

GARAJONAY

Phyllis Gonzales wanted to be anonymous. She was sick of the news reports, seeing Hernán's picture over and over, his life in review, the circumstances of his death. The press devoured the details of their marriage, his ruined career, their son. The more salacious, the better. All over Twitter too—like binging vultures, that's what they were. She shut down her account—and Facebook as well, after his face came up in several photos from a previous year, celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary. Facebook wanted to know if she would like to share these happy memories with everyone.

Phyllis stood smoking outside on the terrace of the hotel, watching the sun set over the ocean. She extinguished her cigarette in a bowl of white sand and went back inside to wait in line with the others in the group, who were checking in. She had signed up for a hiking trip in the Canary Islands, which was only a two and half hour plane ride from her home in Madrid. It seemed exotic enough; the islands were off the northwest coast of Africa, and this way, she could be with people—anonymous but not completely solitary.

It was a diverse group: a couple of newlyweds and other young people in their twenties, sporting sturdy boots and wearing bandanas with the logo of their hiking club. There were geologists and researchers as well as a photographer from National Geographic, and several women dressed in matching sports outfits who were, to judge from their cheery voices and boisterous laughter, overjoyed to be on vacation. Only one other person seemed to be traveling alone: a small bony woman, thirtyish, with a grim expression chiseled onto her face.

Phyllis had just turned fifty. To celebrate—or rather to mask the truth and make herself feel younger, she had gone shopping, bought herself a floppy straw hat, a happy yellow sundress with bright orange flowers and matching sandals for the trip. She was feeling rebellious, non-conformist. She had also bought new hiking boots which she hadn't broken in yet, along with thick socks, sturdy pants with side pockets and a red Gore-Tex rain jacket.

The sky was lit up in hues of pink and violet, with a few trailing clouds. She untied the cotton sweater around her neck and put it on. What she would give to lie on a beach. Forget the mountain hiking. It had been four months since Hernán's death. Three years since Luis, their

son, had kissed her goodbye for the last time, wearing his new climbing gear for the Pyrenees, the backpack stuffed with her sandwiches. A special trip with his father.

At the reception counter, Phyllis was disappointed to find out there were no single rooms available. She protested and even offered to pay extra, but she had already been assigned a room with Elena, the slight, grim-faced woman, who now glared at her.

Afraid she had hurt the young woman's feelings, Phyllis decided to make the best of it. She arranged her things tidily on one side of the room, put her cosmetic case on the shelf above the bathroom sink, her toothbrush in the glass, her clothes folded in a drawer, her jacket hung in the closet. She asked Elena which bed she preferred, secretly wishing for the one nearest the bathroom.

"This one," Elena said, pointing to the other bed.

"That's good— I usually get up in the middle of night—I've got the smallest bladder in the world." Phyllis laughed, relieved.

"Like my mother," Elena said in a tired voice. She unzipped her vest and threw it on the bed, then sat down to unlace her boots. She wore a long-sleeved shirt and brown nylon pants.

"You look like a seasoned hiker," Phyllis said.

Elena frowned. "No. I just needed to get away."

"Me too." Phyllis smiled.

"You look familiar," Elena said.

"Do I?" Her heart skipped. "People always think I remind them of their sister." Phyllis laughed faintly. She should have gone to Greece. Or taken a Baltic cruise.

"No, you don't remind me of my sister."

Phyllis yawned. "Well then, maybe your mother—or your grandmother." She forced a laugh.

"No, you're not that old." Elena kept staring at her.

Phyllis kicked off her sandals, turned to plump the pillows on the bed. How old did Elena think she was? Didn't one age with grief?

"My grandmother is dead," Elena said.

"Oh, well. Your mother then. Maybe it's just *déjà-vu*."

Elena shrugged.

Nothing more. The moment passed, and there was that silence—like a ghost had passed through. They both got ready for bed. Phyllis read for a while, scrolling on her iPad, while Elena tapped her phone, studying an app about birds on the Canary Islands. After a while they said good night and Phyllis turned off the light.

