

The Red Bus to San Pedro

His father is dead—slipped in the mud and fell thirty meters down the steep embankment at the end of la Avenida de los Santos. His mother, 88 and heartbroken, can't cope, phoned frantic with the bad news, begging him to return. Taxicabs, a trans-Atlantic flight, a day to handle the jetlag and then the train from Paris—three days travel to return home; the same time it took Christ to rise from the dead.

Pablo Marquez ambles up to the counter of the café a block from his hotel, orders café con leche. The sun is still hiding beneath the distant horizon, contemplating its promise to return. The Celebration of All Souls has come and gone. It's that time of morning when the light has not yet remembered its name. The air is cool with the coming winter, and the byways are as quiet as forgotten shadows. Marquez leaves the café and walks out into the twilight.

The bus stand is empty, the news machines too. Every paper has, the previous evening, found a pair of hungry eyes, and the village's rotund paper man has yet to restock, hasn't even visited the distribution warehouse. The rancid smell of last night's revelry rises out of the gutter and hovers above the pavement. Wispy tongues of scent from spilled beer mixing with the oily street residue lick at the hairs of Marquez's gray

moustache as he walks along. The weary traveler takes a seat on the bus stop's lone whitewashed bench, a bench he's not sat upon in forty-two years.

Marquez sips his hot coffee from a cardboard-wrapped container while he tries to dredge from his memory the history of each home and each business lining the town square. His parents moved from here twenty years ago. Moved back onto the mountain, to a tiny village near San Pedro just west of Zaragoza where they once lived, where they had raised him, taught him to remember his way home, the way a tiny sea turtle emerging from the dry sand remembers his way back to the ocean. Marquez waits for the driver in the olive-green uniform, waits in the dead of morning for the red bus to San Pedro, as he had so many summers ago. The humid air cloaks him in memories, memories of dark mornings after he'd missed the last bus of the evening, having lingered too long in the arms of a young girl whose eyes opened onto the world. He suppresses his desire to speak her name.

Gods once roamed here. The Pyrenees are named for the Greek goddess Pyrene, daughter of Bebryx, who after being raped by Heraklos, fled into the mountains and was eaten by wild animals. Marquez shifts around, pulls the fare to San Pedro from his wallet and waits. He feels old enough to have been one of the gods, and wise enough to be glad that he is not.

The first rays of the morning fall upon the white stone surrounding him. The brightness reminds Marquez of the reason he left this place—the walls, the chalky white walls lining the perimeter of this village, as a young man he couldn't abide walls, still can't. The sharp teeth of the wild animals living on the other side were never reason enough for walls. Marquez curses his nature. He might have been a happier man if he'd

found some way to overcome the isolation he'd once felt here, living in such a desolate locale, walls on all sides. Back then his desire to leave was overwhelming. Today, the trepidation he feels in returning has become a name. He concentrates. Marquez brings the girl to mind: Maria. And then, as if the act of calling forth her name had released magic onto the earth, the walls of San Sebastian press taut against his heart, their embrace like the arms of a voluptuous woman, wrapped around him so tight he might smother. Marquez is old now, more reasonable. Perhaps to smother in the arms of a woman you love would not be so bad.

The red bus rounds the corner, its tailpipe spewing noxious black diesel smoke into the crisp morning air. The brakes squeal, the red bus stops and the doors open. Marquez steps up, hands the driver his fare and waits for permission to take his seat. The man in the olive-green uniform hardly notices him as he waves his index finger in a tight circle. He is, of course, the same man Marquez remembers from his youth. He doesn't know the man's name, and has never asked. Marquez says nothing as he walks to the rear of the red bus.

They're off, breeze whistling through the open windows. The light green, yellow and red ochre buildings that line the plaza blur into a canvas of life as the bus speeds away toward the walls of San Sebastian. At the town gate they pass under an archway that bears an inscription painted in black: "Farewell traveler, until we meet again." They are free now, climbing up the steep dirt road that winds its way into the foothills east of the mountain. The scenic countryside is as Marquez remembers it to be, cobalt blue skies, wisps of pink morning clouds, lush green foliage shrouded in a fog of yellow dust rising from the roadway.

