

Landscape of extremes

I stand outside my father's house for the first time in ten years. The curtain of plastic ribbons, the colours faded now, still hangs in the doorway between the sunless interior and the searing light outside. I've come back to Sonora because Tía Carmela, has died. My father left it to his other sister, Tía Teresa, to call me. He probably didn't know what to say to me after so many years, never was much good at words unless he had a story to hang them on. I gave up long ago trying to explain to him why I had to leave.

The heat from the parched earth burns through the bottom of my sandals. A lizard sprints into shade under the brittlebush. The distant hills pulse shades of violet. The heat here can work its way inside you until your blood boils, bone and skin aren't enough to hold you together, and everything spills out. Good intentions evaporate.

El desierto, landscape of extremes. Flash floods after scorching months of drought, when, like magic, small yellow flowers appeared on the creosote bushes. Their pungent leaves rolled sticky in my hands. Owl's clover, fairy duster, lupine, desert marigold, and pincushion cactus burst into bloom and carpeted the desert floor with lavender, ultramarine, lemon, crimson. When I was a child, I would repeat the names of the plants after my father. *Escobita, tabardillo, lupino, hierba amarilla*. Now I'm older than he was then.

We used to go camping in the hills. I'd follow him into the desert night. As the moon rose and our shadows lengthened, we walked past the boojum trees – silent grey giants – towards the indigo hills. In the darkness, the desert came to life. We watched pocket mice, hesitant in the moonlight, looking for seeds. I helped him build a fire, and he told me stories. About the

grasshopper mouse, whose howls can be heard fifty feet away, fringe-toed lizards that swim through the sand, and kangaroo rats that never drink, getting the water they need from seeds they eat. The gecko that loses its tail when it needs to escape and then grows a new one.

But everything changed when my mother left.

As I pull a damp strand of hair away from my face, I feel Tía Carmela's fingers on my forehead. Never having known this house without her, I half-expect her to come tottering out, clucking and scolding, pleading with me to be patient, not to fight with my father, to understand how hard it had been for him since my mother died.

"He's afraid to lose you too. You're his only child, so much like him. Remember, *niña*, in the desert we need one another to survive. One day you'll understand,"

I wanted to shout at her, "I'm not like him! I'm like my mother. She left, and I will too."

My mother was American. Her father was a boss at the Ford plant in Hermosillo. He'd moved his family to Sonora from Arizona when the plant was being built. It opened in 1986, two years before I was born. All the boys in town dreamed of having one of the shiny new cars that rolled out of there. They liked to say the American car names – *Mercury, Tracer, Escort*. A lot of people left the farms and got jobs in that factory. My mother worked in the office and tried to persuade my father to sell his cows and get a job there. He'd make a lot more money and could buy a bigger house. Her dad would get him in for sure. But my father always said our house was big enough, and he couldn't stand the idea of being surrounded by noisy machines with an American boss breathing down his neck all day in a factory that was sucking whatever water was left out of the desert to fill the factory wells. He'd rather be outside with the cows.

Tía Teresa told me my father had inherited three hundred cows from his father, who'd been a rancher too. "But there are only two hundred left. Not much rain for years, and no rain means no grass for the cows. Some have already starved to death. Your *papá* sold some for half of what they were worth. If it doesn't rain soon, he'll lose more. The only happy creatures out there are the scavengers – the buzzards and the flies. And the bosses at the car factory."

I'd seen the buzzards hovering, searching for something dead or dying, their orange heads and ragged black tails staining the blue, cloudless sky. I'd heard stories about the buzzards attacking calves. The first time I saw them feeding on a dead cow, I was riding my horse out to the other side of the ranch, taking my father the lunch Tía Carmela had made. The birds scattered when they heard me. There wasn't much left of the cow – just two black holes where eyes had once been, the belly ripped open, guts shredded and trailing into the dust. I almost threw up. I rode away as fast as I could, heart pounding. I found my father repairing a fence.

"We've had droughts before. Rain will come," was all he said when I told him how much the buzzards scared me and asked what he'd do if he didn't have any cows left.

Tía Carmela used to keep her photo album on a shelf in the corner of the kitchen. When I was a kid, I would sit at the table, looking at the pictures while she was cooking. Sometimes, she'd wipe her hands on her apron, sit down beside me, and tell me about them.

"That one was taken before you were born, when they first met." She pointed to a photo in which my mother had one arm around my father and was waving at whoever was taking the picture. She was wearing a dress as blue as the sky that day. My father had on a white shirt with

the sleeves rolled up. They both had big smiles. In another picture, my father was leading a horse with my mother on its back.

“Your *papá* taught her to ride. She’d never been on a horse before she came here. He was so patient with her, just as he was with you when you were learning.”

She turned the page. “Look. It’s you on that horse. Your *papá* is on the other one. You were four when your mother took that photo.”

“How did my parents meet, Tía Carmela?”

“She and some friends were on their way south to the coast, to Guaymas, for carnival, but they didn’t get far. Their car broke down just outside Hermosillo. *Papá* stopped and gave them a ride back into town. Their brand new car broke down, and they had to ride in the back of his old truck! That’s how it all started.”

For my sixth birthday, my mother took me to Phoenix to visit my American aunties. A man from the plant, Frank, drove us there in one of those shiny cars. My mother looked beautiful. She’d done her hair and put on lipstick and a new dress. I was stretched out in the back seat. My mother and Frank were up front. They had the radio on and were laughing and joking and talking a mile a minute. My father didn’t like Frank. I didn’t really either even though Frank tried hard to make me like him, buying me ice cream and comic books. But it was good to have a break from my parents’ fights. Actually, it was more as if my mother was the one doing the fighting because she did all the yelling. My father usually went quiet and ended up slamming the door and driving off in his truck.

