



ROSEBUD BEN-ONI

# The Red Bird

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Ximena slows down at the edge of the Sonora desert. Besides patches of ocotillo and bristly cholla, there isn't much to see. César had reminded her to look for the ancient, towering Tamarisk tree that shades a forth of the motel.

Although they haven't seen each other in years, Ximena didn't need directions. She has forgotten nothing. She never thought she'd have to come here again. For over 30 years, César has managed the motel, which is on the outskirts of San Carlos, a small town known for its beaches, marinas and mild winters. The motel is a cheap alternative for tourists who come to celebrate Carnival in the Spring, in which prices skyrocket from Ash Wednesday until the first day of Lent.

Ximena does not care for Carnival anymore than she does San Carlos, which is only a short drive from where she lives in Guaymas, an industrial port city. Yet, every year she reads the papers to learn what's burned in

*Quema del Malhumo* during Carnival, to see if she agrees with others' rancor. Often it's a politician or a policy like higher taxes.

As she pulls off the main road and onto the gravel lot in front of the motel, Ximena wonders if people burn an image because they cannot change the reality. It amuses her that next year they'll do it again, though the passion of their protest never carries any lingering messages in its ashes, which vanish into the music concerts and parades, into the swelling crowds which flare with the anger of too many drunks packed together.

Ximena steps out of her car and looks around. The motel seems to be completely vacant. From the outside, nothing has changed. The dahlias are still dying in their flower-boxes hooked onto the bottom of the office windows, just as they've always been, no matter how much César waters them.

He's waiting for her at the front desk, propped up under a crutch. Although she wants to remain in the office, he insists she come inside his room where it's cooler.

Although she moved out over a decade ago, he has kept things how they once were. On one side are her old bed, a chest of drawers, and a table with two folding chairs where they'd eaten together in front of a small

window. César would leave open it in the summer to catch the night winds.

As he makes her coffee with some difficulty, she imagines that he now eats his meals at the front desk, alone and standing up. His right leg and his left arm are both in casts; his face is very swollen from the beating with a metal bat. She sits down at the table and frowns at the two small suitcases next to his chair as he tells her he'd been outnumbered five to one. Luckily, only one of the rooms had been occupied, and the guests hadn't been present, as business is always slow in late September. The bastards took everything, the register, the money from the safe, the televisions, even the towels and toilet paper from the storage closet. The motel's owner found a replacement who's coming tomorrow.

She takes small sips of the coffee. "I bought the house back, you know."

With his good hand, César reaches over for a pair of sunglasses that she'd dropped on the table. He cleans the smudges off them with a napkin, as if trying to rub out the words only seconds after she says them. She sits there quietly, and lets him.

"I don't have anywhere to go," he says finally.

"You didn't save anything?"

"Of course," he says, "but I'm responsible for the damages."

"That doesn't sound right."

"It's in my contract."

Rubbing her temples, she wonders why she took the day off for this. She works as an office assistant for a doctor who'd helped secure a bid for a place in an area of Guaymas that has been described as "developing" for at least two decades. It was the same one-story house where Ximena had been born. Left in shambles by the previous owners, an electrician and a carpenter took care of the inside while she whitewashed the outside walls. Every morning she picks out trash from her small yard of gravel and flowering cacti. Yesterday after work she bought a simple but sturdy fence of interlacing wires, and planned to put it up when she got his phone call.

"I can't get out of it," he says.

Ximena gets up and walks to his side of the room. The two-burner hot plate is still on top of a small cabinet that holds his things. Surprised to see the key in the lock, she's tempted to open it, but instead pulls out a cot wedged into the tight space between the cabinet and the wall. A pillow falls from the middle; she picks it up and dusts it off.

"You should've kept a gun," she says.

César stands up. “I did.” He knows the remoteness of the location made him a target for burglars and thieves, so he’d always slept with a gun under his pillow.

Ximena tries not to look too surprised. “So why didn’t you use it?”

He shakes his head, and hobbles closer to her.

She crosses the room again before he can reach her. Her old bed smells of fresh soap, its corners tightly tucked-in. When she sees a large screen folded up against the wall, she turns away and goes to the window.

“I kept that too,” he says, sounding farther away than he actually is, “and changed the sheets of your bed every week, in case you came to visit.”

He falls silent for a moment; she hears the creaking of the cot as he sits down. Then he says: “I remember when you lugged home the screen. You’d just started high school. You wouldn’t let me help you, heavy as it is. When you unfolded it and put it up, it was like you’d created another room. In a way I was proud of you. But after that, I knew not to use the table if you were home and I could not see you. ”

“You’ve been here since it opened,” she cuts him off. “You should’ve negotiated better with the damages.”

