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Oh No, Guadalajara Won't Do

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OH NO, GUADALAJARA WON'T DO

My mother and I met Rhonda on the bus ride from San Diego to Mexico. We were going to Guadalajara for my mother's semester abroad. Rhonda was travelling farther south to Mexico City.

"It's terribly polluted," Rhonda said, "but the city has more silver foxes and, dear, every woman—that means you, Annette—who is over the age of forty and single needs a silver fox."

My mother and I exchanged glances, but her eyes told me to keep my mouth shut. Rhonda's familiarity with us after only fifteen minutes was unnerving, even for my mother, whose openness to the world had increased exponentially over the course of the year.

"What's a silver fox?" I asked.

Rhonda sat in the aisle seat across from me. My mother, at the window seat next to me, pinched my thigh hard.

"What?" I turned to her. "It's just a question."

"It's okay, Annette. Both of you are on an adventure, taking a bus to Mexico, right?"

Rhonda turned back to me, her hands shaping the air as if she were holding a basketball.

“A silver fox is a rich man who is old, but not too old—he can still be the lover you need. He is rich not just with money, but also with body and soul, you know what I mean? Sylvia, when a fox runs, they appear to be flying, almost swimming through the air, yes? So you have to be strategic, not just fast, if you want to catch them.”

Rhonda looked at my mother.

“They like American women, Annette. Most of them live in Mexico City, but I’ve seen some in the Mediterranean, mostly in Greece.”

Rhonda made me nervous with her big flat face and a heavy mane of frizzy red hair.

“We’re going to Guadalajara to study,” I said. “My mother is going to study ancient ruins.”

“Oh no, you don’t understand, Sylvia. I’m a student, too,” Rhonda said. “One should never stop being a student. We should all be students of Life.”

It had been less than a year since my father left us, during which my mother dyed her hair blond, got a nose job, and began therapy. She started cursing, became a vegetarian, and told me that although Jimmy Carter couldn’t get those hostages out of Iran, she was voting for him again, goddammit. She enrolled at Point Loma Nazarene University to study archeology and, despite only one semester completed, she convinced the Dean of the Humanities Department to let her spend the spring studying the ancient pyramids at Iztepete for twenty-one credits. When my dad took issue with my being

pulled out of the eighth grade for three months, she hissed at him on the phone, “If you get to have a midlife crisis, so do I.”

I did not want to go to Mexico. I wanted to be tethered. I wanted to board the school bus every morning and feel the hum of the smooth lanes of I-5 every weekend when my father would drive us to Carlsbad to see his widowed brother. But I did not want to stay with my father, either. When he left us, he denied it was because of another woman; a woman, according to my mother, named Diana. Instead, he claimed he felt so empty that the core of who he was had disappeared, that he needed to escape that emptiness. I assumed I was part of his core, so if it disappeared, then so did I.

We took a cab from the bus depot to the Alcazar Hotel on Avenue Revolucion, right in the heart of the Centro Historico district. We were staying there until the University housing opened up the following week. Our room was stark and airy, with wooden floors and high ceilings, walls painted adobe and no pictures or art hanging. Rhonda abandoned her original plan and decided to stay a few days with us, getting a room next to ours. “I think I’ll just make my way down there slowly, as it were,” she purred to my mother with a wink.

“She’s a hoot and a holler,” my mom said when we were alone. “A real kook, and Spanish speaking at that. This could be fun. And helpful.”

“I don’t know. She uses our names too much when she’s talking.”

“Your name is the most personal thing you can own. It feels good when somebody repeats it.”

When we had checked into the hotel, Rhonda had pointed to the bellhop, whose nametag read *Lujano*. He was twenty at most, with long arms and a square face, his teeth

crooked but bright against his brown skin and green eyes. In that moment, pieces simply fell together for me—the profile of his face, his soft palms, the smell of cigarettes, the shadow that followed him as he moved. It wasn't about sex or romantic love, for I had no true understanding of such concepts. But it was the first step toward understanding what it meant to really want something. I had taken pictures since our trip began, snapping an entire roll on the bus ride alone. But I didn't want a picture of Lujano. I wanted only what my eyes saw in that moment.

