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Heaven or The Deep Blue Sea

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Heaven or The Deep Blue Sea

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This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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It was nearly the end of March when Rodrigo woke me in the dark. He was standing over me with shining eyes and forehead gleaming with sweat, even though the morning was cool.

"Time to go, mi amor. This is the beginning of our new life."

I rose, queasy and weak-kneed. Rodrigo was holding the plastic bag packages with our documents. He patted a lump in his front pocket: the money he’d kept stashed beneath a loose tile under our bed. Then, we walked away from our little house, leaving the radio playing softly and the kitchen light on. Without thinking, I grabbed Rodrigo’s arm and leaned into him. This made him chuckle and kiss the very top of my head.

“Ay, mi vida.” It was the kind of thing he would have said escorting me home after a date in the early days.

We arrived at the place we called la playa pequeña, the little beach. It was a spot near the water where mangrove crept up the sand not much good for swimming, but an excellent place for having sex or smoking marijuana. Victor and Salvador were waiting for us, which did not surprise me. Also waiting for us was their fishing boat. This was to be our vessel? It looked especially small that morning. In the moonlight I could see that Victor wore his usual expression: eyebrows knitted, lips pressed together, giving nothing away. He grunted a greeting.

Salvador gave us his half smile, one corner of his mouth reaching up into his cheek. In his brief eyebrow raising I could see his thoughts. So this is it, let’s give it a try.

Beatriz was not there. Now Salvador seemed to read my mind and his crooked smile collapsed.

"Beatriz isn’t coming."

I climbed into the boat with Victor and Salvador each holding one of my hands, feeling quite sure that La Paloma would not be able to carry us all to the United States. Rodrigo hesitated a moment, and in the moonlight I could see him sizing up the boat as if he’d never seen it before - even though it was the same boat his cousins had been fishing in for years. Victor instructed me to lay flat. The three men sat on the planks of wood that served as benches. Salvador and Rodrigo began to row, and we were off. The oars in the water made a soothing sound as my heart beat like the drums of santeros.

Lying in the boat was not pleasant. There was a smell of fish and I could not find a comfortable position. How long would I have to stay this way, I asked. Without looking down at me, Salvador said,

“Until we pass the coast guard.”

Then, still not looking down, he explained the whole plan. Rodrigo had been going out to fish with Victor and Salvador since the beginning of the month (although he never actually touched a fish). This was to get the coast guards who regularly patrolled the fishing areas used to the idea that their cousin was now working with them. It was also to get Rodrigo used to the boat, so he wouldn’t be overcome with anxiety. Looking up at my husband, I could see that the exercise had been in vain as far as the latter goal. Less than an hour out to sea, his jaw was clenched tight and his face wore a look of creeping agony.

In the bottom of the boat with me were eight large plastic bottles of water; oranges rolled about with the motion of the vessel. There were a dozen cans of sardines and a loaf of bread tied up tight in a plastic bag. I hugged to my chest the packages of documents, Victor’s and Salvador’s included. I thought about Beatriz. Was Salvador’s girl sleeping, or lying awake and wondering if she had made the right choice?

We never even saw the coast guard.

“That happens sometimes,” Victor said.

I was allowed to sit up with the others as the sun came up; Salvador said we were now beyond the fishing waters. The men stopped rowing.
"The current will carry us," Rodrigo spoke as if trying to convince himself of this. In the hours of silence that followed, I stared into the water as the sun scorched my neck. Salvador told us to take sips of water every once in a while. Rodrigo gulped his, so that he was quickly down to only half a bottle after six hours at sea. I knew he would demand my water when his ran out.

Later the men talked about what their lives would be like in Miami. Rodrigo had an idea, which I now heard for the first time: He would seek out his old friend Jorgito who was selling drugs for the Colombians. They would give him something to do. He would save his money and open a cabaret, featuring live bands playing son y salsa. Victor and Salvador had more practical plans: Find jobs in construction, cleaning, restaurants, anything. Get a cheap apartment somewhere and save their money. Maybe they could open a small bodega or restaurant one day. I had nothing to add, convinced we would not reach dry land. Even the prospect of seeing my sister Carlota seemed impossible.

After a while, I tuned the men out. I tried to imagine what it would be like to drown: crushing and terrible, or a sweet float into the slumber? Toward the evening, breezes awoke as if after a long nap. The waves moved us along with greater energy. We ate sardines and bread. Later, Salvador said, we would have orange slices. I fell asleep in the bottom of the boat just after sunset. My dreams were of Carlota dancing with faceless men in Rodrigo's cabaret and of my mother crying into garbanzo soup in her kitchen.

