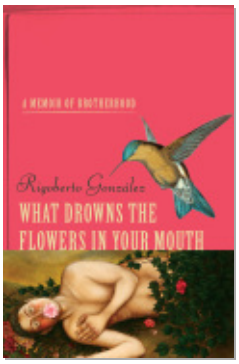
Adelina's Story



because he had less than I did, and I had the luxury of summer travel, clean American clothes, and, if I really wanted them, toys, shiny and new. And yet I envied him because on his rusty old bicycle, he could be himself because, unlike me, he was undeniably free.

Adelina's Story

The summer after we moved in with my grandparents, the idea was born to bring back "una muchacha"—a young woman—from México. The purpose was to find a caretaker for my father, recently widowed, and a nanny for my brother and me, recently orphaned at ages ten and twelve. Abuela, the only female in the small two-bedroom cinderblock apartment, had become exhausted managing a household that had doubled overnight. It seemed like a good solution, though I couldn't imagine where they were thinking of housing this seventh body. My grandparents slept in one bedroom; my father, my brother, and my bachelor uncle slept in the other. I slept on the couch in the tiny living room. This didn't bother me much because I had never had my own bed (that wouldn't happen until my freshman year in college), and sleeping in the apartment's most open space gave me the impression I had a room of my own or at the very least a place to breathe, to daydream, and to cry in complete privacy when I remembered my mother. When I couldn't sleep, I would simply pull a chair into the tiny kitchen and read under its dim light, the only light that didn't bother Abuelo, who always kept his bedroom door ajar in order to keep track of our movements. In any case, I didn't dare ask the obvious questions: Where would she sleep? Would I have to give up my couch?

The plan wasn't discussed with me, but I picked up snippets of conversation over time. Since I was a reader, I became invisible behind a book, and somehow my grandparents thought I also became deaf, because they would speak frankly in front of me about subjects that would make them hush whenever anyone else walked in.

"She won't be expensive," Abuelo assured Abuela, who nodded in agreement. The long pause that followed made me wonder where their minds had drifted. Perhaps to the convenience of the situation: that a young woman from México would be easy to control, perhaps even easy to take advantage of.

I couldn't imagine what young woman would accept such a position, traveling so far away just to live with a family of farmworkers in a compact unit of the Southern California housing projects. I had seen a few Mexican films that touched on the subject of poor young women who left their small villages for an opportunity to thrive, but in all cases, they went to live in big city apartments or suburban homes owned by lawyers, doctors, or businessmen. But in the film narratives, the poor young women didn't have to leave the country. It dawned on me then why this was an especially important detail: the young woman we would be bringing back would be undocumented, making her even more vulnerable.

Locating a coyote who could smuggle a young woman across was a relatively easy search. We lived a few hours from the border. Over the years, reports traveled through the streets about so-and-so's cousin or so-and-so's nephew arriving safely, and the community took note of the coyote's reputation and his contact information to pass along in the most clandestine of referrals. Crossing her over was not the problem. Finding her—that was the sticking point. Or so I thought.

Every summer, my grandparents traveled to Michoacán, Abuelo behind the wheel of his truck, annoyed and exasperated

after the first day on the road. I had made the trip a few times before, so I knew the code of conduct in the camper. Basically, become invisible, inaudible—something I was very good at around Abuelo, who snapped at the smallest things. He held a particular dislike for my brother, who hadn't learned to be silent. Given a choice, Alex would not have joined us on that trip, but he didn't have a choice. Not anymore. As soon as our father moved us into our grandparents' domain, we were expected to surrender completely. So there we were the following July, lying down among the piles of secondhand clothing our grandparents took back to their homeland. Whether they sold it or gave it away I never found out.

The two-day drive was utterly boring. The camper didn't have much in terms of windows, but in reality there wasn't much to see. When we passed by some little town, it looked exactly like the one before with the same buildings and people who wore the same coats and dresses as the citizens of the town just before it. My brother, mad that he had been dragged on this journey, lost himself in sleep since it was too noisy in the back to even hold a conversation. I had withdrawn into a quiet depression after my mother died, so I had no problem letting go of any emotion or expectation, though I did feel bad for my brother, who was more active and spirited. The two-day trip in that tomb must have driven him crazy. I tried not to dwell on the helplessness of the situation because I had no power. Neither of us did. This was our new life without our mother: getting sucked into the whims of our very complicated Abuelo.