“I’m responsible,” he says.

Outside an owl lands on the old Tamarisk tree set

against the evening sky, a fiery array where an orange horizon bleeds into a deep red. The owl has something in its claws that it begins to devour. She remembers that owls often hunt in the cacti and scrub, and like to eat their prey in the tree. Never has she seen an owl dive and come up without something in its talons. Lizards. Snakes. Rodents. Even smaller birds. Ximena never liked eating birds, not out of a particular fondness for them.

Seeing the carcasses of chickens strung up in the market reminds her of when her mother lost her mind. After days of not leaving the house, she’d taken Ximena to a plaza in San Carlos and pretended to feed the pigeons with the tourists. Then she trapped one with her skirt and broke its neck. She did the same to another. The tourists picked up their children in their arms and left the plaza quickly.

Humiliated, Ximena wanted to run away but was afraid to leave her mother, fearing what she’d do next. Ximena tugged on her mother’s skirt, dotted with pigeon shit. Cradling the dead birds in one arm, her mother took her hand and they went home.

Ximena said that she would not eat them, but her mother wouldn’t answer. She sat at the table, still cradling the pigeons. Then she cried quietly to herself, disappointing Ximena even more than she already had.

There were many things to which she never agreed, Ximena thought to herself at the window. She never agreed, and yet they became her responsibilities.

They soon fall into a routine. César waits for her to come home, having spent the day watching television and struggling to turn the pages of a newspaper. He now does everything with his right hand, and the doctor has made no promises that once the cast is off the other hand will be of any use.

After he moves in, he tells Ximena that night one man found the gun in the cabinet before he could get to it. Then another kicked him in the back and held him down with one foot. The third examined César's gun and declared it was better than any of theirs. Then he cocked it and asked César which hand he wrote with.

Unfortunately, César told the man the truth. He watched as they splayed his hand before him and smashed it with a hammer.

The only hope for his hand, the doctor has said, is the pain he feels. The nerves are not dead. But César tells her that he cannot locate the exact spot of the pain, which scatters from the tips of his fingers to his wrist. At first the pain was so bad he'd pass out. Now his entire hand itself is a deep throbbing, the points of pain threading

together.

He's not used to being idle, he tells her when she catches him trying to clean the house, even after she asked him not to. His insistence only increases her resentment. He hadn't been so gracious when, just before Ximena graduated high school, her mother had fallen ill. Not yet forty, the woman died of pneumonia, twisting the sheets of a cot in a *Cruz Roja* hospital. César had not come with Ximena then, and she'd never forgotten this.

Looking exhausted from a long day at the doctor's office, Ximena cooks his food, mashing it up to make it easier for his stomach. It's still healing from where a knife had nearly pierced straight through.

As he eats, Ximena sits down and pretends to read the paper. She has no focus these days. Sometimes when he tries to talk to her, she looks at the remaining strands of hair on his head, and wants to curl up in someone's arms and sleep a long time.

When César asks her about her day, what was her boss like, what did she eat for lunch, she knows that he too is pretending. His focus is too sharp and too unkind, and his eyes linger along the deep lines around her mouth, the wisps of gray at her hairline, her cracked, dry elbows. She is only 28, much too young to have aged so

much.

She sees how he's looking at her and wants to continue to pretend; he does not. One night he promises to put off his own death until he finds her a decent man. The next night, he tells her that he deserves this long, painful recovery for all the wrong he's done. For it isn't love but guilt that keeps his heart beating. And yet, he adds in the same breath, he doesn't feel guilty about what happened to her mother. If he had to do it again, he'd make the same decision.

Ximena never responds to any of it. His explanations are full of contradictions, and she knows in her heart that it's all too late. For her, for them. It's in these moments he tries to reach her that remind her of her loneliness.

One night, as she's doing dishes with her back to him, César tells her that he had expected to be treated with suspicion and contempt. But he hadn't expected she never eat with him, that she'd put him to bed and then start all over in the kitchen. He hadn't expected that she'd harbor him like a fugitive unable to start his life over, waiting for him to rob her blind and then make a run for it.

Ximena turns around and sees that he's looking at his useless hand. César wonders aloud if it was the same one that she'd taken for the first time as a toddler, with-

out thinking of what she was doing, without needing to know just who he was. He wishes she could do it again. But there is nothing natural at all between them. He had seen her so little in her childhood. He hadn't been there for her first word, her first steps, her first taste of the ocean. She was already ten by the time she came to live with him.