When I woke up, my husband was half-draped over me in the bottom of the boat, snoring. There was a strong smell of rum. I wriggled out from under Rodrigo and settled myself on the bench facing Salvador, who was sitting with knees up and his back against the prow of the boat. There was only a little light, as clouds lingered over the moon and stars.

"Why does it smell like rum?" I couldn't imagine. Salvador didn't answer me.

"Rodri drank a whole bottle." Victor's voice came from behind me. "He said he would go crazy if he didn't knock himself out. He just sat there and drank it, like medicine."

"He's going to be thirsty when he wakes up," I stated the obvious, wondering how he'd gotten the rum on board.

"Oye Marisol," Salvador leaned close. "You are not going to give him your water. Hear me?" There was just enough moonlight to see the intensity in his face. I nodded, but I was by no means certain that Rodrigo wouldn't wrest it away from me. Then there was just the sound of waves lapping against the boat and soft snores from my husband. It felt like we were not moving at all.

"Mira, Mari. Look at us," Salvador said after a few moments, with the beginnings of a grin. "Two children of the revolution, traveling ¡pa'l norte!" I tried an ironic smile, and said nothing.

As imperfect as things were in my country, I was never one for trying to get away. For most of my life I was in love with la patria and could imagine no place I would rather be. Rodrigo once told me I lacked the imagination to conceive if a different life. Perhaps. I only thought about "away" as the place my sister lived, the place from which she might one day return to us, if only for a short visit. I never thought of going there, even though the prospect was a kind of mania among many of my compatriots. People like Rodrigo were convinced that Americans waited along Florida beaches to shower new arrivals with money, opportunities, and admiration. Salvador and Victor were more realistic about what they might find across the water; still, they had optimism that I found hard to relate to. I imagined the place filled with people rushing here and there, grim-faced and striving, with no time to even answer a question from a stranger. Miami was closer to our village than many cities in our own country, but I pictured the skies and sea as always grey.

On La Paloma that night, the sea was black. They sky was cloudy and I wondered if there might be a storm that would churn to sea enough to engulf us. Salvador's head was nodding toward his chest. I felt a tenderness verging on pity for him then. We might perish here on the water or we might die in a different way in America, our souls sacrificed for material comforts. I thought a little about la libertad that Americans boasted of. I never craved the freedom to say what I wanted about politics or society. I did not – and still don't – place much value of the idea of independence, autonomy. Growing up, I was a true believer, the kind of girl who grew into the kind of young person our leader most cherished. The early lessons and habits stayed with me, even after the moments of disillusionment.

I was hardworking and single-mindedly devoted to the cause, whatever it happened to be at the time. My school uniforms were always the most crisp, my knowledge about the revolution the most comprehensive, my understanding of our place in the world the most righteous. I was one of the fighters in the battle of us versus them. Yes, we were small and poor, but we sacrificed material things for The Big Ideas.

Hasta la Victoria siempre.
Patria o muerte.
Venceremos.

I was proud and certain. So were Salvador and Yesenia, twins, my best friends. We were good kids, doing all the right things as far as society was concerned. We judged our peers and elders who didn't measure up. We judged Victor when he dropped out of high school to spend his days fixing watches and cigarette lighters in the plaza for a few pesos. The smartest boy we knew called us sheep.

"Las tres ovejas," he would say. "Following the mad shepherd into the abyss."

If we had been religious we would have thought Victor was going to hell.

Salvador, Yesenia and I played sports, volunteered to cut sugarcane, and adored our leader. We drank only a little, and we didn't look at sex as an amusing way to pass the time.

Then, when we were sixteen, Yesenia got sick. It was rare, people said, for cervical cancer to invade the body of one so young. Nothing in our lives had prepared us for this. The many hours Salva and I spent in the local hospital proved the lie about our superiority in the area of health care, about the love of our countrymen. We soon discovered that only American dollars would command the attention of the cancer specialists. Salvador and Victor sold just about everything their family owned to come...
up with some money, but it was not enough; all it bought was the diagnosis from a doctor who himself seemed ill. He was so pale and thin as he counted what seemed an impossible amount of dirty green bills in shaking hands. Victor spat on the floor of the doctor's office. The medicine man didn't even notice, he was so busy at his task.

Salvador and I appealed to our teachers, our neighborhood committee president: was there no one who could make this right? We got vague promises that “people would talk to people,” but nothing came out of it.

