TO BUENA

The third year of their marriage Gerald was posted to Tula, which happened to be one of the places where he grew up. From the age of twelve through seventeen he'd attended the Britanica in Lomas Altas where his father taught chemistry. There, he'd acquired a good education, Spanish fluency, and a Venezuelan stepmother.

Henriet knew only one thing about these years: that they had been a time when Gerald went "a bit native."

“You don’t know what it’s like when your father's always your headmaster,” he told her. During his senior year, he'd actually caused a servant girl to conceive a son, and was still sending small amounts of money to the girl. As the years went on it became more and more difficult to believe this of Gerald.

When they moved from Michigan to Tula, she stayed behind to finish up a year teaching sixth grade. Then she spent the summer studying Spanish with a tutor, appalled at having tested out of her language requirement in college. And then she flew alone, to that foreign place.

A giddy thing, she obtained a bargain flight out of Miami, Lloyd Aereo Colombiano--roundtrip, required by her hasty visa. She filed away the return, in case in case. Marriage, like everything else, seemed precarious those days. She also bought a hat, her first, the kind Rose Kennedy used to wear.

The DC4, sat on the runway like a little begging dog between the jets. You had to climb the aisles; and, though the little plane took almost vertically to the air, it rumbled very low, and very slow above the blue-green Caribbean She could see right to the very bottom; it made her high; her life unrolled before her hopefully, This feeling happened to her on other occasions—once in the White Mountains, another time in the top balcony of the old Academy of Music in Philadelphia— at a certain altitude. Sometime later, at a drunken party, she regaled a man about that flight, how safe she felt, flying so very low and so very slow….

"You actually are safer flying very high and very fast," he said.

Then mountains, densely covered grayish green, solemn and foreign, range on range.

He was waiting for her in the Capital, the man she married before her whole family and none of his, in Flourtown PA.

"Take off that crazy hat you're wearing?" he demanded. They hadn't seen each other for three months.

We are almost strangers she thought when they checked into a hotel in that chilly city. She had checked into hotels wearing a fake wedding ring knowing him better than this husband who with perfect legality writes: Sr y Sra Geraldo Escobar in the great leather register.

It's all right once they're in bed, somehow back in the days when he really was a stranger: dark to her light, unknown to her known. She opened to him fervently, and it seems they must have saved up the vital juices necessary to make the child they couldn't those years in Philadelphia..

They came to live in a pink stucco apartment building on the edge of the city, overlooking the turn off to the Road to The Sea, the route to the port of Buena. She spent a few idle months, then, with a baby coming, she decided she must see the country, starting with following The Road to The Sea to its end.

The problem with the Road to the Sea was its destiny, the town of Buena and its dirty reputation: town of tin roofed shacks, unsavory eating places. And heat. She knew exactly what it would be like, at least she ought to have.

But they went. It was the year of Rojas Prieto's fall, year of the pacification of the countryside, the *Frente Nacional*, that they went—the country also

undergoing one of those leaps that characterized her life. Starting at dawn, they were above the weekend farms with their bright roofs of red and yellow *Eternit* by ten. The pavement ended and the road turned steeply up.

She remembers the red gash in the mountainside, and the deep ravine below, and on the opposite slope, a Polar Beer sign lettered in white stones, the sun, above the *cordillera* now, burning her right cheek and forearm.

“I wish we could go straight on," she'd said to Gerald, who was nervous about the road and didn’t answer. They were to stay a day with his aunt, who lived in El Retiro, which was in the mountains.

They crossed a river, climbed again, the gash now on their left. A crude metal cross stood beside the road, a hub cap hanging from it. "Car went over," Gerald told her. She looked into the chasm, asked him if they recovered the bodies. Not usually, he told her.

There were small valleys where the *carretera* opened out, small settlements, mud houses—sun-baked and crazed like ancient china, thatch roofs caught up on sapling racks trimmed at the bottom like the thick bang she saw on children in this sierra, crude signs painted on their sides, raw aniline blue:

Heximine...Purge the Gut of Ascaris And Other Parasites...

Red cliffs crowded. Another metal cross. On that one hung a bicycle wheel. Pines and blue-green eucalyptus replaced the banana trees as they wound higher.

“Amparo will expect us," Gerald answered her earlier question.

"But we could stop an hour, go straight on..." she argued.

"No," he told her, "they will be shocked if you don't stay." He meant to go ahead and check for places where she could be put up decently, return to fetch her.

There was a lovely village of whitewashed houses with black thatch, a square, a church. The grass bleached colorless. Her nature went out to this austerity; she'd never quite been able to love the sprawl and riot of the valley where he'd settled her in their apartment in a building that resembled an iced wedding cake.