Rhonda elbowed my mother, whispering that she should start with somebody young, a brown fox, before moving onto a silver fox.

“I'm not sure I want a silver fox,” my mother said.

“Oh no, of course you do. Look at you, Annette. You won't have these looks forever.”

My mother's once stiff, focused demeanor had given way to a relaxed posture. Her head delicately leaned back and to the right just a little, as if she was offering her neck to men, her smile not so much a smile as a smirk. She touched her wrists, tracing the blue veins and circling her palm with her index finger. She was all leg and breasts, and she grew her once severe bob haircut that she flattened daily with an iron into a mass of loose curls. Although she had purchased a suitcase worth of make-up when my father left, she mostly wore only heavy mascara and pale pink lipstick, which turned the pout she wore, a permanent scar from the divorce, into a promise of softness. She wore tight shirts that showed lots of cleavage but she seemed embarrassed, as if she was challenging herself to be herself. And all of these things she did were so unaffected: My mother smoldered without knowing she smoldered.

“I doubt you’ll be in Turkey on archeological digs when all is said and done,” Rhonda said. “You need to think about your future.”

My mother’s eyes widened and her face dropped as if she could see the next twenty years of her life that she hadn’t truly given thought to since my father left.

“I’ll walk you through this,” Rhonda said. “Just watch me with Lujano. He’s mine, though. I saw him first. But take notes.”

Lujano had made three trips from the lobby to our rooms carrying our luggage. Rhonda touched his shoulder repeatedly as he moved about placing suitcases in corners next to beds. He looked confused and over-smiled, except to my mother, who he gave a soft and measured nod, a gesture only I seemed to notice. Rhonda tipped him generously in American dollars.

“See, Annette,” she said when he left. “Did you see that? Did you see how much he smiled at me?”

We unpacked, showered off the bus smell, and sat in the hotel dining room. My mother let me have a sip of her wine, and Rhonda kept looking over her shoulder, sighing. After twenty minutes, she asked for the check.

“There are no men here. No real men. We’re going to try another hotel.”

We went to the dining room of three more hotels on Avenue Revolucion and, at each, my mother and Rhonda had a drink. Rhonda kept her eyes on all corners of the room as well as the door to see who came in and left.

“Swing your hips, Annette,” she said as we walked into the fourth hotel of the evening. “*Be* your body. Do you know what I mean?”

My mother moved her hips to the left and right, her face pressed in concentration.

“Is this right?”

“Don’t try so hard. I said *be* you body. Swing your hips. Don’t careen them back and forth.”

We settled into our table. Rhonda ordered more drinks and, although my mother was clearly on the verge of being drunk, Rhonda was lucid and alert. It was after eleven, and I knew if I were to lean over and rest my head on my mother’s lap, a thought so embarrassing on any other occasion, I would fall asleep.

The hotel dining room was crowded with middle-aged men and Rhonda murmured to herself, Come on, gentlemen, here we are. Come on. After fifteen minutes, my mother insisted we order a meal, and that we weren’t going to another hotel. The waiter arrived at our table carrying drinks we did not order.

“Finally,” Rhonda sighed. “Finally.”

Two gentlemen came over. They wore black suits and their gray hair was combed back with pomade. They stood closely behind my mother, and their stubby fingers lined with gold pinky rings touched the back of her chair. They spoke in Spanish with Rhonda, who invited them to sit down.

“They say that you are womanly, Annette, like a Madonna. Isn’t that nice?”