When we finally made it to Michoacán, I was surprised when we stopped in a small mountain village just before Zacapu, my family's hometown. When Abuelo lifted the camper door, the light spilled in and the air was invigorating. I knew right away where we had arrived—El Pueblito, where our distant Purépecha relatives, the cheesemakers, lived. Before we left Zacapu to migrate

to California, we made frequent visits here to pick up cheese and to drop off the gallons of spoiled milk. Our El Pueblito relatives were as small and dark as Abuela, they had a peculiar way of shaking hands, and they walked on the mountain paths on bare feet. The village was a series of wooden shacks with chickens pecking about and exposed kitchens where our relatives knelt on the ground over their stone metates to shape the curdled milk into beautiful wheels of cheese. The acidic smell in the air was overwhelming. On weekends, the cheesemakers traveled to Zacapu to sell their product at the market or on the plaza, but my city relatives came up by bus for the family discount.

After the initial handshaking and samplings of cheese, Abuelo made it clear that my brother and I had to wander about so that the adults could talk. So we did. We kicked at the weeds near the walls made with boulders and pelted rocks at each other. Later, I figured out that this was the moment when a young woman had been chosen to make that long journey back to the U.S. with us. The efficiency of the agreement didn't surprise me, not with Abuelo's temperament. He was an impatient man, and anyone who dealt with him had to move just as quickly, just as impulsively.

We left El Pueblito and showed up, wheels of cheese in hand, at Abuelo's sister's house in the heart of Zacapu. Tía Sara lived in a multiunit complex with a courtyard hidden from street view by a heavy wooden door that was kept bolted shut. I had no idea we would be back to El Pueblito near the end of our visit to pick up Adelina, a terrified young woman only a few years older than I, so during the next few days, my brother and I walked in and out of Tía Sara's house in ignorant bliss, visiting relatives from our mother's side of the family and making frequent trips to the plaza, where we spent our allowance on gelatin cups and used magazines. Despite that fortress of an entrance that had to be opened by skeleton key, we had freedoms here that we didn't have in the U.S.,

where Abuelo kept a strict seven o'clock curfew, which didn't really matter much because there was nowhere to go within walking distance. There, we wasted our evenings glued to the television. Back in our homeland, we felt energized by the activity on the plaza, the constant wave of voices. People spilled out of the church and crowded around the women roasting nuts or pumpkin seeds on large metal discs. Musicians competed against the politicians speaking through ear-piercing sound systems. Groups of teenagers teased each other with flirtatious dares, and the younger kids chased stray dogs out to the street. This was familiar territory. What we had given up. Yet we convinced ourselves, perhaps because we could not choose to return, that we were better off in the north, that opportunities awaited us that none of these people swirling about the plaza could even imagine. At one point, as we walked by a young man our age who was setting up his shoe shine kit on the steps of the church courtyard, my brother turned to me and said, "That would've been us if we had stayed."

I was surprised to hear that insight coming from my younger brother. I was even more startled by the fact that I agreed with him, that somehow we had found a silver lining to the loss of our homeland and the loss of our mother. Sacrifice. That was the word Abuela used often. Sacrifice is what it took to achieve a reward. I imagined that's how my family justified our migration north. I imagined that's what Adelina had been told also when she agreed to join us. Any suffering would be worth it in the end.

At night, Alex and I snuggled into our individual beds and watched television programming in Spanish, something we had access to in the U.S. but didn't care for. We were too busy assimilating with MTV and thirty-minute sitcoms about silly white people who got a laugh for stubbing a toe. We didn't say much to each other because there was nothing to share. The only time we broached anything close to a serious conversation was when we

wondered why Tía Sara lived like a wealthy Mexican with a bountiful kitchen and two servant girls who washed the bedsheets every other day while we lived in the U.S. as poor people.

"She probably married money," I concluded.