Se Ven De Que So Café

A sign spelled out in syllables read on a house that fronted the *carretera*.

A woman in a black fedora filled their thermos, sold them wedges of a farmer's cheese. They stood outside to eat it in the thin, cold air, and a child asked for the canteen that hung from Gerald's shoulder. He refused, and the child grinned and asked for the knife, which Gerald gave him, recalling too late it had been her gift.

“It’s all right. I wanted him to have it,” she said.

The road wound down. The only growth on those sterile and chilly slopes was a small spiky plant with woolly blue leaves; they were called "*Frailejones*," Gerald said they wore little sweaters to keep warm.

In Purificación, storekeepers were throwing pails of water on the streets to keep the dust down. Stalls were closing in the market. Mangos and papayas rotted in the sun; and from a billiard hall came music of Luis Berrios: *Cuando Tu Te Hayas Ido*..."

A wooden-bodied truck that carried firewood was off the road with a flat tire; and a woman waited with chicken on a leash.

LIBERDAD PARA LOS PRISIONEROS DE EL CACIQUE was splashed up in faded aniline on crumbling walls everywhere.

They neared the *páramo*, and stopped to look. Bleached earth, some dusty paddle cactus. A lizard twitched, dislodging a pebble, held immobile, staring.

Then they descended to El Retiro. Gerald's uncle's house was on the central square; Amparo showed them to the room her second son—then off in military training—used to occupy. As soon as Gerald had gone downstairs, she asked The Question: "*y*, *los hijos*?"

"None yet," Henriet answered, aware, as always, it wasn't up to standard.

"But we're expecting in July." she added. Her eagerness to answer this rude question amused her.

Amparo was sure she wanted to rest after such a trip. But she didn't; she ran downstairs to seek out Gerald and they went out for a walk. Gerald asked her if she'd told.

"Well, I mean her very second question..."

Then he explained that if they knew about the baby and learned she meant to accompany him to the coast with no prior check to see if there was a decent place to stay, and something happened to this baby, they would all say that it was because they weren't careful.

She was shocked.

They turned into the the plaza. She studied the carved doors of the baroque cathedral. Gerald's stepmother's people were from there. Lozanos, Escobars, Ochoas. Across the street was an equestrian statue of Simón Bolivar with a plaque commemorating the *pesos de oro*, horses, men that el Retiro had sacrificed to the cause of liberty, in l813.

The streets were narrow. They had to walk in file, squeezed between the traffic and the house fronts. She looked into the entryways at tile walls and fretwork doors. Acacias folded their leaves to tiny fists as they brushed by.

When this baby's born, she thought, I'll tell him of the risk I took, the looking...

She imagined Simón Bolívar riding over the *cordillera* in l913. They said his buttocks were worn to calluses when he died.

She thought it a fine city, she told them at the dinner table. She didn't know when she'd seen so many sights.

"Yes," commiserated Amparo. "One does become so tired..."

“Not a bit,” she said, she only wished that they were going straight on tomorrow...both of them, that was... But they'd protested: "One doesn't court discomforts," said the old man

: "Yes, one worries, *hija mia*," A woman in Buena. Here they were so comfortable. They had everything that one could wish: two movie theaters, a town club and a country club, and the military; one felt so much easier with the military near.

Gerald gave her extra money in the morning to go to the market and buy some cookies in a tin box.

"*Petites beurres*, *tan gentil*! You shouldn't have."

Amparo pulled two wooden rockers into the shade of rubber trees that lined the patio. The *muchacha* brought coffee and there were more sweet confidences

while they drank the coffee, picking off the *nata* from the surface of the oversweetened drink. Always oversweet.

"You must be patient, in Buena, a woman can be subject to indignities," Amparo counseled, patting her neck and shoulders with a napkin. It was the hour of heat, and so they went inside to rest. "Perhaps she'd like a book." She was led into a little parlor where a bookshelf held some engineering texts, the Merck Veterinary Manual, a copy of *Black Beauty,* and a Spanish translation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls. S*he chose the Hemingway and took it to the little room and stretched on the bed. Out on the little balcony, Amparo rested upon a daybed, and, in his den next door, the old uncle snored. She read a page or two and slept, awakened by a clatter of bells at four. There was another sitting down to coffee. Don Lauriano consented to eat a boiled egg, and Amparo to a bit of white cheese with *arepa*. They inquired if she'd slept. "Oh, yes," she cried, ashamed. But it was fortunate, said Amparo. One passed the horrid time of day, and when one waked the air had been exchanged. Don Lauriano explained. The heat at noon created a vacuum that caused an updraft later; cool mountain air came rushing down. It seemed to be true. The leathery palms on the patio were flapping about, and the tablecloth billowing .