Rolling her eyes, Ximena turns back around, but he goes on, and she can hear the tears in his shaky voice: It's no wonder he can't remember if it was the same hand that now made her life so difficult.

He hopes that it isn't.

The dreams begin again. She hasn't had the dreams in years, but now almost every night they chase her: her mother, hair wild and clothes unkempt, the savage gulls, and the red bird too which still shrieks like a drowning woman. She dreams of the days before César Reyes took her away from her mother, when Ximena spent almost every weekend at the beach. Her mother wasn't fond of the touristy beaches of San Carlos, and preferred to stay closer to the fishing docks of Guaymas.

She does not dream new dreams, but memories, of the gulls that steal food from her in broad daylight, the steam that arises from her emptied hands, the thick, wet

air clinging to her naked back, the sweat gathering in her belly-button. She yanks up her pants, as her mother buys them one size too big so she'd wear them longer. The bottom hems are always unraveling, and whenever she pulls at the loose strings, her shorts fall to one side. If her mother sees Ximena's underwear showing, she pulls them up hard and fast, causing Ximena to wince in pain and feel safe again.

She dreams that César Reyes is still a Sunday night call at the motel; she nor her mother ever say much to him. They only see him twice a year when someone comes to relieve him for a few days.

Ximena doesn't like it when César Reyes comes to their house. Her mother keeps the windows shut, and dresses Ximena in stiff, starched dresses. They eat sitting at the table. Most of all, she doesn't like it when César Reyes takes her spot in the bed next to her mother. Ximena has to sleep in the smaller bedroom by herself which they use for storage. No matter how much she and her mother clean, it is always dusty and smells like rotten fruit.

After he leaves, Ximena and her mother are uneasy around each other. They immediately go back to the beach and try to act like nothing has changed, but often Ximena goes looking for trouble, and her mother seems

too ready to punish her.

One time her mother catches her digging up corroded batteries in the sand. Soft, mealy rust sticks to Ximena's fingers, stings her lips, and freezes her tongue so she can't defend herself. Her mother slaps her and throws her headfirst into the water, bending her at the waist. Back and forth, she immerses her head and her hands, until the surf knocks her down.

When Ximena cries out, she's choked by a brackish burn that takes away her nose until her mother pulls her up again. She wraps Ximena in her skirt and then pokes her ears with her smallest finger, cleaning them out until she hears the screaming of the gulls above the rolling surf and Ximena awakens in the middle of a scream, her fist clinched. Outside the rain pounds her gravel garden in hard, grey sheets, and she reaches up to shut the window above her which has blown open.

When she falls back into bed, she's startled to find him standing at the door, the dim light from the hallway thinning him out, making his face seem even more sunken.

He hobbles in and reaches for her hand, which she slaps away and turns on a lamp. Her throat still stinging from the brine of her dream, she folds her arms and glares at him, willing him to return to his room.

With his good hand, César wipes his eyes and then reaches over for her sunglasses which she's left at the foot of the bed. He cleans them with his t-shirt.

"I don't have anywhere to go," He says again, trying to look her in the eye, but she withholds it until she sees he is losing focus. He drops her sunglasses; suddenly he isn't so brave anymore. He turns away from her, his face flushed with shame.

Ximena makes him stand up, fighting his stiffening body to feel if his diaper needed to be changed.

The next morning she oversleeps, and blurry-eyed, her head pounding as if she'd drunk too much, Ximena rushes to make him breakfast. She calls out to him several times, but he doesn't come to the kitchen.

She sweeps into the room, throwing open the door so hard the knob leaves an indent in the wall. He's still asleep. She calls to him from the doorway, the side of the bed, shakes him by the shoulders, by his sides. She can't get him to wake up. She takes him to a hospital in San Carlos, which caters to wealthy retirees from the U.S and Canada, knowing he'll protest the expense later. A doctor tells her his blood pressure has fallen dangerously low due to a new antibiotic. He'll be fine, but due to his condition, they want to keep him overnight for observation.

Ximena thanks him, and says she had to go home

and change; she's almost three hours late for work.

At the office she misplaces several charts and schedules two patients at the same time. After lunch she throws up in the bathroom. The other office assistant hands her a bottle of water, and traces with a bony finger the dark circles under Ximena's eyes and her wild, uncombed hair with a smile. Ximena stares at her. The assistant raises an eyebrow and asks her if she's finally got herself a man. Then three lines ring at once, and relieved, Ximena answers the phone just as a new patient comes through the door.

