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MARACAIBO

MY MOTHER NEVER ACTUALLY said out loud that it was my father who ate all that chocolate, but I was thirteen already and not completely in the dark about how serious a fat man from Oklahoma could be about needing to hunt down sweets at night.

We were living in Maracaibo in a casita on the grounds of the Hotel del Lago while my father was figuring out how to be an oil company executive. He never did too well as a company man, but then he never did too well as a wildcatter either. He was plenty smart enough and worked out of an intuition uncommon in most men I've ever known, but he had a short fuse and was haunted always by thinking he was not good enough in the main and was certain to be found out, exposed, sent back to Oklahoma to live out his destiny as the loser king of losers, forever hungry and hollow-eyed in a dust bowl decade that stretched beyond the thirties to fill his whole miserable life.

In short, much as he wanted to make a sweeping success of whatever he did, he always fucked up, got mad at the wrong time at the wrong people, read a given situation about sixty degrees off the mark, invested in the wrong well, hooked up with beyond shady business partners, and blew it, blew it so big and so publicly that everybody saw it and turned away and thought, if they had a trace of empathy in them, how sad, how pitiful, how nakedly human a person could be. Those without empathy just thought he was an asshole and hoped he'd leave town.

We were doing pretty well in Venezuela those first few months, but we were still in the hotel, although looking daily at houses, and my father was traveling a lot, trying to get his associates in line and find out just what was what in a country full of oil and corruption of every sort. My sister Evie, just six, and I waited every morning on the round leather couch in the Hotel del Lago lobby for the school bus. It was never on time, and nobody seemed to care, except for Evie who was a pretty earnest first grader and worried she'd get called out for tardiness.

"Nobody gives a shit if we're late," I told Evie. "Everybody's late in this country and I don't know when you're going to catch on to this. Now why don't you see what kind of crap they fixed us today?"

The hotel kitchen made us box lunches, which they left for us at the lobby desk, and they were always a crushing disappointment, particularly for Evie. Dry Swiss cheese sandwiches on old toast points, butter instead of mayonnaise, slimy sweet pickles, hunks of mango and papaya too ripe by far too many days, everything leaking through the bottom of a thin cardboard box designed for pastries.

Evie cried at lunch box inspection every single day. She wanted my mother's pimento cheese, animal crackers, peanut butter, Oreos. Well, I did too.

"I hate this place, Lillian," she blubbered. "Why aren't we home?"

WE ALL MISSED HOME, wherever that had been, which was in some rented ranch house in the suburbs of nearly every oil town in the south and southwest, from Mobile to Midland, and also Canada. We spent a lot of time moving in and getting settled in any number of places, but the South American stint shook us all up, although Evie was the only one who talked about hating it with any feeling or constancy.

When in Rome, do as Romans, my mother said most mornings of my life, a cliché that apparently worked for her. Early on in Maracaibo she was enjoying the company wife thing, joining the American Women's Club, taking Spanish lessons — *yo soy Americana* was her ready phrase, as if the whole country wasn't keenly aware of that fact — and thinking she really might have to finally learn to play bridge for this town. She was no good with cards, but she knew the value of gossip for the company cause, so bridge lessons were pretty high up on her list.

Eventually, the school bus wheezed up the circular drive, and Evie

and I climbed on, she sitting up by the driver—whose only English was “Sit down and shut up, you little fuckers”—and me in the back with the other ninth grade blondes and the rich Venezuelan boys who were teaching us to smoke.

We went to the American School, because that’s what Romans did in Maracaibo, and on the way to this pink villa that was our school—the Escuela Buena Vista, this place way up on this hill with a view of the lake, the former vacation home of some Venezuelan president shot for some cause no one could remember—we drove through acres of corrugated metal and cardboard shacks, whole families living in boxes, naked baby boys wandering around and pissing on the ground. They all came out to watch the Americanos’ bus chug by, and on more than one occasion the bus took a few rocks, and once a man jumped up and actually spit in the window. I caught that wad of spit in my eye—it reeked of beer and tobacco, his neighbors cheered—and I told my daddy all about it, and he said we might be moving to Bogotá for just this sort of thing.

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“You know they hate us here?” my father said. “Rebels blew up six, maybe seven wells last night just this side of Cúcuta, and I’m thinking this might not be the best place to raise a family.”

Well, we were all glad to hear that because we were never really sure our family’s thriving, not to mention safety, was on his list, particularly when my father was in his new town mode, which was pretty much all the time, and of course they hated us. We were taking all their oil, leaving them nothing but a long future of life in a box. Plus, we were smug and obvious about who we were and who they weren’t. It was 1962, and we didn’t know anything about anything and faking it wasn’t working out. My mother failed bridge and also Spanish, and my father’s main source of inside information, this piano player at the hotel bar named Dennis, turned out to be a Communist, a fact that simply scared the hell out of my father, who was an Adlai man and a

Woody Guthrie fan, but virtually innocent at 42 on the ways the world might otherwise be.

SO TO CHEER US UP, my father went to Panamá for us, at least that's what he said, although we knew there were some oil people there he needed to see. (He was trying to figure out exactly what the bribe rate was for the customs officials. He had paid too little recently and was nearly beaten up, and he had to give over his good Omega watch, the one we gave him that Christmas in Lafayette.) So, my father went to Panamá and promised presents all around.