They were sitting down to dinner when Gerald came. There was a woman he'd found, who rented rooms. They would do. The woman's name was Jacinta

Saenz. Amparo was sure she wasn't respectable; but Gerald insisted. The house was clean and there was a bath.

"It won't be all that comfortable," he warned her when they were walking after dinner. "Not like here..."

"Thank God!" she'd cried.

The Road to the Sea wound down from El Retiro. At intervals you could look below and glimpse the little train pull round a curve, its rooftop crowded with baskets, coffins, beasts in cages. Leaves that had been dusty, dripped with moisture. Tree trunks were black with damp. A wild cat crossed the road. She remembers two nearly naked men struggling in a ditch to extricate a mule.

And then it opened out a bit; there was a river with a grassy bank, some shacks were painted baby blue and pink, and pasted up with pictures cut from magazines; and, in the doorways, women richly lolling, sticking out an impudent tongue or hip on which an infant rode. She had to laugh. So many infants, so many bellies. She'd heard that they delivered themselves by hanging from a rope tied to the roofbeam. She thought of coral snakes, of *endamoeba histolica.*

They found Jacinta throwing clothing back into a tin trunk open on the floor. In the dark doorway a servant hovered with a sullen face. "Ah, you find us in the

middle of this. You must excuse. I mentioned to this wretch that I was missing a pair of stockings and she becomes hysterical and brings all her trunks in here and empties them in the middle of the room. I mean nothing. She thinks I accuse her of stealing. Now she must leave, she says. She has made all this mess and she must leave me in the middle of dinner!". Jacinta, in this flustered state, invited them in and promised them a beefsteak and some plantain. Gerald had gone to park the car while Henriet waited in the front garden in a chair the woman brought. There was a plaza opposite, where boys were finishing a soccer game in the last light. Jacinta brought her a plate of cottony *badea* pulp, and it was like a compress laid on her dusty throat.

Jacinta Saenz was not a respectable woman, according to Gerald's aunt. Her life certainly was not orderly.

The cursed girl was packing up to leave her, she told her guest, but she would be giving them their supper soon. Henriet told her not to upset herself; they were in no hurry. "Did you fire her...?" she was curious to know.

"Oh, no, it's her idea to leave me in the middle of the dinner," said Jacinta. She's turned the house upside down and made the dinner wait, so she must leave; it's very logical!"

At this point they had both laughed, and she fell in love with Jacinta.

"The supper!" screamed Jacinta then and ran into the house. The servant girl was leaving, she explained to Gerald, and told him she wished she could help.

No, let her get calmed down, he'd said. They'd walk around.

They crossed the little plaza, took a narrow street down to the estuary. There was another little plaza there, ill-kept but charming, with vine-covered trellises. The gray, unknown, Pacific lay beyond a point of land. They would take a launch next morning, around the point to Juancho where there was a beach.

Quite suddenly, it was dark, and they walked back. All that was visible of the soccer players now were their white pants. The ball rolled toward them; Gerald picked it up, drop kicked it back. *Cigarras* droned in a large ceiba tree, and dropped their tiny excrement, like rain.

The supper was served, a child, Jacinta's eldest, called them in. They sat on the verandah, and were given beefsteak, rice with beans. She found it tastier than anything she'd eaten in that country yet. Jacinta came and went with dishes, her youngest slung upon her hip, secured there with a wide blue shawl. I have no friends, she thought. No friend but Gerald.

I'll help later, she told Gerald.

Was it so important to her? Yes, it was, she told him.

The concrete sink was filled with dirty dishes; pots were set on the stove to boil loose deposits of burnt soup. The cursed girl had hidden all the dirty pans inside the oven.

“No, no, you mustn't help!” cried Jacinta. She was ashamed, she moaned distractedly, her mind still on the faithless girl. She’d find another girl. There were girls that passed by in the street; but they'd no papers and they were dirty. It was too bad. This girl had had her papers, and she was clean, Jacinta admitted. She wasn't a bad girl. She just got frightened.

"More trouble than they're worth, sometimes," Jacinta said. “Some days the very soup tasted of her poison. The infant, in an older child's arms, began to sob and hiccup; Jacinta took it, slung it on her hip.

"At least just let me hold the baby," said Henriet; and this Jacinta allowed, passing her the sodden bundle. "Have you children?" Jacinta asked her then, and she remembers she didn't mind the question from this woman. She didn't remember when she'd ever held a baby. Perhaps it was the first time.