César is still sleeping when she goes to the hospital after work. She sits down on the side of his bed and closes her eyes. Outside the hospital she thinks she hears them. She has heard them all day— the gulls. She needs to sleep through one night or she'll go mad with their cries; they have a vengeful streak that separates them from other birds. It takes just one harassed gull to incite a sort of mob rule among them. She has forgotten nothing.

She closes her eyes and watches as a flock backs a stray, skinny dog into the surf after it tries to attack a young chick. The gulls keep the dog at bay for almost an hour, pushing it deeper into the water. A small crowd soon gathers, mostly fishermen and some of the women



who sell their catches at small stands, as the gulls circle from high above until a rising tide lifted the dog high into the air.

The crowd draws in a collective breath as the wave pulls the dog under for good, and then everyone cheers. Soon most lose interest, and suddenly Ximena feels her mother squeeze her shoulder. She tells Ximena to wait right there, and sneaks off with a tall, dark man, laughing so hard her head seems to tilt all the way to her back.

Ximena sits in the sand. As it grows dark and her mother still hasn't returned, she notices that long after the dog is taken-- that even after the last of the fishing boats is pulled in and the sun has faded-- that even then the gulls continue to circle above the waters where the dog disappeared, their cries cutting across the clear sky.

A nurse pokes her head in to announce visiting hours are over. Startled, Ximena jumps from where she's fallen asleep on the side of his bed. She checks the clock on the wall; it's past midnight. César must've awoken at some point and then fallen asleep again, because their fingers are so tightly intertwined there's nothing to do but wake him so he'd let go.

In the hallway she runs into the doctor who tells her

that César's casts will be taken off tomorrow. Soon she can reintroduce him to solid foods and start some light exercises.

Ximena nods and asks if she can pay for everything upfront. Then she goes home and sleeps terribly. She doesn't go to the hospital the next day. After work she comes home and picks out the trash for her gravel yard, most of it carried by the wind, and then remembers she has not yet put up her fence. She feels very exposed and is still cleaning up the yard when the hospital calls; César Reyes was discharged that afternoon and is still waiting for her.

Ximena drags herself into her car and drives to the beach. She has avoided it since her mother died. It's late, and the last of the fisherman are coming in, their small boats full of the last day's catches. Her phone rings again, and she silences it and leaves in the car.

She walks along the surf, taking gentle steps. This is how her mother taught her to walk on the sand, on the tips of her toes and never letting the heel come down, so she won't leave a complete footprint behind. Night is falling and seagulls in the dim sky swarm over the fishermen. Ximena watches them butcher the fish right on the sand, leaving behind the scales and guts which a

flock of gulls fight over with other birds. The cry of the gulls will always frighten her. Sometimes she thinks they know what her mother has done. She closes her eyes and the ocean drowns out the distant ringing in her ears, the waves breaking hard and sudden as the tide rolls in, and she is very alone, and her mother has stopped taking her to the beach.

Instead her mother takes her to the fisheries where men with heavy-gloved hands eye her with a state of urgency and then she disappears with the same tall, dark man.

She leaves Ximena alone and some of the men bump into her as if she's not there and others who look at her with the same state of urgency. Ximena finds a dark corner to wait, hidden from view by the various catches of the day, tuna and hake and mackerel and manta rays. She feels sick when she sees a manta out of the water; to her, its dried-up body looks like the shell of an emptied soul.

She's glad that she never has to eat the popular *cahuamanta*, a dish made of manta rays and vegetables. But this is because her mother despises the mantas, that these strange creatures were angels who fell into the sea because they sinned in Heaven and grew horns and tails like the devil. They swim alone for most their lives, and cannot sting or bite, their fins but sad remains of naked,

torn-off wings, each mouth a silent void, surviving on the basest elements.

Ximena cried when she first heard this, and her mother fixed her with an icy gaze.

*Why else, she asked her, would God have made a creature so defenseless, but in the same nature of sharks and sting-rays?*

Ximena still does not know what makes a sin a sin and does not ask and only when she hears her mother calling for her does she come out of her corner and sees her mother now has the urgent look in her eye, as if the man has passed it on to her, for now the man looks calm and happy and walks in front of them as if her mother doesn't exist anymore.

Her mother grabs her hand and they walk home quickly. Ximena hears a jingling in her mother's pockets, the coins ringing out loudly against the clatter and commotion of the fishery. She uses the coins to buy Ximena an ice cream and this continues for almost a year until one night, at the beginning of Carnival, the tall, dark man doesn't show up. Ximena and her mother walk around the docks and the fisheries and the beach until another man, who was grizzly and half-blind, approaches them and tells Ximena's mother not to come back to these parts again. He leaves without another word, and