Marquez is not the only passenger. Two middle-aged women and a thin young man, all of whom must work in San Pedro, are seated around the bus, closer to the middle than Marquez, who's always preferred sitting in the backs of buses. It satisfies an instinctual curiosity he has about the passengers. He can play the game of wondering who they are, why they are here, their stories cracking open before his mind's eye like the shells of fertile eggs.

The two women are servants. That's obvious from their dress; one even wears a faded white apron covered with pictures of pink and red roses. The woman seated closer to the driver is more attractive than most. Perhaps she is having an affair with the wealthy plantation owner, the one to whom she serves coffee each morning, the one who whispers in her expectant ear as his wife leaves the dining room.

And the other, the plainer of the two, she resents her companion, or perhaps she is only envious of the attention she attracts. Could it be she's lived her entire life in the shadow of her alluring friend, a hidden fire ever rising beneath her breast, an aching, a secret passion waiting to engulf just once, one of the myriad men whose heads spin as she and her beautiful counterpart walk through the shaded streets of San Pedro?

The young man is a loner. He has a job keeping the books for the only businessman in the tiny village who is busy enough and wealthy enough to hire an accountant—the banker. Hardly more than a boy out of high school, he is well kept, wearing smart brown loafers and a tan blazer that is heavier than it needs to be for the early fall. Likely it is the only jacket he owns, but that will not soon be so. Someday he will make enough money to travel. Someday the ambitious young man will flee San Sebastian for points west, Mexico City, Miami, perhaps even New York. And when he

remembers this place he will smile a melancholy smile, recounting his humble beginnings, memories of when he owned only one set of work clothes, and of his life before he'd broken the heart of a young woman, leaving her with only a broken promise to return.

It is no more than a thirty-minute ride to San Pedro, and before long small houses dot the sides of the roadway. The red bus passes a man, singing in full voice, leading an old donkey with a graying midriff down the steepening road. His own father, Javier Marquez, would walk this same road down to San Sebastian, wearing the accepting, often infectious smile of a man grateful for the life of hard work he had chosen. For more than sixty years his father strode up and down these mountain roads, using his sonorous tenor voice to sing away his day, as he used to say. Marquez leans out of the bus window and catches a few notes that the man with the donkey has tossed toward the red bus.

“Vaya con dios mi vida! Vaya con dios mi amor!” he sings, clutching at his heart the way Marquez’s father used to. The man’s voice is transcendent, as lush as spring leaves brushing against clean white sheets, the vibrato tugging Marquez back to his own childhood. For a moment he is a boy lashed to a raft, its rudder snared in the invisible current of a deep river. As the bus passes, the singing man waves to Marquez and smiles. Marquez hangs his arm out of the window and waves back. Papa? he almost says, his mouth hanging open until the swirling yellow dust forces it closed. He rubs at his eyes and stares at the man and the gray donkey until they are lost around the next bend.

The red bus winds through the final twisting switchbacks of the narrow throughway and then, summiting the last uphill stretch, it coasts into the central square of San Pedro. The engine sounds strained, like a new mother breathing heavily after a

difficult labor. The bustle of morning fills the air, children off to school, their parents mulling about the plaza. The young man and the two women from San Sebastian get off the bus at the town's busy transit stand. This is not the last stop.

The olive-clad driver glances into the rear-view and notices Marquez still stretched out, legs crossed, as if the old man owns the back bench seat of his bus. He removes his green driver's cap, rises from behind the wheel and traipses back toward Marquez. When he arrives in front of him the driver removes his glasses, and his shoulders hunch into a troubled shrug.

"If you get out here," he says, "I can turn the bus around and head back to San Sebastian."

"But, I'm going all the way to the end."

The driver breathes in, and exhales with fresh resignation. "I'm not going seven more kilometers up that mountain for one fare."