My mother flushed and she pulled at the skin of her elbows. Silver foxes, I mouthed to my mother. She squeezed my hand and turned, not looking at me for the rest of the meal. Rhonda reveled in the attention as she managed the task of back-and-forth

translation for all us, telling the men we came to Guadalajara to visit a dying relative who worked at the American Embassy. More drinks arrived and soon my mother was slurring her words. The men made large gestures with their hands, telling Rhonda that they had a limousine and that Javier, the one who was missing the upper portion of his left ear, owned a restaurant. Javier invited us to come to his home in Mexico City. On a bathroom break, Rhonda clapped her hands together and said that they liked us very much.

“Javier told me my Spanish is perfect. Annette, he said that I have a romantic voice. I think that’s what he said. Sometimes when they speak fast, I get confused. You should laugh when a man confuses you, okay?”

During dessert, my mother’s bra strap slipped from under her dress, resting on her arm inches below her shoulder. Javier’s eyes fixed on the pink satin. He caught me watching him watch her and nodded at me.

“Mexico City is magical,” he said to my mother, with a sudden and commanding English. “Your daughter will love it.”

He turned and looked me in the eyes, grinning, and stared for that one extra second that was one second too long.

Later, Rhonda sat in our room while we readied for bed. My mother talked aloud to neither of us in particular, saying that Diana was no Madonna and my father was no fox.

“So there, so there,” she repeated as she took off her stockings.

“Why did you say we had dying relatives?” I asked Rhonda.

“Always prey on the sympathy of rich men. We will be going to Mexico City. I’m certainly going. Javier seemed quite taken by me. Your mother is beautiful, more so than me. I’m in touch with these hard truths, Sylvia. But he kept speaking Spanish, even though he can speak English. Clearly, he fancied me. But we can all go. We will all stay with him.”

“I told you already, we’re here to study,” I snapped at her.

My mother didn’t notice my voice had risen. She stared into the mirror, wearing her silk robe, playing with her hair.

“We’ll see,” Rhonda said. She patted my shoulder and said in a low voice, “You know, your mother is escaping the ruins by coming here, not looking for them.”

My mother took a slip of paper out of her purse.

“Javier gave me his number,” she said, and she giggled. “I caught a silver fox. Maybe I don’t need a brown fox first. Can I go straight to the silver fox? Will I have to make love to him? I mean, right away? I have only been with—Sylvia, shut your ears for a moment—one man. This was foolish? No? Maybe not? Is this too much like high school? But I’m in college, right? Ha ha! What do I do with a fox?”

“Interesting, interesting, Annette,” Rhonda said, ignoring my mother’s questions, taking the paper from her hands, staring at the numbers, her smile too wide.

“We’re not going to Mexico City, are we?” I said to my mother.

“We’ll see.” And she patted my head.

Somebody knocked on the door. Lujano walked in holding a single dahlia and a small card. There wasn’t even a measurable moment in which I thought the flower was from him for me but I could imagine how it would feel if it were, how it could make a

crowded city in a foreign country a place that feels something close to home, because somebody wants you there.

“De Javier. Para la senora,” he said, looking around, not knowing which one of us to give the dahlia to.

Rhonda took the flower from him, opened the small envelope and read the card, her brow furrowing.

The next day, my mother and I spent a quiet afternoon at the hotel pool. I sat on the steps of the shallow end. My parents did not know I couldn't swim. We didn't belong to a swim club and, despite being only a twenty-minute drive to the beaches of North County, my mother wouldn't even dip her feet in the cold waters because she was so frightened of sharks.

Rhonda had left early to spend the day at Mercado San Juan de Dio and shop. She smirked at my mother when she refused Rhonda's invite to walk through the squares and parks.

“Jesus, Annette, you are missing out on this rich culture. There's a square called Plaza de la Liberacion. Liberacion, Annette. You are liberated now. You have crossed borders. Why are you at a pool?”

When Rhonda left, I asked my mom if we could go to campus and see the buildings her classes were in. Universidad de Guadalajara was only blocks away, and I wanted to see if there was a student union or a statue of a famous Mexican on the quad. My mother said, Hmm, and asked me if I thought Javier was good looking. I told her he

was old. She lied down on the cement right next to the water, flat on her back with a hotel towel folded under her neck. Her right hand moved back and forth in the water, and she occasionally placed her finger on the top of her forehead and traced a straight line down the bridge of her new nose.