Elena immediately began to snore. Phyllis lay on her back, thinking about Hernán, how she would tap him on the shoulder and try to make him change position when he snored. It was usually after he had too much to drink, or on those long plane trips—or after the trip to the Pyrenees, barely alive, and then later, worsened by sleeping pills. Their sex life gone. Like two mummies. Elena snored on steadily with rhythmic precision and a soft flutter of the lips. Sleepless, Phyllis got up and stuffed cotton balls in her ears.

Early the next morning, the group boarded a bus with their local guide Damian, to visit the rim of the volcano, El Teide. Capped with snow, it rose before them on a blue cloudless day, a majestic cone surrounded by jagged mountains and centuries-old rivulets of lava, thick black, rusty brown and ochre hues, frozen in time. Standing at the base of the volcano, the jarring landscape made Phyllis feel like she was on another planet, or the moon. Even the weather had changed, from a balmy seventies down by the beach, where they wore shorts, to a sharp bitter cold. They had all donned fleece jackets. She shivered, in awe of the view.

Elena had climbed up on top of a large rock formation and stood defiantly, arms crossed over her windbreaker vest, her eyes narrowed, surveying the land as though she were calculating the distance. Her small body was taut and compact, the Spandex shirt outlining the muscles in her arms. Definitely a loner, thought Phyllis, which was just as well.

The group set off towards the cable car station at the base of the volcano and all twenty squeezed themselves into one glass enclosed tram that brought them mid-way up the peak. From there, they trudged uphill with their backpacks, weaving along a zig zag path, stopping only to catch their breath or drink water. Phyllis and Elena followed, last in line. Phyllis, having slept poorly, heaved for air and had to stop. She was out of shape. Her boots were too tight. The other hikers eagerly scrambled up to the edge of the crater. Phyllis and Elena straggled behind but finally managed to reach the top. The group rested, snapped photos of the rock formations below, the fabulous view of the ocean, with the islands of La Gomera and Hierro in the distance.

The crater itself was desolate, a circle of chalky white rock with no plant life, just a faint mist emanating from its depths and a stench of sulfur, like rotten eggs. Phyllis' heart pumped in

the thin air. She longed to get back down to the hotel where she could put her feet up, smoke a cigarette and have a drink. Elena, on the other hand, seemed to have gotten a second wind. She shouted when she got to the top, raised her fists to the sky and asked Phyllis to take her photo, smiling tightly. At least Elena was rested, thought Phyllis, irritably. On the way down, Elena thrust forward and passed everyone else with renewed energy, waving her visor cap triumphantly and spitting like a man, when she arrived first at the cable car station. Phyllis was completely spent.

The next day the group took a ferry from Playa Los Cristianos to the smaller island of La Gomera. Phyllis watched for dolphins that never appeared. The women with matching outfits chattered away, the younger couples snapped selfies while the researchers compared notes. Elena stood off by herself on the top deck, her chin jutted, face to the sky, arms crossed like a Viking explorer. Phyllis looked back at the snow-capped volcano, El Teide, amazed to think they had been on top just the day before.

Hernán would have enjoyed this, she thought. An avid hiker, historian and cartographer, his lifelong passion had been tracing paths, studying the routes of the Spanish explorers in the new world. He collected maps as a hobby. Now of course, with Google maps, all that seemed obsolete, which annoyed him to no end. People had their noses glued to their smart phones, he complained; they had lost common sense, and missed familiar landmarks right before their eyes. Of course, he admitted, it could be useful in the mountains—but what good was a GPS, thought Phyllis, when you were buried under seven feet of snow?

Phyllis had met Hernán at a conference in Boston. A visiting scholar from Madrid, he was participating in forums in 1992 to celebrate five centuries since Columbus' discovery of the New World. She was a simultaneous translator and this had been her first important job. Nervous, but euphoric to be at such a prestigious event among renowned scholars, she found it easy to translate for him. Afterwards, he thanked her for her efforts and there was an instant connection; love flowed between them easily, naturally. He was curious, a seeker, as was she.