Yesi got a bed in a ward filled with women in various extremities. She was tended by a series of nurses who ranged in their approach to care from indifferent to fatalistic. They gave her pain medication and pills to make her sleep. Yesi's mother and I took turns bathing her on alternative days, because the nurses wouldn't do it. And they would only change her bedpan with ill grace. We brought home-cooked food to Yesenia's bedside, but she couldn't eat much, so we ended up sharing the food with the women next to her, who was on bed rest for the remaining two months of her pregnancy; she ate like a horse. In exchange for the food, she shared talcum powder and lotion with Yesenia.

When my friend died, I didn't know how to comfort Salvador and he didn't know how to comfort me. I'll never forget the day he told me quite simply,

“It's all shit.” He spat like Victor on the sidewalk in front of the hospital.

Salvador dropped out of high school and joined his father fishing for a living. Soon after, Victor also joined the fishing enterprise and their father retired.

I soldiered on, believing my father's theory that what happened to Yesenia was the fault of the Americans. He said it matter of factly one night about a month after she'd died, as I cried on my mother's shoulder in our small living room. It was stifling hot, so that my tears mingled with sweat.

“The embargo. It's why there's no medicine and our good doctors are demoralized. The Yankees are squeezing us.”

This was the closest my old man ever came to offering comfort.

About six months later, as I was getting ready to finish high school, Rodrigo appeared on the scene. He had spent a couple of summers in our town, but had grown up in the capital. I didn't know him very well as Salvador and Yesi tended to avoid him.

“Jinetero. He spends his time hustling old foreign ladies for money.” This was Salva's assessment of his cousin. Yesi and I were suitably appalled. Rodrigo and Victor were tight.

“Dos capitalistas.” Ruled by money.”

And yet, when Rodrigo turned up after Yesenia had died, exiled from his mother's home for general unruliness, Salvador started hanging around with his brother and cousin. I was shut out for a while, until Rodrigo started showing interest in me. He'd seen me in the plaza one Sunday evening with my parents and persuaded Victor and Salva to make introductions. He came at me indirectly, paying compliments to my mother on those evenings when he'd happen to run into us in the plaza. Later, he dropped by our house, always bringing beer or a bottle of rum, and asking my father questions about what life was like before everything changed. It was my old man's favorite subject. The iniquity, the poverty, the corruption.

“Viva la revolucion!” At this, Rodrigo and my father would drink, and I was fascinated by Rodrigo, a man who would put in this kind of effort to get into my life. I knew very well he had nothing but contempt for the revolution, and — still morning Yesi — I was becoming a more ambivalent soldier.

Salvador seemed to be angry with me all the time once I became a sort of adjunct to the three boys' little gang. Without fail, whenever I was with them, I would look up to find him gloowering in my general direction, looking more like Victor than himself, complete with perpetually furrowed brows.

For someone who considered herself a smart and upright girl, I was foolish and easy in love. Rodrigo loosened all the ties of responsibility with which I'd bound myself. The first time we had sex he'd taken me into the room he shared with Victor and Salvador and I allowed him to make love to me there. We once did it behind the old church on the plaza, with my parents enjoying ice cream cones just a few hundred feet away. And there was another time, one hot night against a fence by the railroad tracks, while we were supposed to be buying aspirin to take to my father. This version of me was shameful, and I was somehow fascinated by this new baseness in myself.

Rodrigo told me I was pretty in front of other people, which pleased me ridiculously. He showed up to take me out when he said he would, and always had a little cash to spend on our dates. Soon, he had his own little house. Or at least he had the use of the house after the owner, a friend of his, won the visa lottery and left for Miami. He bribed the housing authorities and moved in. Then he asked me to be his wife, not just to live with him, pero con papeles. Officially.

The day before Rodrigo and I were to marry, I ate lunch with my parents for what would be my last day as the daughter of the house. My mother had been teaching me how to cook for about two weeks. It was not a skill I had learned growing up; I was too busy being a revolutionary. That day the lesson was garbanzo soup. I did nearly everything myself, while my mother sat at our round kitchen table, watching and calling out the occasional instruction:

“Not that much, m'hija. Turn the heat down. Don't be stingy with the garlic.”

My father got home just as my mother pronounced the soup ready. The three of us sat at the kitchen table and ate it with white rice and slices of tomato on the side. I waited nervously for my father questions about what life was like before everything changed. It was my old man's favorite subject. The iniquity, the poverty, the corruption.

“Que rico ma.” He assumed my mother had cooked, because everything tasted good. My mother beamed and said, and I was fascinated by Rodrigo, a man who would put in this kind of effort to get into my life. I knew very well he had nothing but contempt for the revolution, and — still morning Yesi — I was becoming a more ambivalent soldier.

