

Chapter 1

Lean in closer.

This is a story that has the shape of a river. Imagine the shape of a river, and it not only looks like that but it moves like that too: inhaling, exhaling; rising and falling like lungs, like an empire. This story also undulates like the bellies of the midday drunks laughing in the shade of the large, spiny ceiba tree at a roadside bar. The most boisterous drunk turns and squints from the bright sunlight toward the dim interior of the bar, hollering to the bartender, “*¡Traite otra!*” He turns back to the other men sitting around the metal table. They are silent for the first time then, sweat beading on their foreheads, and each one contemplating the bottom of his clear plastic cup, with the last dredges of ice cubes melting in the midday heat.

There was a pause of stillness and then everything happened at once: hundreds of blackbirds in the nearby laurel trees began squawking like firecrackers. A tiny tornado of wind suddenly appeared, whirling down the highway. It layered a delicate spray of dust like lace across the tables, the midday drunks, and over the liquor store’s faded canvas awning. The wind drew in a few scattered plastic bags from the roadside, and tossed them skywards where the plastic bags danced and spun and disappeared into the cloudless heavens. The sandwich board advertising the roadside liquor store, *El Parabólico’s Licorería*, toppled in the dust, as if simply giving up, with an unflinching thunk.

The nun sitting at the bar took a long pull of her cigarette.

Half a minute later, all was still again except for the blackbirds, still chittering. The nun sighed. The drunks wondered why El Parabólico was taking so long with the bottle of tequila, and even the trees seemed resigned to the fact that practically nothing ever happened on Tuesdays on this stretch of highway in the middle of Mexico.

However, at that moment, a white Volkswagen van with gringo music blaring, squealed to a stop on the side of the highway in front of the roadside bar. Every eye turned to the spectacle. The cowboys— some on horseback and some sitting in the shade sipping beer— and the drunks at the table watched as a blonde girl flung herself from the passenger side of the vehicle, shouting at the driver. They didn't have to understand English to know she was furious, still yelling as she pulled a couple of backpacks from the van, tossing them into the dust.

Inside the bar, El Parabólico used one long arm to swat at a couple of flies in the limes. Unlike his clients, he hadn't noticed the commotion of the wind or the scene on the highway outside. Instead, he was carefully thumbing through his memories of the previous day and finding the files dusty and cobwebbed; after closing time last night, everything felt fuzzy.

El Parabólico had to acknowledge the unusual fact that he had woken up, balanced on the highest roof beam inside his neighbour's barn. His legs and arms had been dangling like an East African lion asleep in a tree, delicately balanced on a limb. The only reasonable explanation was the *chaneques*—those troublesome pixies were always making fun of his weakness for a good tequila. It must have been them. They had pulled him up to the top of the barn beam after he fell asleep and left him there, laughing to themselves.

His head hurt as he tried to think backwards to what had happened before waking up on the wooden beam. He had been drinking the previous afternoon with The Tuzero. The tall stranger wore a ratty vest, and one big white rain boot and one black rain boot cut off at the calf.

He had a long droopy moustache, unusual blue eyes the colour of an April sky, and at his feet there was a hairless xoloitzcuintli dog, the breed favoured by the Aztecs.

The stranger had called himself The Tuzero. El Parabólico had never heard of a “Tuzero” before, as if catching *tuzas*— those pesky gophers— was an actual job? He knew, the mysterious man said, how to eliminate the infestation of rodents that was plaguing El Parabólico’s corn patch. Mid-tequila bottle, they had agreed that the stranger would return the next day to start work.

However, The Tuzero seemed to have vanished, carried away like the sailing plastic bags in the sky. No one else remembered seeing him or his unusual hairless dog. No one knew where he had gone. El Parabólico kept wondering if he had imagined the whole conversation with this Pied Piper of tuzas. And now what was he going to do with the gophers still destroying the corn—the only patch of green as far as the eye could see?

Movement outside caught El Parabólico’s eye. There was a blonde girl in a bright green jumpsuit on the side of the road in front of his bar. Dust still swirling, he saw the girl tugging angrily at a surfboard on top of the van, shouting all the while. El Parabólico had never seen anyone with a surfboard in the desert before. She looked, as one might say around these parts, very strawberry, what with that perfect coif and designer sunglasses perched on the top of her head.

El Parabólico watched the dust rise all around as the van took off with squealing tires. The blond girl was quiet then, standing alone in the middle of the deserted highway. The van disappeared into the hazy distance. If the English and short shorts didn’t give her away as a foreigner, the long blonde hair, sturdy travel backpack, and the sandals with their flimsy ties

wrapped around her calves certainly did. Everyone watched as she slowly turned to pick up her bag and surfboard and look around.

Only one cowboy, astride his horse, dared to voice what everyone was thinking: “*Ya se va’ chillar,*” and the midday drunks nodded in agreement; she was likely to start crying. They were transfixed. It was as good as one of those scandalous and glamorous *telenovelas*, happening right here in front of them, on this stretch of highway close to nowhere.

El Parabólico had thought his situation was bad, what with the pixies and gophers and someone who called himself The Tuzero. But turning back to the bar, he laughed to himself, selected a bottle for the midday drunks, and mumbled out loud, “Now, there’s a girl who’s really lost.”

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Lety, the nun at the bar, stretched her legs and leaned back in her chair; a cloud of smoke of her own circled her head like a halo. The beer was cold at least. Everyone knew she liked to be left alone, fearing her temper that could pop like a green bean. The only others at the *licorería* were men: the drunks clustered outside in the shade of the tree, and others on their motorcycles or on horseback, passing around bottles of pale-yellow tequila tipping from their plastic cups.

She ignored their laughter.