After a brief courtship, they married and travelled widely. Once they went to California, retracing the route of the Spanish Jesuits, from south to north. In San Francisco, Hernán knelt among the tombstones in the Mission Dolores, and under the shade of the palm tree, surrounded by rosemary bushes, he had prayed. Later, living in Spain, they continued to travel and hike in

the mountains around Madrid. Luis was born, and they took him along, toting him in a baby carrier. When Luis was older he collected wild flowers with his mother and learned from his father how to distinguish which mushrooms were edible. Hernán taught him to read maps and pitch a tent, to secure the ropes and clamps on their rock climbs. He made him promise never to travel alone. The highpoint was to have been a trip to the National Park of Ordesa in the Pyrenees which Hernán organized for Luis' nineteenth birthday, just the two of them.

The ferry landed on the island and the group boarded a bus, which wound its way slowly up and around the mountains. As the bus swerved left and right, Damian pointed out the effects of the volcano, offering colorful anecdotes about the isolated inhabitants. Phyllis swayed in her seat, feeling sick. She bumped shoulders with Elena, who had reverted into her shell, sitting by the window again looking grim, fists clenched. Phyllis tried to maintain herself upright, hands folded primly in her lap, feet and thighs pressed together just as she had as a young girl on the bus in Boston, on her way to elementary school.

They stopped at a restaurant for lunch and afterwards, there was a demonstration of *silbo*, the whistle calling which had developed into a language of its own over time. It had been used to communicate on the island, from the top of one mountain peak to another, but was now a dying art. To demonstrate, one waiter cupped his two hands together, as though he were holding a large conch, then gave a loud blow, like a shrill bird call. Phyllis was startled by its intensity.

"I need water!" "I'm thirsty!" cried another waiter, feeding him phrases so that the whistler could translate.

"Fire!" "Help!" The other man whistled, varying the intensity and inflection, adding a little flair at the end, like a flute glissando. "Bananas!" "Whiskey!" The group laughed with approval and tipped the waiters generously. Elena guffawed like a truck driver and sputtered, trying to make whistling sounds with her hands. Phyllis marveled. It was like an old-fashioned Twitter, she thought. She tweeted Hernán mentally: you would have enjoyed this, dear. Imagine, sending each other little messages of love, a hint, an invitation. Luis. I loved you. Hernán. I can't forgive you.

That night, Elena retreated into their room, studying her phone apps on birds and the weather. Phyllis went outside to smoke. It was a crescent moon, and the outline of the mountains stood in relief, the sky pulsing with stars. She whistled between her teeth, the way her father had

taught her. A sliver of sound. What could she say anyway? Hernán. Why? When Phyllis returned to the room, Elena was fast asleep, snoring.

At breakfast, Damian urged them all to try *gofio*, a typical food on the island. A rust-colored flour, it was known for its nutritious qualities, an essential food source during times of famine. Elena heaped several spoonfuls on her cereal and ate with gusto.

“Try it,” Elena said, between mouthfuls. Phyllis had no taste for it, but Elena insisted. It seemed unpalatable, a nuisance, mixing it with her granola and yoghurt, which was perfectly fine the way it was. Elena munched away noisily, like a horse. Phyllis looked away, finished her fruit, then went to fetch her backpack. Elena was getting on her nerves.

“I’ll go with you,” Elena said.

Elena’s backpack was twice the size of Phyllis’ packed with God knows what. Phyllis was used to a light pack— it was Hernán who always carried the heavier one, with plenty of water and the first aid kit. He packed everything just so: the plastic tarp first, then the crampons and boot covers, the extra clothing, compass and maps, in the top pocket; the jack-knife and binoculars in the side flaps. Phyllis carried sunscreen and the lunch, usually ham and cheese sandwiches but sometimes her favorite, peanut butter and jelly. She also packed dried apricots, just in case. Hernán was diabetic. Funny, how he had been reorganizing his equipment that last night, before he died. Looking for the carabiners and climbing rope. Of course, she should have suspected.

They were on the trail. Phyllis bent down to tighten the laces on her new high-cut Salomon boots. They had thick rubber soles, reinforced at the toe, but she hadn’t broken them in sufficiently. They were hard as rocks. She had been silly not to break them in beforehand as the salesperson had advised—of course she knew that, she was an experienced hiker after all. She had brought along Hernán’s old battered poles because the springs on hers had broken, but now wished she hadn’t. Too many reminders.