She told Jacinta Gerald had told her they shouldn't stay, that it was too awkward. The woman touched her cheek: "*Ah*, *mi nena*...You stay," Jacinta told her, but must not work. She would die of shame!

"All right," she agreed. She walked out to the patio with the infant, soothing it, allowing the mother to bring order to the kitchen. Above the patio wall,

plantain leaves moved and gently touched in the soft wind. She found a square of flannel on the clothesline; lay it out on a pine table and, taking off the sodden diaper, wrapped the child in it, feeling pleased and solemn.

The child cried the moment she put him down; but stopped when he was in her arms again. Then the servant dragged her tin trunk to the kitchen, along with several cardboard boxes, not tied up: Here were her things. They saw that she stole nothing! "Ah the devil with you and your boxes! Leave my kitchen!" screamed Jesusa, and the infant wailed. The girl was pale and dignified. Her brother was coming for her in his taxi, she said.

"*Bien*, *bien*, I bear no grudge," Jacinta, bending over pots, said to her guest, "She is good family; they're the worst."

She mistook her Spanish verb..

They had spent some more time in the kitchen while the taxi-driving brother came to pick up the pale and dignified girl; and, after she'd gone, Jacinta talked about her humorously but kindly. She had been with her a long time. The girl's mother used to work for Jacinta, it seemed, when the girl was a child. They called her Luz then; and she was being taught to play guitar, so she could enter the Miss *Estado Arango* competition at fifteen and save them all with the prize money. When she was twelve, she worked there with her mother. Even then,

she painted and used creams, flitting like a fairy, dusting, sweeping, afraid to break one of her long polished nails. A spook, Jacinta's husband called her. Henriet became curious about the husband.

"Is your husband in the army?" she asked.

“They told you that? He's in the barracks, yes," Jacinta said evasively. "How long have you been married, *nena*?" she asked.

"Well, we've been together seven years,” she said. “That is we are not married..."

She had meant to say “we *were* not married”—meaning in the first three years they spent in Michigan for Gerald's graduate school—mistook her Spanish verb...as she often did those days. But Jacinta had interrupted with a confession of her own:

“Ah, well, I'll tell you then, he neither is my husband, nor is in the barracks. He's the father of a number of these brats. My man, who left, just after that one you're holding, for the barracks, it is true. A month ago, however, they came looking for him, officers, they told me they can't find him. So, *mi nena*, we are sisters!"

“Yes, sisters, she’d said. It was still possible, of course, to change the verb, explain; but, since mistake had been the agent of this breaking of a barrier, of

this desired intimacy, she was silent, thinking how, while she loved Gerald as much as she thought possible, she needed this, this woman for a friend.

"Let me help you with the babies." she'd said. She was going to have a child, she needed to learn, she told the woman..

"Ah, *nena*," Jacinta touched her cheek. "You'll soon enough have problems of your own. Not that I won't be glad of you a couple days."

If Gerald understood, she thought, he would forgive...

The child had finally gone to sleep, and the pots were finally all washed, Gerald seemed to have gone to bed, so they sat in the parlor and Jacinta told her more about the girl who had left her, about her problems.

She had nothing in common with this person, she thought.

“So tell me, *nena*, why he wouldn't marry you?" Jacinta asked then; and, amazingly, a second lie came unhesitant to her lips:

"Well, there's another woman,” she said. “He’s already married." Jacinta nodded..

And of course it was true that there was another woman. But it was the woman Gerald made pregnant when he was in high school—not herself—that Gerald couldn't marry.

“It's something never occurred to me," Jacinta murmured, "that I should have a little *Norteamericano* for a friend..."

"But why should it be strange?" she wanted to know.

Jacinta thought a moment: "Fab Soap" she said "That's all I ever knew about your country: it's where they make Fab Soap! And atom bomb! And dollar!" Henriet was looking at her stupified.

"It's that we are so poor. We look at you, that's all that comes into our heads, that we are poor."

"But, many people here are rich..." Henriet countered. "Gerald's people are rich…

"But they are few, and have the shame of all the rest of us. They can't forget about us, though they'd like to..."

"You and I, though..." said Henriet, "I mean I will give up my claim to atom bombs if you'll give up..."

Her shame? It wasn't so easy, she was thinking. But they would try! She would write to Jacinta, and they would see each other..."

Yes, perhaps. A child ran by; Jacinta grabbed him by his shirttails and hauled him off to bed. The power went off at ten, so she must take the candle, Jacinta advised.