Lety signaled to El Parabólico for another beer. By the angle of the sun it was probably the hour for praying Nones back in the cloistered convent. She snorted to herself. If she prayed now, it would be for the alcohol to drink her up so she could forget her role in the biggest catastrophe the convent had seen in the last four hundred years. She could never go back. Lety gripped the bottle in her fist and frowned to herself.

When a foreigner walked in, Lety glanced up. Yesterday, while sitting in the exact same chair, she had seen a stranger come in the bar, an oddly-dressed old man with a drooping moustache and a xoloitzcuintli dog. It felt like déjà vu; another stranger coming in the bar, and the same wind blowing in gusts down the highway. The blonde girl ordered a drink in a harsh accent. The usual foreigners around here were the *pochos*, spending their dollars freestyle and speaking a Spanish inflected with gringo, but this girl surely didn't have family in a town like this.

The girl wasn't crying. She didn't even look angry. She just looked pleased with herself and the drink she had ordered. She smiled, dimples crinkling her cheeks in delight, as she watched El Parabólico make his famous *michelada* beverage. He was doing his best to flirt in English: *You like spicy?* The girl's laughter was sunshine in the cool interior of the bar.

A moment later, Lety could feel the girl bearing down towards her table, as if they'd have a bonding moment, being the only women there. The girl pointed to the chair and chirped, "*Puedo sentarme con usted?*" in decent Spanish but awful accent.

Lety grunted, which the girl took for agreement, and she sat down. Outside, a cricket suddenly started singing. Lety tilted her head to listen.

The girl interrupted Lety's thoughts with a big sigh. "I might have gotten myself into a real tough spot," she said, offering her hand. "My name's Britt by the way." Lety took it firmly and grunted as if it were a greeting. Lety took in the girl with a glance—Britt was too young and too pretty and too blonde for her own good.

Britt hardly seemed to notice Lety's recalcitrance. "This is absolutely the worst day ever. My boyfriend just left me here. I mean, we were fighting, and I told him to—"

She sighed. "I didn't think he would though."

Britt pulled out a leather strap and what was left of an analogue watch face, dropping the pieces on the plastic table. “Xavier will be back, I’m sure. Once he cools down a bit. The van is his, but he doesn’t speak any Spanish besides *más cerveza*. He totally needs me.” She took a long sip of her michelada and turned the broken watch to look at it again with a sigh. “My watch slipped off my wrist when I got out and I think the back wheel of the van drove right over it.” She studied the smashed watch face, the broken hands stuck in time.

Britt sighed a third time, but she then perked up as she pulled out her phone. She snapped a photo of her michelada with its decorative rim of chile powder and a tamarind candy perched on top of the cup, before angling the camera around the bar as if looking for something—anything, really. Lety snorted to herself. The foreigner looked like a girl who carried a travel bag filled with essential oils, for all the ailments except fear. Lety watched Britt turn the phone camera around for a selfie, fussing with her hair and moving her lips in strange pouts. Lety frowned. There must be an essential oil too, for that mild level of anxiety of wanting to be seen—really seen—but only in the right lighting and with the correct angle.

Lety took another long drink of her beer. She wanted another cigarette and considered the near-empty pack on the table.

She was just about to light up again when the girl started talking.

“But maybe this freedom is exactly what I need for our travel blog!” Britt’s face brightened. Lety wasn’t sure if Britt was talking to herself now.

“I always wanted to go off the beaten track and Xavier didn’t like to. All I was posting about lately were beaches and tacos. Of course, that’s what most people want to read about when they travel to Mexico, right? But there’s so much more to the *real México!*”

Lety looked at the girl out of the corner of her eye and lit her second to last cigarette.

A couple of cowboys trotted by on horseback, and some firecrackers sounded like gunshots in the distance. Britt pulled out her phone and snapped a photo as they passed, trying to angle her drink into the photo too. “This is so amazing,” she said.

At first the sound was like a distant techno beat from some broken Ford with subwoofers, or maybe an accordion jiving out a *narcocorrido* but the main tune never kicked in. Lety tilted her head. No, it wasn’t music. It must be the ducks on the pond, sounding an endless beat of noise, probably as they swam in circles, hunting salamanders and tiny fish.

Britt was still talking. “I run the social media accounts, although my boyfriend paid for the blog website and the van and stuff. But my photos are way better than his.” Britt sighed contentedly. “Yes, this will be good! It’s so *Mexican* here!”

Lety rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at the sides of her mouth.

One of the *pistoleros* at the door called over to Britt, “Don’t expect too many words from her. She’s taken a vow of silence.”

They laughed, and Britt looked at the middle-aged nun. The older woman’s shoes were sturdy and practical, but also covered with mud. Her equally sturdy and practical skirt had patches. Her dark hair, lightly streaked with grey, was falling loose out of her bun. It was a Lucky Strike cigarette tumbling out of her lips rather than the rosary, but looking at her bright brown eyes, it was easy to imagine that the woman was equally as comfortable in a pew as she seemed to be in the plastic Coca-Cola chair of El Parabólico’s roadside bar.

Lety fixed her eyes on Britt. “You’re better off without a *baboso* who’d leave you on the side of the highway.”

At these words Britt’s eyes spilled over with the first real tears. She brushed them away quickly and changed the subject.

“So then you didn’t really take a vow of silence?”

Lety shrugged. She was quiet for a moment. “You can hear more in silence.”

She finished the last of her beer. Lety looked at the blonde girl, who suddenly looked vulnerable and alone; here in this small town close to nowhere, sitting there with a surfboard and an empty glass, the air dry and hot.

Lety sighed. “Can’t leave you here. Let’s go and get something to eat.”