Trekking single file, Elena walked behind her, breathing heavily, the rhythmic thud of her poles digging into the earth with each step. The other women in the group chattered and flirted with the photographer and the geologists, while the researchers discussed their findings; the younger people marched ahead at a faster pace. Phyllis fell to the back of the line. She didn’t feel

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like engaging in conversation. She wanted peace, to get in touch with nature, the volcano and the sea, blissful in her anonymity.

She smelled the ferns, the moss, the moist earth, while keeping her eye on the path, watching out for ruts and stones. She daydreamed, trying to block out the annoying thump and clatter of Elena's poles. But when the trail steepened before her, she gasped for air. She wondered if she'd make it to the top. Her heart beat ferociously. She stopped to sip water, and lagged farther behind the rest of the group. Elena struggled past her without saying a word, grunting and plunging her poles into the ground with a fury. Phyllis waited to catch her breath, enjoying the quiet. Her feet had begun to bother her and she could feel the blisters forming, her big toe rubbing painfully against the leather. The boots were too snug; she hadn't bought the larger size, as the salesperson had advised, out of pure vanity.

Hernán would have chided her. Why wasn't she wearing her old boots, which were already broken in? She did have plenty of water at least, and the dried apricots and other things for emergencies or a change in the weather. But none of that had saved Luis, had it?

"You okay Phyllis?" asked Damian, who had come back to the last of the stragglers, to make sure no one was left behind.

"Yes, fine." She got up and plodded on, determined to ride it out stoically. She hated complainers, people who made a fuss.

Soon the group began their descent through Garajonay Park. Down the canyon they went, where a deep mist had settled over the laurel forest. The gnarled trees, drenched with thick moss, were covered with a spidery veil of fuzzy green lichen. With curved trunks and knobby branches, they seemed to be listening, like stooped old women wearing fishnet shawls. The ground was soft underfoot; an owl hooted and small lizards skittered under the brush. Phyllis pushed branches out of the way; thistles clawed at her skin. The mist grew denser.

The rest of the group headed off briskly but Phyllis and Elena fell back once again to the end of the line. Phyllis clutched her poles, keeping her eye on the trail, trying to ignore the blisters. Elena, with determination etched on her face, stabbed the ground, her poles striking dirt and rocks in her way. She jerked this way and that, the backpack sliding to and fro, dodging between the trees. They crouched and squeezed their way under and around like mountain goats, shuffling and slipping up and down the trail.

Forging through the thorny brush, Phyllis tripped, hitting her toe on a big tree root which lay broken and twisted, like a dismembered arm. She cried out in pain. As they progressed, the sky darkened and the shrubs and walls of the canyon seemed to close in on her. After struggling up a steep hill, the mist cleared, then on the descent, it returned, enclosing them in an eerie white veil. She kept her knees bent and her weight forward, as Damian had instructed her, so she wouldn't lose her balance and land on her rear end.

Exhausted, Phyllis dropped back to rest. Damian came up from the rear and asked her if she needed help but she told him to go on, she would meet them at the top of the next peak. She removed a boot, examined her toes and put new Band-Aids on. Her feet were a mess, she was ashamed to admit.

Elena straggled up to her. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Blisters."

"Doesn't look good." Elena removed her backpack and sat down. She guzzled some water from her canister, then offered some to Phyllis.

"I'll wait for you. But first I need to find a place to pee." Elena tromped off, whacking at the bushes, the branches crackling under her feet. Phyllis heard a cry, and a sharp snapping sound.

"Elena?" A light rain had started to fall. Phyllis laced up her boots quickly and limped over in the direction where Elena had gone. She called out again.

"Where are you?" She reached a precipice and looked down. Elena had fallen onto a narrow stone ledge, about three meters' steep. She was rocking back and forth, holding her ankle, groaning in pain.

"Oh God," she moaned. "I think I've broken it."

"I'll get help."

"No! You can't leave me here, goddammit."

Phyllis pondered. The rain came down steadily.