Whatever the reason, the courtyard was filled with wonder—a fig tree that exploded with fruit every morning, a flock of cooing doves that shed downy feathers into the air, and a Doberman pinscher with its tail cut off that answered to the name of Hitler. Tía Sara seemed embarrassed to tell us this, but she had no choice. Calling out its name was the only way to quiet the animal.

"My youngest named him that," she explained. "And the name stuck. It's vulgar, I know, but what can we do?"

Hitler was a gentle animal most of the time, but his bark was frightening. And because I reminded him of his young owner (or so my aunt said), it gravitated toward me especially. If I stood or sat down, the dog would press its lean but sturdy body against my legs, threatening to knock me off balance.

A week into our visit, Alex and I had grown so accustomed to our newfound perks and privileges that it was with great disappointment that we received the news from Abuela that we were headed back to California. "So gather your things," she said. Alex and I stuffed our duffle bags with clothes and the small collection of knickknacks we had accumulated on our daily trips to the plaza. Another two-day journey was upon us.

A few hours later, Abuelo instructed us to hop inside the camper. When I picked up my duffle bag, he yelled out, "Leave that there, stupid. We're going to run some errands first."

My heart sank. That glimpse of nastiness was just a taste of the company we were going to keep all the way back home. An hour later, as we pulled into El Pueblito, Abuelo told us to stay put inside the camper. Minutes later, the camper door opened and we sat there speechless and confused as a frightened young woman climbed in with us.

"That's Adelina," Abuelo said. "Your cousin. She's going to take care of you." And then the camper door slammed shut.

The whole episode was something out of a kidnapping plot. The visit was no longer than a few minutes, and the young woman had climbed on board without even a purse, just the clothes on her back—a pink hand-knitted sweater, a plain blue skirt, and white knee-high socks with holes in them. As Abuelo drove back to Zacapu, the young woman began to hyperventilate. Alex and I simply watched, uncertain about what to do.

"You have a cut there," Alex pointed out to her, finally breaking the awkward silence.

We all looked down at her hand. Her fingernail was bleeding. I knew that kind of damage—evidence of a desperate grip in a hard-fought battle that had just been lost.

That rest of the afternoon was surreal. Abuelo employed a soft, almost tender manner when speaking to Adelina. Unsettling at first, it eventually angered me because I knew this act was short-lived, that by the time we arrived back in California he would resort back to his brutish ways, his gruffness matching his bristly mustache.

We stopped at the mercado, which puzzled me because I didn't think there was any need for grocery shopping, but then we beelined it to the back of the building, where the merchants sold cheap clothing. Since Adelina climbed into the truck without a suitcase, this would have to do for the moment. Abuela coaxed her into choosing a blouse, stockings, and underwear, which was stuffed into a cone made from newspaper. Even during this intimate selection, she remained stoic, in shock, so I became embarrassed for her at the indignity of having to pick her panty colors in front of all of us.

"Would you like an ice cream?" Abuelo said in his fake gentle voice.

Adelina nodded, a glimmer of excitement on her face, and this is when I realized how young she actually was. She picked a tamarind ice cream bar and devoured it, as if this was the last taste of anything she was going to have of her homeland. I remembered that sense of impending separation when I had to climb a bus with my family to travel north to the border three years before. I wanted to hold on to something—a final touch, a final taste, a last-chance encounter that I could brand into my brain as the parting gift from my beloved hometown.

As we sat in silence consuming our treats, I finally wondered about Adelina, how her name sounded eerily similar to my mother's—Avelina—how her presence here seemed more like a penance than a reward. Had she done something to offend her family, who so willingly offered her up for this task of being a nanny to two orphans living in California? Had she been told earlier that week or was she informed just hours ago? The fact that she had been flung into the truck like an exile suggested other dramatic explanations. Had she sinned against her body? Had she sinned against God? She looked so innocent and so fragile, I couldn't imagine what her story was, and I had a feeling I would never find out.