“I think we should go to Mexico City,” she said.

“You don’t speak Spanish,” I said, a pause between each word.

“Honey, that’s okay. Javier speaks enough English. We’ll stay at his home. He has lots of bedrooms.”

“How do you know that?”

“He told me. He called me.”

“He called you? Where did he call you?”

“On the telephone. That is how people call each other.”

“I mean, did he call you in the lobby or the room? When did he do this? Last night?”

“This morning in the lobby. Now, Sylvia, relax. When you are in another country, you have to submit yourself to the world. It’s only an invitation. I haven’t decided yet what I’ll do.”

“What about school?”

“What about it? School isn’t going anywhere. And I’m not saying we should move there, for Christ’s sake. I’m just saying maybe we should visit for a few days.”

“Did he invite Rhonda, too?”

She moved her head from side to side slowly and I tapped her shoulder, needing to know if she was stretching her neck or saying No. She stroked my hand and said, Hmm.

Lujano came outside holding a Scrabble board and gestured me toward the table. He lined up Spanish words, watching me make English words against them. I kept score, and he laughed as my numbers piled up higher and higher. He looked over at my mom several times, and I finally said, “She has big boobs, doesn’t she?” He smiled and stared at my mother.

“Annette,” he said, and he rubbed his calves.

“Sylvia,” I said, pointing at myself.

“Sylvia,” he repeated, slowly, still staring at my mom.

“Lujano played a board game with Sylvia today at the pool,” my mother said to Rhonda.

“I think he has a crush on her.”

“Doubtful,” Rhonda said, studying her nails.

I reddened with embarrassment. I was pudgy, my face riddled with pimples.

“Oh no, now, Sylvia, I did not mean insult to you,” Rhonda said. “Don’t take it that way. It’s just that you are a child. It’s your mother he is interested in. She is an American woman. He’s a silver fox in the making.”

“He’s a bellhop,” I said. “That won’t make him rich.”

Rhonda laughed so hard spit came out of her mouth and her fake smile spread across her face. I wondered what a real smile from her looked like.

“Both of you stop,” my mother said. “He’s a nice boy, even if I don’t understand a word he says.” And she sashayed out the room to get ice from the hallway.

“He likes my mom’s boobs,” I said to Rhonda. “He stared at them the whole afternoon. Javier likes my mom, too. She got all of the foxes. You and I have none. But that’s okay, right?”

“You know not what you say, Sylvia,” Rhonda said, clenching her hands.

“I don’t think you have insides,” I said, turning on the television and upping the volume.

Rhonda frowned, and shook her head.

“Lujano is looking for an American woman’s citizenship. Yes, your mother is beautiful, but that’s not what he’s interested in.”

“I’m going to tell her you said that.”

“Oh no, you won’t,” she said with a shrug. “You have no idea what it is like when a man stops loving you, Sylvia. But you know your mother, and that is enough.”

My mother walked back into the room and Rhonda announced she was skipping dinner and retiring to bed early. She wore a white bathing suit that was too small, and her dimpled thighs shook with each step she took out the door.

“Did you say something to upset her?” my mother asked.

“Nope.”

I walked into the bathroom to put on my bathing suit. I heard the phone ring.

“Hola, hola,” my mother said, laughing. “Bueno, bueno. Soon, maybe. Maybe soon,” she said.

I stared into the mirror and smacked at my midsection, disgusted by the sound. My mother was so deep in conversation she didn't notice me leave the bathroom and walk outside. I went to the pool, where I found Lujano sitting at a table near the deep end. He was in his bellhop suit and smoking a cigarette. He saw me and waved, gesturing me toward him. There was two parts of me, again. There was the part that thought he was just being friendly and the small pinprick-sized part that thought he would wave me right into his arms, that the smoke from his cigarette would swirl around me and protect me from any choice that I or anybody else would make.