"Wait, maybe I can slide down." Phyllis sat on her butt, and slid on the rocks. Her pants caught on a branch and ripped. She landed with a thump.

"I have my phone," Elena said. "Call Damian." But the phone was useless, there was no coverage. The wind picked up.

Elena began to cry.

“Now stop it,” Phyllis said. This was the last thing she needed—Elena, falling apart on her. All this time, pretending to be so strong, but she couldn’t live without her phone. Phyllis hated that dependency. She was like her mother, who had always told her to be strong, control her emotions. This wouldn’t do. She took out her first aid kit, found the gauze bandage and wrapped it around Elena’s ankle.

“Elena, please stop it,” she said, but Elena snuggled closer and clutched her arm, grimacing with pain. Phyllis wasn’t used to these displays of affection. Her own mother had never hugged nor indulged her. And Hernán wasn’t the type either—except for the beginning of their relationship. Their healthy lust, the one thing that had carried them through those early years. How sad that sex had become so perfunctory, apart in bed, a dry kiss in the morning.

“Damian will come back any minute— when we don’t show.” But he seemed to take forever. A wind came up, and the rain continued. Elena’s swollen ankle had doubled in size and they were both chilled. Phyllis wished she had brought her heavy Gore-Tex rain jacket. She had left it behind, thinking it was too much weight, since the sun had been shining that morning. Hernán would have scolded her too, for taking this unnecessary risk. She searched Elena’s backpack and found a plastic tarp to protect them from the rain.

They huddled together, shivering, wedged into a crevice in the canyon wall. From time to time they shouted for help but no one came. Her mind wandered with its usual trickery, replaying the past. What did one think of in that last doomed moment?

“It’ll be getting dark soon,” Elena said.

Another hour passed. Phyllis shared the last of her sandwich, then they finished the dried apricots and a few almonds.

“They’ll find us.” It wasn’t like they had wandered way off the path. But mountains had a way about them, capable of treachery at any moment.

“Can I tell you something?” Elena said softly. Here it was.

“My mother was in a terrible car accident three years ago, Elena said. “Now she’s a tetraplegic, in a special care center south of Madrid, in Toledo. My dad died in the crash. My older brother is married, with two kids, and my younger sister moved to London with her husband and children, so I’m stuck, the middle child. I’m single, no kids, so I’m the one that has to be with my mom, talk to the doctors, make sure she takes her medicine and does the exercises—the little that she can do. She can’t speak. She looks at me with those eyes—and I

know this is a terrible thing to say, but those eyes say, let me die. I try to bring her back to life, I spoon feed her like a baby, comb her hair, read to her; I touch her forehead to see if she has a temperature, the way she did to me when I was little. In between, the physical therapists do what they can—which is nothing. It all falls on me. I told my brother and sister I needed a break. So I came here, to get away.”

Elena’s voice quavered. “My mother used to be an Olympic swimmer.”

“I’m sorry,” Phyllis said.

“Do you know what that’s like?” Elena burst out, her words sharp as knives against slate. “To see your own mother, unable to move, her scared face, the atrophied muscles, the bedsores and the scaly skin, who can’t feel a thing when you massage her toes, or press her hand, stuck inside in a cold metal wheelchair for the rest of her life. Do you know how I feel? I’m cursed! Sometimes I want to kill her!” Elena sobbed. “I didn’t mean that, I didn’t—”

“It’s all right,” Phyllis said. “Of course, it’s a terrible burden. You’ve had it all bottled up inside.” Elena covered her face with her hands.

Phyllis patted her on the back, the way she did sometimes when Hernán was despondent— a useless gesture, their physical intimacy long gone, her body a dried-up fig. Of course, other people had their tragedies too.

They heard Damian calling for them and were finally discovered. Damien slid down the rock, landed easily on the shelf, and surveyed the pair of women in silence. After bandaging Elena’s leg, he managed to hoist them up to the main path with the aid of another guide who had come with a stretcher. Damian was livid.

“You’re my responsibility. If anything happens to a member of the group, I’m screwed!”

“I’m sorry,” said Phyllis, thinking he shouldn’t have left them alone in the first place.

