

A Plan of Escape

by

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Inka had spent four years in nomadic expeditions for money and experience. She traveled in vans to the small airports of Timișoara and Budapest and rode the Trans-Manchurian Railway to Beijing. She lost her mind in Hong Kong's metro and on the buses of the Punjab. She took budget airlines from east to west and the MS *Stubnitz*, a floating multi-cultural arts collective, from west to north. She didn't stay too long in the north, just long enough to listen to the sounds of ice cracking and chill out a while in the peace and orderliness. From there she returned by ferry, in a really nice cabin with a bed, a bathtub, and a round window that looked out at the steely sea. That journey lasted twenty hours and she went out on deck frequently in order to be closer to the waves. Comfort frustrated her, but Inka also needed a gentle transition to the *barrios* of South America.

Inka's starting point was what she earlier would have classified as a condition rather than a place; it was more of a conclusion than a beginning. It was as if a new Inka had stepped out of it, newly invented, a copy of the old Inka, a dubious figure. What would've been the name of this starting point? Helplessness, perhaps. Then what was this trip called? Escape, probably.

In Caracas she found lodging in Santa Teresa, a former dormitory for female students that had been converted into a hostel. Since there weren't a lot of other guests there, everyone got to sleep alone in a room with four beds and skimpy furnishings. The bunks were equipped with

white mattresses, fragrant and firm, but that was the only thing new in the whole setting. Clumsily painted bedframes were covered with clean, ironed linens, which were supposed to give the impression of a respectable level of hygiene. In the corners of every item of the bedclothes could be found the blur of the old stamp of the boarding school; all you could make out now were the letters STCM, standing for *Santa Teresa Colegio de Mujeres*. Every room contained a small washstand and mirror, and on each floor there was a common bathroom with shower stalls and a toilet. She spent two days here, mostly in a deep, sound sleep, waiting for Oscar to answer her email. She was pretty certain that he'd get in touch; all over the world teachers of English are in demand, and why would Oscar's private cosmos be any different?

He was an old acquaintance of Inka's, now going by a new name, which he, jerk that he was, had likely chosen quite a while ago to match his new life. In middle school, Oscar was the face of his generation. All the girls had crushes on him, but so did all the boys, too, who hoped that in his presence they might become more like him. And then he just disappeared. People said he was studying management in Germany and piling up huge sums of money that he'd use in Belgrade to carry on the family business—charging a certain percentage on financial transactions or currency conversions at a chain of exchange offices called *Rodeo*. Oscar's father had been the manager there for twenty-seven years. Contrary to expectations, however, Oscar cropped up again in the gossipy chit-chat of her city as the organizer of elite entertainments in Venezuela. So on that afternoon, she found herself in Caracas, on the twenty-third floor of the *Torre de David*. This unfinished skyscraper, with its squatters and all, was a testament to the frustrated ambitions of one David Brillembourg, whose concept led to the beginning of construction in 1990. After the banking collapse of 1994, work was halted, and in 2007 the Tower of David got new tenants,

for the most part down-and-out residents of the *barrio*. Oscar told her the income from this rent was wretched. To whom did they pay it? To a boss named El Niño Gaz, a tough and unwavering landlord, and a savior to those in muck and hunger—noble in his gifts, cruel in his punishments.

To the girls, to whom she gave English lessons in the building, Inka allowed fifteen-minute breaks. She went outside for fresh air, too, but she didn't join the group of students in casual conversation. She made for a distant corner and leaned against the wall, staring at the grubby skyline of the city.

“Inka? Like the Mayas and Incas?” one of the students said in her direction. She was skipping around like a little girl on a big vacation, which wasn't far from the truth.

“Well, no,” Inka replied. “It's a nickname. It's local and old-fashioned.” She repeated her actual name several times to the girl. “When you hear it, you can imagine an old woman, a kerchief on her head, large coarse hands, and death in the field where she toils.” Lupe said it sounded to her like a mighty mountain, bigger than the Andes, large, like a house full of angry gods. She shut her eyes, as if she were ashamed; *a house full of angry gods*—she had started to express herself like her Irishman, poetically, abnormally.

“Lupe is not my real name, either,” she laughed. She had some loose teeth, dappled with cavities and tartar, but that could not spoil the impression that Lupe was a very pretty child. Over and above that, she was smart and she was tough.