When we got back to Tía Sara, who kept shaking her head with disapproval, Adelina withdrew even deeper into herself, lowering her head as if in shame. Tía Sara's two servant girls kept eyeing her from a distance as they moved about doing their chores. And then Adelina's situation worsened when Abuelo sat her down in a chair in the middle of the courtyard and cut off her long hair. I became mortified at that public display of humiliation, at the way Tía Sara kept verbalizing her disbelief in what was happening, and how the two servant girls started to giggle, sticking their tongues out at Adelina, who had just aged a few decades after Abuela combed her hair to look exactly like hers—short and with the bangs combed back.

I walked up to Abuela and asked her discreetly, "Why did he cut it off?"

Abuela put her finger to her lips and then pointed with her eyes at a white bucket with Adelina's discarded hair. I bent down to look at it and recognized the infestation of lice. Meanwhile, Adelina simply sat there, expressionless and defeated.

"Why don't you start looking after the boys now," Abuelo told Adelina. She got up from her seat and followed Alex and me to the fig tree at the end of the courtyard. She watched over Alex with disinterest as he climbed up to pick fruit.

Even from a distance, I could hear the grown-ups laughing about the whole situation. I felt I needed to counter that laughter with some compassion, so I started to ask questions.

"You like figs?" I said, offering her one that Alex had pelted down from the tree.

She took it in her hand, but it was more like an act of obedience.

"Have you ever been to California?" I asked and then realized what a stupid thing that was to say. But I was at a loss. I didn't know how to reach out to her. Adelina was a distant cousin, a member of the cheesemakers from El Pueblito. What in the world was she doing getting herself involved with this depressing side of the family? That's the question I really wanted to ask.

But once she realized that I had given up trying to engage her, she spoke up on her own.

"My mother's sick," she said softly. I hardly recognized her voice. All this time, she had been nodding her head or answering my grandparents in monosyllables.

"My mother died," I said, and for the first time since she was thrown into the truck, we made eye contact. Her eyes became watery. I wasn't sure if she was grieving for herself or for me, or for both of us, but I was strangely comforted by the fact that I had someone near me who knew about such pain. Alex had been

refusing to talk about our mother's death. Whenever I brought it up, he would stiffen up and say, "Can we change the conversation?" or "I don't want to talk about that." So even though we had suffered the same loss, I felt alone all this time. Suddenly I began to imagine that it wouldn't be so bad to have Adelina among us. Her role was to be our nanny, but there would be a special connection between us, as if she had come into my life to be the older sibling I desperately needed—someone to protect *me* for a change from the awful things of this world, like death, like school bullies, like Abuelo.

"Why don't we go to the plaza together one last time?" Alex called out from the fig tree. And I thought what a great idea it would be to say good-bye to Zacapu together, just the three of us. But when I asked Abuelo for permission, he shot it down.

"She can't leave the house," he said. "If you want to go you go alone, but don't stay out too late. We leave at the crack of dawn."

I wanted to stay behind to keep Adelina company, but my brother wasn't having it and pleaded with me to come along; otherwise he would not be allowed to venture out by himself. And in truth, I wanted to go out as well. So we left Adelina perched on the stone border around the fig tree, and I promised myself that I would bring her something back. When we got to the front door, Tía Sara came over with her skeleton key and unlocked it, as usual. That's when I realized that Adelina was a prisoner. That she was not allowed to come with us because my grandparents were afraid she would escape.

"I don't understand," I said to Alex. "Are we forcing her to go with us?"

"I think so," Alex said.

My good-bye stroll along the plaza was sullied by the thought of Adelina getting smaller and smaller as the hour of our departure neared. And suddenly I began to question whether I really wanted to return. What if I fled that very moment and hid away with my

mother's relatives? They were church people, kind of boring and not very expressive, but they weren't mean or abusive like Abuelo. I thought about proposing the idea to Alex, but I didn't dare. Even then I knew what a stupid risk it was, and what dire consequences awaited us after Abuelo claimed us back.

Before returning to Tía Sara's, I bought Adelina a set of barrettes. It seemed like an insensitive gift, but Abuela had pinned Adelina's hair back with those old lady bobby pins that had aged her. We knocked on Tía Sara's door and heard her unlocking like a warden.