Reunited with the main group, they called an ambulance. While they waited, Damian related the legend of Gara and Jonay, two ill-fated lovers who lost their way in the forest after a powerful earthquake. El Teide erupted and the sea around La Gomera turned a glowing red. The lovers, unable to find their way out, took a lance made of laurel, sharpened at both ends and stabbed themselves in their chests. They died in each other’s embrace. Hence, the mysterious misty forest was given the name Garajonay.

Such were life's choices—so confounding, thought Phyllis, bitterly. What a lot of fuss, that could have been avoided.

Phyllis woke up the next morning with a head-ache, dizzy and exhausted from the events of the previous day. Elena had been taken to the hospital, where the doctors put her foot in a cast. It was their last day on the island. Before leaving, the group went to visit the Casa de la Aduana, a white square stucco building from the fifteenth century with a red tiled roof and wooden beams. In the center of the inner courtyard there was a well, with a plaque dedicated to Columbus. Supposedly he had drawn water there right before he set off for the New World and had used it to bless the trip.

How odd, that in all her travels with Hernán, retracing the footsteps of the Spanish colonizers, they had never been here, where it started. She walked around the stone well; the bucket and pulley, still attached with a thick rotted cord. She peered inside and spit into the dark space, to see if she could hear it hit the waters' surface. She heard a faint plop. She craned over and thought she saw her face reflected, then was taken aback.

It was Hernán's.

Here he was again, staring at her oddly, as she had found him. His eyes, open and accusing; the mouth and purple tongue—mute. His body swinging gently over his desk. The smell of urine. The climbing rope and carabiners hanging from the ceiling. A crumpled note. The dove cooing on the window ledge, unperturbed. The lowered blinds, the deadly heat, the fan whirring, the trellised wallpaper like a ragged cage, closing in on her. A hush, and a scream. The phone call, the paramedics, the shattered glass and the map, torn into a thousand pieces; picking at shards with bleeding fingers, then scrubbing the rug uselessly in an insane moment.

Phyllis hurried back to the bus, ignoring the others. She found a window seat near the back and pressed her forehead against the cool pane. She put her sunglasses on, closed her eyes, folded her hands. When they arrived at the ferry terminal for their return trip to Tenerife, Phyllis waited until everyone else had boarded and then went to stand by herself at the rear. As the ferry pulled from shore she looked back at the island, the wide swath of the wake, the seagulls soaring in its path. Columbus must have had this view as he bid farewell to this last bit of land, still uncertain of his final destination.

Hernán had missed this part completely. She hit the railing with her fists. They were supposed to forge on—together. That’s what he said they must do. But instead, they had lain, side by side like those granite tombs of Spanish royalty with their likeness engraved on top—she could hardly remember the last time they had made love.

“Phyllis!” Elena called from behind her. Phyllis could hear her clomping along the deck, hobbling on crutches. She stood next to Phyllis, looking out over the ocean.

“Beautiful island, isn’t it?” Elena said.

Phyllis began to sob.

“Oh no.” Elena paused. “I’m really sorry—maybe my story upset you. And now this.” She groaned and tapped the cast with her crutch.

“Oh,” Phyllis said. She felt weak, her body trembled. Sniffing uncontrollably, her sunglasses slid off her nose; she grabbed them and wiped the tears hastily with the back of her hand. Elena turned and stared at her. A sudden recognition.

“Phyllis, I meant to tell you—thank you—for listening. It was like a weight just lifted off me. I know you—“

“Stop it will you!” Phyllis cringed. She wasn’t going to accept any more pity. She kept her lips closed in a tight line, wordless, resisting. Elena looked out to sea. They said nothing.

Phyllis’ blood surged, her sorrow burned and smoldered, more tears flowed. Elena reached for her and the two women stood, hand in hand, braced against the wind, while Phyllis let the horror of the avalanche overtake her, suffocating her in its cold whiteness on Monte Perdido—Luis, Luis! Hernán had dug himself out, but left his son there, cocooned forever. Her hair blew back in her face like the fan whirring over her husband’s body, hanging like a sack. How to forgive?