*

Erika picked her broken heel out of a crack in the sidewalk and then hung her backpack over a piece of metal protruding from the stop sign. At last, she began to salvage what

could be salvaged, re-burying her wallet and Mario's photo under knockoff Oreos and potato chips. When she was done, she dug the zipper of her backpack out of a fold of material on the left side of the bag and began to pull it upwards. Near its zenith, the zipper slid off into nothingness. Erika cradled the detached bit of plastic in her hand and began to examine the damage to her bag. She hadn't realized that a section of material, about the size of a four-by-six photograph, had been torn off, and she looked down at the ground now to see if a blue patch of nylon could be spotted amongst the debris. Seeing nothing and feeling suddenly overcome by exhaustion, she leaned back against the 'no parking' sign to await the police's arrival.

After a couple of minutes, she was fighting to keep her eyes open. She bent her knees and began to slide her back down the metal pole. Suddenly, she felt something pulling at her. The metal protrusion where she'd hung her backpack had caught on the fabric of her T-shirt. As she lifted it gently away, she noticed something strange. Underneath her backpack, still hanging innocently off of the metal protrusion, a piece of dark blue nylon, about the size of a four-by-six photograph, was tangled between two sliding pieces of metal.

In the distance, Erika saw blue and red lights flashing. The police were almost there to take her statement. Stepping to the left of the stop sign so that her shirt wouldn't get caught again, Erika bent over and unbuckled the strap on her left shoe and then her right. She set the stilettos down on the sidewalk, laid the stump of broken heel over a slice of cured ham, and slung her backpack over her shoulder. Without looking back, she walked the remaining block to the theater and paid her sister's deposit. Afterwards, she sat on a couch in the lobby, waiting for her Uber to pull up out front.