I stood in front of him and touched his hair. He rose quickly, startled. He touched my shoulder and shook his head as if he was deciding what he should do next. I walked backward, held my arms up, waiting for the expression on his face to change to a firm realization that he was going to have to take care of me, that he was going to get his suit wet, that I was going to have water envelop me and make room in my head for my mother. I kept walking backward to the edge of the pool, then I turned around, faced the water, and I jumped in. The cold surrounded me and I swallowed water and I did not thrash because I felt at peace with everything. I was not frightened because Lujano would not let me drown. It seemed to take forever for him to call my name, to figure out that I couldn't swim, and when he did, the water had already begun to win.

When I came to, all I could focus on was that the strap of my bathing suit had fallen off my right shoulder and my small breast was exposed. Rhonda had convinced my mother and the hotel personnel not to call the ambulance, explaining that a hospital would do

more harm than good. I was flat on my back, the cement still warm from the day's heat. I couldn't stop coughing.

"Lujano's father is coming," Rhonda said.

"What are you talking about? Is he a doctor?"

"I have no idea, Annette. But your daughter is not going to a hospital. We're in a third-world country, for Christ sake."

My mother began to cry and she squeezed my hands so hard it hurt. I threw up twice before Lujano's father arrived. When he did, he looked me over, tapping my forehead and examining my ears. He held my hands against his chest and prayed in Spanish. He whispered to Rhonda.

"She's fine. She's fine," Rhonda told my mother. "Eduardo said that she needs to eat two avocados and that we must go to his church in the morning and light a candle for St. John Chrysostom. He's the patron saint of epilepsy."

"What are you talking about? Sylvia doesn't have epilepsy," she yelled.

"I know that. But maybe somebody in Lujano's family does and they need all the help they can get. Stop asking questions. And, listen, we are going to his house for dinner now."

"No, we aren't. I need to get her to bed," my mom said, shaking her head at Rhonda.

"To decline this invitation is rude."

I began to cry, because I was scared that my mother would still say No. I wanted to see Lujano's house. I wanted him to hold my hands to his chest in prayer. Lujano squatted closely next to my mother, his eyes fixed on mine, fearful.

Lujano's house was in the Sector Reforma, an industrial district with a small residential area not far from the city center. Weeds and withered rose bushes lined the front yard. When we arrived, Lujano's mother yelled at Lujano and his father, pointing at us, her voice in a frenzied pitch. Eduardo hollered back, his words just as quick and urgent. Rhonda did not engage with them, nor did she translate. She drank wine and hummed to the transistor radio that played Spanish music. I wasn't hungry, but Lujano's mom poked me in the shoulder and pointed sharply, saying Eat, Eat, Eat, my plate filled with plantain fritters and tortas ahogadas, sandwiches filled with pork and hot sauce. Everything tasted like chlorine and it hurt to swallow, but I didn't want to leave. Lujano sat next to me and smiled. He touched my mother's shoulder on and off during the meal. Once he took his index finger and rested it on her thigh. Rhonda watched and nodded her head up and down, to herself it seemed.

Curtains were useless against Mexico's sun and my eyes opened early to find Rhonda, not my mother, in the bed next to mine.

"Where's my mom?"

My bed covers were on the floor and I was sticky with sweat. The air conditioner in our room made more noise than it cooled the air. The previous night had ended late, and I had gone to bed alone, leaving my mother with Rhonda and Lujano at the pool.

"She's in my room," Rhonda said.

"Why?"

“Sylvia, I need to explain to you what it means to be a woman, what having needs—”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Sylvia, your mother should have everything. When you are older, you will understand. I know you don’t like me. It’s okay. I’m going to Mexico City tomorrow to stay with Javier.”

“He thinks my mom is coming, you know.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Rhonda said, getting out of bed.

“He called her. And she called him.”