"Did you have a nice time?" she asked, and I wanted to spit on her. Surely she could see what a cruel thing was taking place right in her own house, and though she kept muttering her disapproval, she was going to do nothing to stop her stubborn older brother.

As the grown-ups prepared the final meal in the kitchen, their mood was celebratory. Laughter and music lit up the small room while just a few feet away Adelina sulked in a chair. I walked up to her with my gift.

"I brought you these," I said, holding up the barrettes. But instead of taking them, she took hold of my wrist.

"You have to help me," she said. Her eyes were burning with anxiety.

"Help you how?" I said. Though I knew exactly what she was asking.

Adelina pulled me so close to her that for a moment I thought she was going to kiss me, but I didn't resist. And just as I was about to anticipate our faces coming together, she froze, her eyes locked directly with mine.

A flash of recognition passed between us, and in that instant I began to suspect why she had been cast out of her family, her village, why she was being punished like this. There it was, that thing inside of me that made me different, an aberration in the eyes of family and an insult to God. Or maybe that was wishful

thinking, me projecting my own fears upon this young woman who was opening her soul to me, trusting me while she was at her most vulnerable. In any case, I responded in kind, revealing my true self, letting her in on this secret that I wanted someone else to recognize without ridicule or disgust.

Suddenly I became even more frightened. What if I denied her? Would she betray me? Would she confirm for Abuelo what he was probably suspecting all along, and would he then cast me out of this family as well, maybe drop me off in El Pueblito on our way out because that would be an apt punishment for me—a life of labor in a rural village that would butch me up, me, this sissy of a boy who was all sentimentality and sensitivity, not much of a man-to-be at all.

"Will you help me?" This time she appealed to me with a kindness in her voice that convinced me she was intending no malice. So I resolved to help her.

I would be lying if I didn't admit that I was experiencing a thrill plotting Adelina's flight. But it was a relatively easy plan to come up with and execute. I wandered into the kitchen the way young people sometimes do, curious about the goings-on with the grown-ups, until one of them shooed the underage visitor away from the off-colored jokes and big people talk. I was able to sneak in and out without notice, but not before pinching Tía Sara's skeleton key, which she kept in plain sight and which remained forgotten until it was needed.

Adelina was already waiting in the shadows. The music was playing loud enough that it would drown out the creaking of the door opening. But just as we started to fiddle with the lock in the dark, Hitler came barking. Adelina cowered in the corner and whimpered in fear.

"It's okay, it's okay," I said.

I called the dog over. It recognized me and started to press against my legs to show its affection. This time I didn't push it

away. This time I needed to keep the animal tame. I continued to jiggle the key in the lock until it finally clicked open. A puff of fresh air blew in from the street. I looked at Adelina, who looked incredulous that we had gone this far. She hesitated.

"What's the matter?" I said. Suddenly I worried that this pause in the plan was going to cost us. I felt the heat of Abuelo's belt across my ass.

Even in the shadow, I saw the glossy glare of Adelina's eyes. She had been moved by my actions. And just as easily, my own eyes began to water. The moment seemed inappropriately melodramatic, maybe even unconvincing, because we had just met a few hours ago and here we were weeping at our parting. But we were both in states of distress—I had lost my loved one and she had been rejected by hers. We were both abandoned and alone, and possibly, just maybe, or so I wanted to believe, we were both struggling with our sexual identities. She was my sister in that moment and I was her brother, and we had just found each other but now we were saying good-bye. And for a moment, I thought about going with her, about escaping into the night in order to live my own life, not the one that was being dictated by family. I pictured taking her hand and stepping through the threshold right after her, shutting the door behind us and disappearing into who knows what wondrous freedoms. But before I had a chance to take this moment of fantasy any further, Adelina flew out like the caged dove that she was, her pink sweater suddenly bright and magical. I watched her turn the corner and I imagined her slipping into a whole new dimension where she would remain safe—untouched and unharmed—for the rest of her days.

Solemnly I closed the door to Adelina's courageous world and shut myself inside my own. The next day, the grown-ups would wonder how Adelina had escaped, and none of their speculations would come close to the truth; I would keep the secret hidden in my heart until most of them had passed away, long after her name