“Tell Marisol, pa. She did everything.” But my father could not bring himself to pay me a compliment. Instead he made a sort of
grunt, raised his eyebrows in the direction of the sliced tomato, and resumed eating.

What did my father have against me? I may never know. After Carlota left us during the infamous boatlift, he shut down. He was a staunch supporter of the revolution but seemed to take no pride in my successes or in my patriotism. He went to his job at the bank, came home for lunch, and went back to work. He played dominos with his friends on Saturdays, and slept most of the day on Sundays. He took my mother and me for el paseo every Sunday evening in the plaza.

“You coming, Mari?” My mother always invited me along.

That day at the table I fumed into my garbanzo soup. Soon I will be gone, I raged against my father in my head. And then you'll be sorry. He spoke, then, in that way he had of beginning a conversation as if we had been talking about a particular subject all along.

“You know, Marisol.” He wiped his mouth with a thin paper napkin and looked me in the eye. “I'm surprised you're going to marry Rodrigo. I always thought you and Salvador would end up together. That boy was always so crazy about you.”

Then he pushed back his chair and left the kitchen. Did I know that Salvador had those feelings for me? On some level, I suppose I must have. And yet, my father's words did not give me pause that day. What would have happened if I had not married Rodrigo? For that matter, if I had never met him? If Yesenia had not died? This kind of thinking is always futile, of course. And in the boat that night I sighed. The sound collided with a choking snore from Rodrigo and an incoherent word from the dozing Salvador. I had the feeling that Victor was awake, glooming either at my back or into the dark sea.

After I married Rodrigo, Salvador met the beautiful Beatriz: A good head taller than him, slender, una prieta – dark skinned, with long ringlet hair. She used to call him her gringo, because she said he looked like an American with his light brown hair and pink skin. Salvador began to be nice to me again and for a while things were great. We two couples did everything together, and we never had more time to do the job as he usually slept until five. The house was quiet. The children were asleep. I decided not to make a remark about how much such a letter would be worth when her son really needed his leader's help later on. When I stepped into the kitchen, my husband was waiting for me looking like the devil. He was holding his favorite pair of jeans.

For the next three years, my life revolved around Rodrigo's whims and his rages. I couldn't even bring myself to eat while he was at home. Once, he'd accused me of gobbling up our rations (even though we had enough money for extra food) and hit me across the mouth while I was lifting a spoon of rice and beans to my lips. The spoon chipped one of my front teeth. Around the same time, Rodrigo quit his job singing in a band for foreigners in one of the lower end hotels in Cabo Paz. His new work was, clandestine, conducted by night along the road between Cabo Paz and our village. It concerned the procurement and sale of soap and toilet paper, both rare commodities at the time. I am not sure what Rodrigo's role was, but we always had soap and toilet paper as well as cash. He gave me a few dollars for the house. Otherwise he spent the earnings on himself: black market clothes, sneakers and cologne. It was important to him to have a watch and he was constantly buying or trading up.

There were tender moments. Those times that convince a woman there will be no more pain.

“That's so perfect, Mari,” he would say as I ironed his jeans. “You are the best wife a man could have.” Or, “You know just how I like things.” Or, “You really know how to take care of me.” And usually a few hours after a blow or a scolding, he would apologize and touch my face softly.

“You know you're la mujer de mi vida,” Mari. The love of his life.

Rodrigo was usually gone by nine each night. That's when I would eat something, clean the kitchen and bathe. Sometimes I watched television before sleep. I was usually awake when Rodrigo fell into the bed beside me before dawn. When he began to snore, I rose and reminded myself about the many things I had to do and not to do in order to avoid making my husband angry.

At this time of my life, I spent a lot of time trying to become smaller. I felt that the smaller I became, the harder it would be for Rodrigo to hurt me. Lying in bed after a beating or berating, I would concentrate on smallness. How could I make myself less obtrusive? I cut my long brown hair short like a boy's. I ate less and less and became very thin. My breasts shrank. My culo flattened. Rodrigo, who had always loved to caress and nibble on my tetas, who once had never missed a chance to squeeze my behind, didn't seem to notice. I dreamed of being so small that I would simply disappear, floating away on the breeze.

Beneath the clouds on the boat I thought of the last time I made Rodrigo angry with me, nine days before. In the afternoon, I went next door to trade my neighbor Rosa a bar of soap for some eggs from her chickens. She said she could only spare two, even though the soap was worth at least four. But I didn't quibble with Rosa, who was a nurse and helped me for free. I was gone too long; Rose kept on about her son, the genius, who had received a letter from el comandante to congratulate him on his achievements in school. I decided not to make a remark about how much such a letter would be worth when her son really needed his leader's help later on. When I stepped into the kitchen, my husband was waiting for me looking like the devil. He was holding his favorite pair of jeans.