Her head cocked, and she sat next to me on the bed, sighing at me.

“I just want to go home,” I said. “That’s all.”

She took my hands. I felt the wedding band that she wore on the index finger of her right hand. I wanted to know if it was her husband’s, if she was divorced, if he was dead. She was a talker and nosey, but she said little about her own life. But I didn’t really want to know the answer about her ring because the answer would be too big and too much. I stroked the band over and over and stared at her pockmarked face, the gray hairs sprouting from her roots, and rows of wrinkles across her forehead. She smiled, wide and relaxed and true, and she looked pretty.

“You choose your home every day. So, just say to yourself, ‘Today, it is Guadalajara.’”

I went to shower and, after, standing in a towel, I went through my mother’s make-up bag. I applied mascara, heavy and thick. I found an unopened tube of red lipstick and blush. I painted my lips and face heavily and filled my thin eyebrows with a

dark liner. I heard the hotel room door open, my mother's voice, then a man coughed, followed by rapid-fire conversation in Spanish with Rhonda. Just once more, he said, just once more. Rhonda kept talking loudly with her fake voice, a high-pitched inflection, and my mother laughed.

I opened the bathroom door. The curtains of the hotel room were pulled back and I could see the back of Lujano's head in the distance as he walked down the stairs. My mom squinted at me.

"What are you wearing on your face?"

"Make-up," I said.

"You're twelve years old."

"Thirteen."

"You've been thirteen for two months. You are closer to twelve than you are thirteen."

"That statement makes no sense," Rhonda chimed in.

"Shut up, Rhonda," my mom said. Her eyes were bleary and red, and she looked skinny and child-like in her baby-doll pajamas. The bottoms were inside out.

The following morning Rhonda was gone. My mother searched the pool area and the restaurant and when she couldn't find her, she checked the front desk. Rhonda had left a note. *Annette, my sweet friend, I have gone to see Javier. I called him. I told him you won't be coming, that you were staying in Guadalajara and must study. You have school,*

Annette. You have so much to learn. Tell that daughter of yours to go home. She's not ready for all of this, Annette, not at all.

In a warbled voice, my mother instructed me to pack. She rifled through her purse. "I just can't find that number. I just can't find it."

I went to the lobby while my mom did her hair and make-up. I saw Lujano standing tall at the revolving door, hands behind his back. The tassel on the right shoulder of his bellhop suit was missing. I walked to him and pointed it out. He looked at his left shoulder and yanked it off. We burst into laughter. He jiggled the tassel at my nose and bared his crooked teeth. I wanted to run my finger down the bridge of his long nose. I took the tassel from him and put it in my pocket. He took in a deep breath and his face turned curious.

"Annette? Donde?"

I went back to our room. My mother was taking clothes out of the closet and she handed them to me, piece by piece. She refused to iron since our father left and had taken to putting her clothes in a steamed bathroom to get out the wrinkles.

"Hang my pink blouse and the white pants. It's a little much for the bus. It'll wrinkle, I know, but pink has always been my color."

"I don't think it will wrinkle much," I said, walking toward the bathroom. "I think you'll look fine."

I turned on the shower high and hot and shut the bathroom door. I didn't know what my mother would do with us that morning. Maybe she'd send me home and go to see Javier in Mexico City and argue with Rhonda, or bring me with her. Maybe we were both going home. I imagined calling my father, him picking us up in the lobby, Lujano

watching in confusion. Or maybe he would pick us up in the lobby of a hotel somewhere between Guadalajara and Mexico City. I could see the three of us on the taxi ride to the airport: me, not talking to him, and my mother, silent and angry for me calling him—or her being relieved but yelling at him about how all of the foxes wanted her.

The bathroom filled with steam and I could no longer see my reflection. I heard my mother call for me, but the shower was too loud so I didn't know what she said. I took the tassel from my pocket and cleared the mirror with it, my reflection showing in parts with each swipe, but then quickly fogging up again.