Henriet undressed in the dark and lay beside the sleeping Gerald. As she turned to snuff the flame, the child stirred inside her, the first time.

They walked the next morning, to the smaller of the wharves to take a public launch to Juancho. The green fringe of the land came right to the water's edge. In front of it, was a line of wooden shacks. Behind was darkness. They landed below a rickety pile of boards, and were told the launch would come back for them in five hours. The heat, which she had hardly noticed earlier, was now a palpable presence, like molten metal.

They crossed the coarse black sand to find a place to change, chose one of the many shacks, called The Grand Hotel Caracas. On the verandahs, fish was being fried. They had to order something to have a room to change in. A Japanese of middle age attended them; and Gerald ordered *aguardiente* for himself, *cafe con leche* for her. The *aguadiente*, brought immediately, was served outside. Her coffee was so long in coming that she walked inside to a large central room that served as kitchen, parlor, bedroom, where the Japanese resided amid remarkable confusion. She remembers one corner filled, inexplicably—for there was no electricity—with appliances, all new in boxes. Another corner was filled with oriental dolls.

He poured her coffee, set it on a tray, then cleared the cot of dolls and signaled her to sit. She told him she wanted to go outside with her husband, but he insisted: "No, here." and, without asking if she wanted sugar, put three teaspoons in her cup. Oh, well, she would be amenable and drink it quickly. She

complimented him on his pretty things, thinking of the oddity of the Spanish language being the only link between them.

"*Contrabando*," he said. "I buy in the Port." That explained the dolls, the Osterizer, and the fry pans... Imports had been closed on such things for a year. The word "*contrabando*", passed between the natives like a dirty penny, was tendered to her, another foreigner, conspiratorially.

She went to a back room to put her bathing suit on. Through the moist, loose-fitting boards she saw the jungle dark behind. Again, the second time, the child stirred.

And so at last, she walked across black sand to the Pacific Ocean. Tub-warm, leaden, barely breaking into waves. She walked in the water until it came up to her neck. Some dugout boats, slant-rigged like sampans, passed her slowly with their drowsy fishermen reclining in their hulls. She swam diagonally to the mouth of a small river, then walked back along the sand. Some fishermen were "walking" their long dugouts down the beach by swinging, alternately, one end forward, then the other. She found Gerald and their blanket. He'd bought the bottle of *aguardiente* from the Japanese, and also an outrageously expensive can of sausages.

Contrabando. They were too salty for her. She felt slightly ill, besides. She flopped down flat, her hip and shoulder touching Gerald's flesh, turned coppery

already. The air felt like being in a womb. Everything was body temperature. A boy brought them a coconut with the top lopped off so that they could drink the milk by tipping it up over their mouths. The milk was cool, reminding her of the *badea* pulp Jacinta had served her the evening before. Was it only a day before? The conversation while Gerald slept seemed at that moment to have been hallucination.

Recalling Jacinta's narrow face, dark eyes, quick mouth, the small neat figure, slightly humped from carrying a child on her hip, she wonders what it was that she'd desired from the woman? She'd probably never write the promised letter, nor receive what would have been the barbarous reply spelled out in syllables:

Se ven De Que So Cafe.

But at that moment, she sat up and put a towel across her, worried about too much sun. Gerald, the betrayed Gerald, lay motionless, always more contented on a beach than she. And she'd thought how she would suffer, once the somnolence of that day was past. She would suffer for her fictions of the night before. Why had she always felt convinced that lying was a woman's vice? Her husband never lied, she knew. Merely kept silent sometimes, to satisfy certain social necessities...

But hadn't she kept silent, simply, having created a certain misunderstanding with a verb? But she'd been ready to embroider it. Embroidery was woman's

work. And she had wanted it so much...been so convinced this woman, this Jacinta...

But at that moment she wanted nothing. Unless it was for Gerald to make love to her: lengthily, indolently, humidly, without her having to stir a muscle. Right then, right there, right on that beach, or in the water, it didn't matter. If Gerald were to turn over right then and take her, and then leave her, irresponsibly, with child...to deliver herself alone, hung on a rope thrown over the roofbeam...

If he were to paddle off in one of these dugout boats, and only return years later to give her another, she would wait in a dark shack for him to come, the child to come, her blouse unbuttoned, giving suck...

She was about to ask him if the little room she'd changed in might be theirs to use for other purposes...when suddenly she felt such an uprising of nausea she ran across the sand into the water, brought up the coffee, and the crackers, standing in the water to her waist, and watching bits of cracker float away...

Of course...Of course, of course...

Jacinta was the woman Gerald couldn't marry.