

## Where the Moon Does Not Rise in Argentina

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It was January of 1932 when I decided to kill my husband. It wasn't an impulsive decision, lest anyone think I'm neurotic. It was a long belabored means to an end, to escape. Escape. To save myself. Escape. Then again maybe I am neurotic. *He* certainly thought so, especially in the minutes before the poisoned tea was finally swallowed. But he'd never loved me and I never him.

It was an arranged marriage that brought us together and the convenience of an arrangement that kept us together these forty long years. Forty years he stole from me. He nabbed the stars and he pocketed my moon. Forty years I rotted from within.

In white, I wedded a gray stranger in black, forty long years ago. Out from blue we stepped into the small corner church where Jesus in body and blood blessed this holy matrimony and into gray we stepped out as one. I learned his name in the chauffeured car ride that carried us to the boat and in a sonorous voice he told me my new name. *Esperanze*, I was excited. He didn't say anything else until we'd reached the docks. There, he grunted, pointing to where a dingy rowboat bobbed up and down in the cloudy teal waters, manned by an emaciated brown in a ragged loincloth. The civilized cannibal would row us to the island, he explained, where we would spend our honeymoon.

Our honeymoon! I shivered at the thought of something so romantic, so grand. My family, poor but proud, could never have afforded such a luxury, and it became apparent then that my new husband was a very rich man. A honeymoon, I'd shivered, and I still shiver. I have never escaped my honeymoon—boasted threshold of married life—the treacle stickiness of that lie, amber, glumping up my throat and viscousing my words.

As he held my hand and I held my dress to step gingerly into the spongy rowboat, my husband sheathed my eyes from the sight of the savage. Proper gentleman, I thought then. Selfish brute I think now. It took a year or several to remember, but now I do: before his doughy paw clamped over my virgin eyes I saw the moon for the last time. Crescent and hushed like a dandelion in the frost. I have not seen the moon since in these forty years. The stars are still there

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for my husband to hang when he pleases so he can force my head to turn to watch those winks taunt me. But I have not seen where he keeps my moon.

He steps through the door of our humble hut now. For all his once-proclaimed riches, my husband is a poor man in the game of economics and yet he fancies himself a dilettante in the company of liquors he can no longer afford. Years ago, silver men came to the door of our spacious home and demanded our gold. It turned out my husband had some debts to pay, and if he wasn't there to pay him, well, I could make just as easy of a settlement, willingly or no. They kept me tied to the kitchen chair for hours until the orange sun went down and the moon never came up and my husband came home. When he saw the stake out set up in his own home, he became furious, chased the men out of there with cutting words and hurling their filthy money at their slated backs. He ripped me from my chair and threw me to the floor. It was in an anger that my body would bloom blue and accustomed to in the following years. I can still feel where ropes bite into my wrists and linoleum licks my cheeks.

After this... 'indecent' as he says, though he never likes to, we fled here to the place where you go to get lost, to Argentina, to this thatched roof, to this wild land lush in strange noises at night yet, unquenched in friends and family and familiarity. I do not call it my home, this dearth of love. I do not call it my country, this paucity of civilization. The jungle grows green outside my windows unchecked and burgeons something dangerous inside of me, something reckless. Man cannot tame the earth, earth cultures and grooms man and so it has with me, so it has shown me my escape. Escape. My freedom. Escape.

My husband hangs his frayed brown coat on its peg and sits down heavily at the dinner table where, without even a glance to where I stand now crippled, now 58, now too browned by this sun and this life and this hard earth, he grabs his potted blue bowl of soup and ladles it messily into his wide mouth. I finger the tiny vial of toxics in the folds of my apron.

He has had a hard day of work this day, but I know better now than to think it has been for me. He only labors to wine and dine that vixen Vodka so that he may cheat her the next night with giddy Gin. I do not begrudge these mistresses, I bide my time. But see how he has had a hard day of work this day; I have learned to tell by the state of his thick hands, the once clammy meat of his palms toughened now, like forgotten beef. They are sliced and blistered in some places, thinly roped, hard, shiny to heal in others, and dust, gray dust cakes his fingernails. They

must have hit the crust digging the foundation today, and tomorrow they would start on their next set.

When we first moved to this place, this Satan's good times, my husband joined a construction crew and painted tales of how they would rise cities, glitter them out from between the too tall trees, blossom them up like the purple flowers beyond the backyard. It's been 35 years and I have yet to see these planted sequins thrive and flourish like the native roots meant for this soil. Instead they dig and they dig for some new way to stick something square and neat and clean into the big cats' squalid manor. My husband would not count himself among the they's for much longer though. And watching the wrinkles of his face work and jump up and down as he chewed the meat of the stew, I almost wanted to tell him this, to comfort him with this secret knowledge.

He grunts for his perfunctory tea, and this is my cue.

I'm shaking, I did not expect that. I turn to the stove to pour his tea and spill the hot liquid on the dirt floor. My husband cusses, but does not get up to help. I grab the rust-colored kitchen cloth and drop to my knees to mop the mess, nearly crushing my precious vial in the process. I rescue the glass liberty from the folds of my apron and clutch it fast in my knotted grip. I concentrate on the cool nested in my hot hand and remember the same cool breeze on the back of my hot neck the day I picked the plant.