Watching Frank and my mother smiling and singing along to the radio, I started to think it might not be such a bad idea for my father to get a job at the factory.

My American aunties lived in a big apartment building. Most mornings, Frank picked up my mother to go for a drive and I stayed with my aunties, eating potato chips and chocolate and watching cartoons and movies on their giant TV. When they asked me if I'd rather stay in Phoenix than go back to Mexico, I said yes. That night, while my mother was still out driving around with Frank, my father called.

“When you get back, we'll go camping in the hills,” he said. He sounded sad, and I felt bad for telling my aunties I'd rather stay in Phoenix.

My mother started going to Phoenix a lot, spending more time there than in Hermosillo. Tía Teresa would shake her head and mutter to Tía Carmela. “Too bad he didn't drive right by her and her stupid friends that day they were stuck on the road. Somebody else would've found them and saved us a lot of trouble. I knew she'd never settle here with all those fancy American ideas in her head. She always said she'd get out of Sonora one day and go back to Arizona.”

And she did get out. Even having me didn't stop her.

At school one day, in front of all the other kids, Kevin, whose father worked at the Ford plant, said everyone knew Frank was fucking my mother. I punched him hard and blood poured out of his nose. I got a black eye back. I wouldn't tell anyone how I got the black eye or what Kevin had said about my mother. That night, when Tía Carmela was rubbing butter and salt into the bruise on my forehead, I made up a story about getting hit with a ball – the first lie I'd ever told her.

One morning, after having a big fight with my father, my mother hugged me and said she was going to Phoenix for a while, but next time she'd take me with her. When Frank picked her up, I wanted to get in the car and go with her right then.

That was the last time I saw her. A couple of weeks later, she and Frank were killed in a car crash fifty miles out of Phoenix. Tía Carmela said they'd probably been on their way back to see me. I wanted to believe her but wasn't sure I did.

At the service for my mother in Hermosillo, my American grandparents and some people from the factory sat on one side of the church, and my father, Tía Carmela, Tía Teresa, Tío Luís, and I sat on the other. My mother's body wasn't there. It stayed in Phoenix.

"She's too good to even be buried here," said Tía Teresa. "Didn't even come back for her own funeral."

My father never spoke her name again.

I missed my mother a lot – her voice, her laugh, her voice, and even her goodbye kisses.

Everything of hers was gone – her soaps and little bottles of perfume, her pretty dresses – as if she'd been erased. The house smelled like my *tías*. Tía Carmela's photo album disappeared from the kitchen.

On my next birthday, my eighth, my *tías* had a party for me, but I didn't really feel like cake or presents. My father and I had always gone camping in the hills on my birthday. I said I wasn't going because I had a stomach ache. My second lie.

My grief turned into anger that had to go somewhere. I needed to blame someone for my mother's leaving, for the accident, for things people were saying about her, for my lies. But no matter how hard I tried to make my father fight, he just went quiet, the way he had with my mother. Once I said it was all his fault she'd left, and I knew I'd hurt him but didn't care. All I wanted was my mother not to be dead. I swore I'd get out of Sonora one day.

Sometimes my American grandparents picked me up in their car and took me to their house. My mother and I used to stay there sometimes, and I still had my own room. Their house was way bigger than ours and even had a swimming pool. I'd close my eyes and float on the blow-up raft, imagining my mother laughing and splashing, pushing me around the pool on the raft the way she used to.

I was eighteen when I left Sonora. I'd saved enough money working at the Ford plant – stuffing envelopes and getting coffee for the people in the office – to keep me going until I found a job in Phoenix. That morning, my father got up before me and drove the truck into the hills. We never said goodbye.

Tía Carmela came with me to the station. Through the window in the back of the bus, I waved until she was too far away to see anymore. In the paper bag she'd given me, there were two *tortillas*, a plastic container of beef and bean stew, a jar of black coffee, and three American twenty-dollar bills. I cried all the way to Phoenix. I was supposed to go to my American aunties' place there, but I got on another bus and kept going north.

I left my father's house to live alone in an apartment in a city of concrete and glass, surrounded by water. Many nights in those first few months in Seattle, after eight hours of washing dishes in a restaurant, I fell asleep to the sound of rain, his stories running through me. In dreams, I was a tiny creature, howling, swimming through sand. Tía Carmela visited me once but didn't stay long, saying she felt like an overwatered cactus and I should come home with her. But I wasn't sure where home was anymore. I guess I'm still not.

A week after Tía Carmela left, I quit the dishwashing job and took a bus to Phoenix. My aunties called my grandfather and he got me a job in the office at the Ford factory in Minnesota. After months of overhearing comments about "that Mexican girl in the office", I began to shed pieces of my name. Susana Hernández Johnson became Susie Johnson.

The Minnesota plant closed in 2011 and they moved me to the one in Michigan, but now there's talk of layoffs there. Don't know where I'll go if that happens.

A breeze ripples through the coloured ribbons in my father's doorway. The desert wind can erase your footprints and leave you stumbling in circles, lost, trying to retrace your steps.

Familiar voices come from inside. There are stories I need to hear again. Unlike the gecko's tail, the part of myself I lost to escape Sonora has never grown back.