“Woman, are you trying to test me?”

I was to hem the jeans that day so he could wear them that night. It was not a work night; he would likely be seeing a girl or playing dominos with his friends. I hadn't forgotten, but I'd thought I would have more time to do the job as he usually slept until five. It seemed I could never quite master the art of avoiding problems with Rodrigo. Standing there in the kitchen, my husband – the man who once told me I was like a star in his sky – twisted the jeans into a sort of thick rope and began to swing at me. I kept backing away, even though I knew I would soon be cornered. I held my arms over my face and took the beating. When Rodrigo left the house later, bathed and cologne, I got into bed, closed my eyes, and willed myself smaller for a while. Eventually I began to contemplate Rodrigo's favorite woman. Rafaela was actually a
creation of my own, a composite of several females in the village I suspected of seeing my husband. Rafaela was tall and the color of dark honey, a mulata with masses of curly brown-gold hair. Her waist and breasts were small, while her hips and thighs were thick and strong and dimpled at the back. Rafaela always wore shorts or short skirts with halter or bikini tops. She was always smiling at me and tossing her hair. Her eyes were flashing and green. Thinking about Rafaela usually led to imaging her making loving with Rodrigo. I imagined their shining bodies intertwined in sheets. I also thought about what it would be like to come upon them rutting against a wall or a tree. These thoughts shocked and shamed me at first; later I allowed myself to become aroused by them and I would touch myself. I knew this was not normal, but I was no longer a normal woman. Like passion, love, affection and trust, jealousy was something I had gotten over, surrendered. It cost me too much to feel those things. Animal instincts and urges took over.

Rodrigo groaned and called out for water. Salvador handed me my husband's bottle - less than a quarter full - and I passed it over my shoulder to him as he pulled himself up onto the plank behind me. After a few seconds Rodrigo called for more.

“There’s no more for you right now, hermano.” Salvador’s voice was steady. “Try to hold out and you can start on your second bottle tomorrow. Eat an orange.”

“Mari, give me some of your water.” I looked into Salvador’s face. “Oye, Rodrigo,” he said, his eyes directed over my head. “We have to make it through the night until we can drink again. We have at least another full day, probably more. Just hold on.”

“Ya tu sabes,” Victor said, his voice low. Then he spat.

Rodrigo was silent for a moment. Would he confront Victor?

“Mari? Give me your bottle.” His voice was thick, as if the rum had left a coating on his tongue and inside his throat. I reached for my bottle and was surprised that Salvador let me take it. Looking down at my thin hands around the plastic container, I felt as if my whole life hinged on that water. The men were silent, and it seemed they were holding their breath, waiting for me to decide my fate. I could hold on to the bottle until Rodrigo took it from me. Or I could hand it back to Salvador, who was a much better match for my husband.

The boat rocked then and I knew Rodrigo was trying to stand up. Looking over my shoulder I saw him fighting for balance, but he was unsteady and his efforts made the boat lurch to one side so hard I thought he was going to fall into the dark water. Instead, he sat down hard on the plank bench and the boat stilled.

“Salvador,” he said in a tired voice, “if my wife wants to give me her water you can’t interfere. You can’t prevent her from tending to her husband.”

“We told you not to drink that rum,” Victor’s voice came flat behind us. “Now you’re paying for it.”

All of the blood in my body seemed concentrated in my hands as I gripped the bottle. Rodrigo made another try at standing and the boat rocked again. I handed the bottle to Salvador who tucked it behind his back. Now Rodrigo was trying to climb over me to get to Salvador and the bottle. His hands pressed down on my shoulders. The boat was tossing as if in the storm I had wished for a few hours earlier. I squeezed my eyes shut, buried my face in my hands and bent toward my lap, expecting to feel my husband’s knee on my back as he crawled across me to get what he wanted. Then came a loud crack, a pause, a bump, and a terrific plunging splash. The boat was steady again.

I lifted my head from my knees.

“Victor!” Salvador was staring in horror at his brother.

Looking into water to my left, I saw Rodrigo face down in the water. He wasn’t struggling or trying to get back into the boat. Instead he was floating, his white shirt especially bright in dark water.

“Don’t, Mari.” Salvador pushed my head down into my lap.

“Hermano.” It was Victor’s voice, low and flat still. “He would have drunk all the water, or turned the boat over still.”

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