I was hoping for a sky blue sweater set, a *Seventeen* magazine, records, and Evie stated a clear preference for a dog.

"He's not bringing us a dog, Stink. You know what he's bringing us."

"He might bring us a dog. He might bring two dogs."

"Come on, Evie. You know what it's going to be."

"Food?"

"Yeah."

"Shit."

Did I mention my father was a large man? The truth of the matter is that he was very large, well over six feet tall, and he weighed in 1962 nearly 300 pounds. He was fat is what he was, like Jackie Gleason fat, but taller and always on a diet, which is to say that we were always on a diet. This is why my sister and mother and I are thin as sticks — you could call us lanky, if you wanted to be kind — but what we are is skinny with no taste for much that is sweet.

We grew up on green salads dressed in lemon juice (they evolved from iceberg to endive as my mother's cooking lessons took hold) and lean beef and hardly ever dessert, just the occasional pie, no cookies in the jar, no ice cream in the freezer. My father loves sweets, particularly chocolate, and once during a particularly strenuous dieting period — "275, our goal before Christmas" — I caught him late at night rooting around for marshmallows hidden in the back of the pantry, and another time simply licking white sugar off a wet finger he'd stuck in the canister.

FROM PANAMÁ MY FATHER brought back a whole case of Hershey Bars with Almonds — that’s 24 bars — and four jars of peanut butter, Peter Pan, two smooth, two chunky. He brought this booty back in his brown Samsonite briefcase from Panamá, which in 1962 was like any American beach town, a city full of grocery stores and gasoline stations and waving red, white and blue flags. He paid the customs guy 30,000 Bolivars to bring the stuff in, and that must have been the right price because he got home with most of it.

My father dumped our stash out on the coffee table at the Hotel del Lago casita, and we all oohed, which is what we were supposed to do. “Be sure and ooh,” my mother said. “He likes to know we appreciate what he does for us.”

“You don’t think he’s bringing us a dog?”

“Jesus, Stink. Forget about the damn dog.”

So, we oohed and were allowed to pet the chocolate, and we even got to open a jar of peanut butter and lick some off spoons. My mother, who was in charge of rituals, said after the main oohing that she thought we all ought to have a bar now and then save the rest. Her concept: on Sunday afternoons for the next few weeks we’d gather around this very coffee table and have a Hershey Bar and think of home.

“That way we’ll make this last and last. Remember our pretty kitchen in New Orleans? That great rumpus room in Edmonton?”

So the four of us each had a whole Hershey Bar with Almonds. They were wrapped in that brown paper and then again in aluminum foil, and we kept the foil — “we can do something with this,” said my mother, an Arkansas farm girl with Mamie Eisenhower bangs who didn’t believe in waste and couldn’t throw anything out if she could think up a secondary use, which she generally did — and we let that chocolate from home melt piece by piece, sliver by sliver, oh so slowly on our tongues and felt for a moment like everything might be all right this time.

The next week went by as it did. My mother won a hat-making contest at the American Women’s Club using a round piece of cardboard covered in aluminum foil, and my father took to wearing cowboy boots and answering to Tex, a ploy that had worked to his advantage in Edmonton until they found out he was born just outside of Tulsa. I didn’t get spit in the eye even once, although Victoria Taylor did (but nobody liked her anyway), and Evie amused herself by setting out traps at night for the iguanas that roamed around our beds while we slept.

She was a strange little girl even then, with an odd imagination and even odder measure of success. Before bedtime she'd put a piece of soap on the floor in the middle of a circle of string, and in the morning the soap would be gone.

"Got another one."

"Just get on the damn bus, Evie."

Then Sunday came, and Evie said, "So when's chocolate time?"

"What chocolate?" my mother said.

"You know, The Chocolate? The Hershey Bars? What time are we going to choc down?"

My mother looked at her plain — my father was still in the shower — and said in a whisper to her baby daughter, "You know, I'm getting a little worried about your teeth. I'm thinking maybe we won't be gnawing on chocolate for a while because you're getting your permanents now and we need to take care of them."

Evie was young, just six, and maybe not the brightest kid on the planet, but she wasn't completely stupid. I watched the true facts wash over her face, something forever shifted in her, and I remembered when it happened to me and felt my stomach turn sour for all of us.

"Fuck," said Evie. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

My mother was going for the soap, but my father — in a Hotel del Lago towel not nearly generous enough — caught her in the hall.

"You know, I've been thinking we better get on to Bogotá. I made some good contacts there last week, and they told me about a real good school for the girls. This Venezuela's a powder keg, so I'm thinking we might just better pack it up and get out of this hellhole. We can catch that late afternoon flight."

And that is what we did, because that is what we did at least twice, sometimes three times a year in that family. The only consolation in

Bogotá was we got into a real nice house—two stories, I had my own room for once—after just a few weeks in the Hotel Tacendama—a horrible place, freezing because they didn't have any heat because they didn't have gas, and I don't know why they even had that stove in the kitchenette. Plus everything was orange, the carpet, the walls, the scratchy blankets. They said Cantinflas lived down the hall, but we never saw him, so I guess that was a lie, and on the day we moved into the best house we ever lived in my father brought home in his jacket pocket a red dachshund puppy for Evie.