"How will I get to my stop?"

The man in green sighs once more. "If I pick up one more fare I will take you up to the last stop. If not, you'll have to find your own way. We'll wait fifteen minutes."

Marquez says nothing, hoping the silence expresses his disgust. The driver turns and makes his way back behind the wheel.

The plaza is alive with children's laughter, music blaring from radios, mothers scurrying behind rambunctious boys running in and out between the columns of the covered walkways. Marquez has never had the desire to join that throng. His focus is numbers, the settling of accounts. He too is an accountant, like the young man, but Marquez is not going back to work. This journey is a means to set things in order, to put

things in balance, but he is uneasy. The farther he travels up Mount Corazon the less he is able to gauge the value of this endeavor. Surely they can bury his father without him.

What good is an old man at a funeral? And the girl—she is an old woman now, has likely taken work as a housekeeper somewhere near here. Marquez smiles, imagining how she must still turn the heads of the men of San Pedro. But his smile soon wanes, and his heart sinks deeper into his empty soul. Likely Maria has written him off as lost, never to return. He chose the pursuit of unbridled success over the ties that bind. Now, having returned here to San Pedro, the simplicity of all life is peeling back before his eyes.

In his day, Marquez has made a fortune, more money than one man could ever hope to spend. But, he has no descendents. Upon his death all of it, everything he has ever earned, will sift its way into the hands of charitable organizations, his church and even an orphanage. Rearranging his will has, in some small way, brought him a feeling of closure, but it's not enough. Philanthropy is often an impersonal choice, born of guilt and not contrition. He will apologize to the beauty he deserted, tell her he's always loved her, tell them all he is sorry for having abandoned his past. He holds his chin a little higher. True redemption can come only from forgiveness. Knowing this, Marquez feels lighter. So light that if the bus driver refuses to take him any further he might just float the rest of the way up the side of this mountain, an updraft under an angel's wings.

The driver lifts his glasses and rests them atop his head as he puckers his lips and blows out a breathy whistle. A young woman, near bursting from the top of her form-fitting white dress, is approaching the red bus. It is the girl from Marquez's past, unchanged in the forty-two withering years that he has spent away from San Pedro. She

rounds the front of the bus under the watchful eye of the man in green, then steps inside and pays the fare.

“You are going up to la Avenida de los Santos?” she asks the driver.

“I am now,” he says, pointing to the rear.

Marquez stands. The girl whose name he hesitates to repeat approaches. She walks to the back of the bus, but stops two rows in front of him and sits facing away, as if the rift in time that lies between him and the young goddess has erased her memory. He leans forward, enough to see her angular features in profile. Her skin is as clear as a blank page.

“Could it be you don’t remember me?” he says to her.

She lifts her head, but only stares forward. “That could be. Or it could be that I never knew you.”

The driver closes the doors to the bus and pulls away from the stop, swerving around the white marble statue of the Angel Gabriel gracing the center of the plaza. He turns onto a steep one-lane road that climbs further up the shoulder of Mount Corazon. The bus creaks as it bumps over the ruts and rocks, the squeaking of the shocks a confirmation that the vehicle is indeed on a road and not careening off into some imaginary world where Marquez is getting younger.

“I promised you I’d return,” he calls over to her, raising his voice above the din.

“And now here you are,” she says, still aiming her conversation toward the front of the bus. She removes a small compact from her purse, cracks open the lid and powders her nose. She bends her head at a series angles, as if she is surveying a broad terrain, then

steals a glimpse at Marquez in the tiny mirror. Finally she closes her compact and turns to him. “I can assure you, I know nothing of what you are talking about.”

Could it be that she is still mad at him, after all these years? Would she never forgive him for pursuing his passion? Perhaps this is not the girl he remembers. Could the time he’s spent away from this place have dulled his senses so much that he can no longer recall whether this woman is *the* woman, the paramour from his ardent and damaging first love affair? Marquez looks at his outstretched hand. The deep wrinkles and dark spots betray his hope that he too has somehow cheated the years. No, he is old and she is young, and time does not play such elaborate pranks. He doesn’t wish to become a pest, so Marquez sits in silence for the remainder of the journey.