“The Irishman gave me this name, Lupe, after a character in a novel by his favorite writer. He was gentle with me. Brought me flowers and took me to the movies. After a few times he asked me if he could do it without a condom. I agreed, since he was so nervous and all. You'd

think the world depended on me saying yes. When he would come inside me, he used to love to watch his semen trickle down my ass. He'd use his finger to put it back in and got as excited about it as a child. And several times he even cried. He wasn't quite right in the head."

Inka was petrified. She stopped breathing, stopped hearing and seeing, and, more than anything, wanted to push the girl away from her, if only back across the seam in the middle of the concrete balcony. Anything to make her quit talking, to make her stop revealing what had been obvious to the girls the whole time and only Inka, till that afternoon, had refused to accept.

The other pupils, ten girls in summer dresses, were sharing a cigarette and singing the fight song for the Venezuelan soccer team. She looked at them as though they were apparitions. So light and delighted, so carefree, while she was fighting the nausea of having taken a look at the material for today. "I think they're ready to transition to the specialized lessons," Oscar said as he handed her the binder. He made air-quotes with his index and middle fingers as he pronounced the word "specialized."

Not waiting around for Inka's reaction or possible resistance, he started charging downstairs on his way out of the building. "Padre Martín and El Gaz are waiting for me," he explained, looking at his watch. That gesture enabled him to avoid the appearance of fleeing; it was more like he was in a rush. Conversations with Oscar were always brief and abrupt. Mostly they consisted of long sentences by him and occasional questions from Inka, to which she never received answers—only orders in the form of requests. Please, don't interrupt me, he would interrupt, with his hand over his heart. And he'd continue in this vein. Eventually he would, exactly like today, take a look at the gold watch on the wrist of his left arm—either that or a man

with a bronze complexion and a meaty neck would beckon him from the stairwell. Something imminent and unavoidable was forever disrupting his communication.

Inka remained trapped with the three-ring binder in her hands, an accomplice who had not been asked for her consent. Oscar and his gold watch had left, as had his friend with the bronzed neck. Behind them hung in the air the blessing that Padre Martín had uttered. He was the priest for this vertical parish that found its concrete god on the highest inhabited floor of the Tower of David.

Although Inka was hoping that Lupe would go back over to her friends, the girl lit up a cigarette and sat down next to her. With a pencil she scraped a piece of dried chewing gum off of the concrete and debated how to tell the other woman.

Lupe has a plan.

What kind of plan?

A plan of escape. Anyway, that's why she was going to the championship. Oscar doesn't suspect anything. Her goal is Argentina: the small locale of Las Toninas and a person named Stela Vita, a friend of her late mother who works as a nurse in the Hospital Maciel. They do interventions there; Venezuela, it seemed to her, was centuries away from making such a decision. On the way from the Tower of David to Stela Vita she was sharing the outing with the girls: the soccer tournament in Brazil, two or three tricks to turn with drunken fans, then a bit of patience till her contact for Las Toninas showed up. After that a short journey by bus and long hours in the hold of a fishing boat, in the nocturnal boundary waters of the Atlantic. The Irishman does not know that Lupe is pregnant. She didn't tell him, for she thought that then he would persuade her to keep the child. But that would be pretty weird.

The girls were having a loud discussion about which pairings would be the most advantageous for them: if only South American teams made it into the semi-finals, then they'd be sunk. The prices for their services would be as much as ten times lower than if France, Germany, or Belgium were among the top finishers. Now that would be grand! The fans that'll inundate the city will pay a lot more for intercourse than impoverished Latino guys. A Swede will pay the same amount for a blow job as three Brazilians will for an entire night. Well, who could resist? Plus they have to fulfill a certain quota for Oscar, for El Gaz, for their families, and for food and an apartment in the Tower.

And Inka?

What about Inka?

Does Inka have a love, a child, a home, some place safe and warm, like the Irishman has Lupe and her tender pussy, the way Lupe has Las Toninas, Stela Vita, and her own stomach?

She does, but it's far off.

On another continent?

In another time. What do you mean, your own stomach?

"Maybe I'll change my mind," Lupe whispered. "Stela Vita doesn't have children and she wants me close to her. Sometimes she talks to me like I'm my mother. She would take in my baby, too. And then will she address the child as if it's me?" She giggled. "Probably. These total whackos tend to get hooked on me," she whispered as if she needed to justify herself. Inka wanted to disabuse her of that notion, to tell her that loving Lupe was a completely normal thing, and that loving at all was awfully brave. Instead she just smiled amiably and looked at her watch. The break was over.

THE END

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