One does not live in this abomination Argentina forty years without naming the plants, testing them, testing how they test you. I had smuggled knowledge that my husband never knew of. I knew which ferns curled at the touch and which herbs simmered nicely in a stew, which flowers courted the nasty wasps and which buds could bloom in our stuffy kitchen. And I knew which thorns pricked cuts that stung with the acid of the fire ant and which needles plucked off skin like love me love me not. And I knew which leaf made its sugars from the horrors of the sunlight, flowed fear through its spiny green veins, harvested hallucinations to drive the wisest man mad into the fathomless realm of forever in its thin stem.

This leaf, *Circet Etusa*, was rare, even for morbid collector Argentina. But the desperate are the most ruthless hunters. I coaxed a reluctant weed out from the outcasts of my garden. I nourished this vagabond with water I dare not waste on myself. I loved this parasite like a child. And two suns prior, it was ready. I picked it under the stardust with my husband's heavy work

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gloves. I crushed it with a blunt knife we would melt down again soon. I swept it into the vial that no longer held the medication I no longer needed. My baby in this vial.

He was a foolish man to think I would not discover his plot. A woman is never so stupid when it comes to her baby. He was an ignorant man when he swore with stale metal on his breath that he could never love 'the demon'. He was a desperate man when he remedied my mornings with medicinal herbs 'to take away my pains forever.' He was a foolish man when he flushed down my red and pink moon, rubbed my back, and went to the bar. Went to the bar, and he went to the bar. My baby in this vial.

I stand up suddenly and turned once again to his tea. With a hand that no longer shakes, I empty the contents of the vial into the pot. The pointy bits of the itsby bitsy green stars stick and float on the top for just a moment, last moment, before I no longer pour just tea into my husband's teacup.

It is a nice teacup, only one chip in it's plated rim, small and delicate with a handle too thin for his first finger. I swirl the teacup just once before placing it on its saucer and handing it to my husband. And I sit down on my chair at the opposite end of the table with a hand on my stomach to watch.

My husband puts the cup to lips but does not sip.

I dig my nails into my stomach.

He sets it back down and I scream.

He accuses its temperature.

I foretell his fate:        you are going to die.

His thick eyebrows crawl over those hooded eyes and he sits back in his chair. I repeat myself with conviction. He was, he had to. Then I lean forwards and press my palms to the table and lick my words with a relish: I am going to kill you.

He begins to laugh. I scream louder to drown out that hated noise that senseless noise. You are going to die.        I am going to kill you.        You are a walking dead man.

My husband stops laughing. I do not stop screaming.

I stop screaming when he upturns the table. The teacup flies through the air. It is a swift flip, all the silverware grows wings. I do too, I grow wings, but it is too late.

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The teacup shatters on the floor and my precious poison stains where it ought not be staining. My husband watches me watch my liquid victory dissipate before hollow eyes. I have grown very silent now. And my husband has won. Like the jaguar with pretending spots, he stalks towards his prey, shoulders hunched under lithe cords of muscle, raw power. He snarls and stomps the liquid and I almost see my moon under those heavy boots.

He pushes me to the floor, where my body can mingle with its maker. He kicks me and there is the sound of crunching china, ivory, bone. Forty years he has not broken me. Forty years he could not choke me. But now in forty years he tries to squelch me. He presses his dirty boot to my face and my skull to the ground and its about to burst and its all about to burst and I am desperate like the butterfly pinned to a corkboard and I shout and push out my heart and I push out my shout and I push out my tongue and I... and I lick his boot.

The grit of earth mingles with an unfamiliar tang on my tongue and I remember and I dare desperately to hope. Like starved vulture I descend to my feast and I wrench the man down to my ground and I scrape my tongue all along the grooves of his rancorous boot, pressing taste inside of me, seizing, begging that it will be enough.

And then I am no longer shouting, I am laughing because it is enough and the world has burst into brilliant color. I see the moon, I see the thousands of moons, I see the moon for every night he has stolen from me, all dappled red and glowing pink in kaleidescoping sky. I am laughing and I think it has scared that man, and I vaguely remember that I want to scare that man, so I laugh louder.

I laugh so loudly and so hardly that my fists bang the floor and come up bleeding and I lick the blood, blue blood and the sky turns a violent purple and my many moons shake with their uncontained glee. And I bang again and I cut again and I see that it is because of the shards of gilded china that chime and change and chink in a meadow of shards of gilded china. I fist one and the cut stings and I see that man cower in the corner and I decide that that sky is too achingly beautiful for anyone to be in misery. See, I am merciful. I am laughing and I am merciful.

I bring the shard down and rake it into the white skin where that man has no heart and I yank it up and I thrust it down once again and I plunge it down into where that man medicated my stomach and I carve out my moon and then I'm breathing and laughing and I'm breathing harder as I lay back I realize that I am tired.

So I go to sleep with a laugh on my lips and a restolen moon in my fist.

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