Before they reach the final stop a teenager riding a bicycle darts out in front of the bus. He’s wearing a yellow rain slicker, the kind an ocean fisherman might wear. The bus screeches to an abrupt halt. An identical incident plays out as a memory from Marquez’s childhood. The bus bringing his tutor back from San Sebastian swerves—the bus’ horn sounds, blaring out at the boy in the road, and from the depths of Marquez’s memory simultaneously.

The young woman springs from her seat. “Pablo!” She dashes to the front of the bus. The driver opens the door. She bounds down and out to the boy, and after admonishing him for several seconds she smiles, and squeezes him tight to her torso. Marquez remembers the feel of her lithe arms wrapped around his shoulders, her soft breasts pressing against his rain slicker. His strange uncle Alejandro had brought the slicker back with him from America—had given one to each of his nephews. Marquez

used to wear his when riding through the scrubby stands of poplar and lime trees so that the razor thin shoots didn't tear up his cheeks and arms.

That first time she'd held him, he'd told himself he loved her. That was forty-seven years ago, but it is also now. This whole journey has become a penance, payback for his past, the worst of his transgressions splayed open before him like a mortal wound. The driver in green closes the door and eases past the boy, guiding the blood-red bus further toward the last stop.

With perhaps just a kilometer to go Marquez can stand it no longer. "Wait! Stop!" he yells at the driver. He bounds from his seat and makes his way up the center aisle.

"What?"

"Go back. I want to go back."

The driver turns, gazing into Marquez's desperate eyes. Reflected in the lenses of the driver's mirrored sunglasses Marquez sees a pathetic old man rife with regret, looking forlorn, shrinking into an abyss of time.

"I cannot go back," the driver says.

"You must!"

"But the bus, it has no reverse. We cannot go back, señor. Besides, we are almost there, see?"

The man in green points up ahead. An isolated bus stop with a dark yellow sign grows up in the distance. Marquez walks back toward his seat, and for a brief moment he experiences that strange feeling of moving backwards even though the vehicle he is walking inside is hurtling in the opposite direction. He takes his seat again, comes to the

grudging realization that his good intentions are meaningless unless they are accompanied by a second chance.

The driver pulls toward the last stand, rounds the circle and then jerks the vehicle to a halt. It will take a little under an hour for the red bus to make its way back to San Sebastian, but Marquez will not be on board. He's come back to the top of Mount Corazon, across furious seas of reckoning and dreams of forgiveness in the hopes that his future is not an unending circle of recrimination.

"Last stop," the driver yells, and opens the door.

In the distance Marquez's mother is waiting for him on the front steps of their faded home. She waves. A tear wells up in the corner of his eye. He waves back to her. She is crying. He wants to call out to her: See mother, I told you I would return, but he can't find his voice. He is drowning in the very air that surrounds him. The vision of his mother blurs behind his tears. Marquez closes his eyes, covering them with his open palms, and for a time he is swallowed by the darkness.

Has his soul ever left this place? He has travelled the world. Achieved more than most men ever dream of achieving, and for what? What force ever drove him toward the arms of such madness? Here is where his life was full, here at this place where his father and his father before him lived, and loved, and died. He has returned, crossed an ocean and travelled up this mountain, ready to abandon his past.

Marquez opens his eyes. The world outside the bus is blurry, nondescript. Green leaves, and the myriad shades of the brown-skinned trees have all faded to a cold dark blue. The black horizon creeps toward him—night falling in the daytime.

The red bus has gone dark. The driver's mirrored glasses are faint lights at the end of a long tunnel. Marquez stands, and with his last ounce of energy he tries to creep back toward the front of the bus, but he has become helpless, an innocent being with no past. The passage forward opens before him like an eyelid. He is delivered into two hands that reach out to support his head. He is still crying, but now he has no memory of why.