WE GO TO XOCHIMILCO

Ingrid Hill

NOSOTROS SOMOS ESTUDIANTES EN MEXICO.

THE UP-SLOPE OF the driveway is considerable. Its ribbon of asphalt curves to the right like a scythe as the rich ground rises. To both sides, the verdure is outrageous: the bushes, which climb to the height of trees, all seem fat-leaved, like succulents. Fragrant white blossoms like tiny poinsettias-of-summer are luminous in night's blue shadow. Halfway up the driveway, or just past half—make that five-eighths—sits Senora O.'s sofa. White naugahyde, lit by the moon, and damned spooky.

We are here for the summer to study. I might as well be on some far planet. My Spanish stumbles. I have not made a friend and suspect I am labeled a loner. As I climb the curve of the driveway I wonder whether I glow like the naugahyde sofa. I am bioluminescent with loneliness. It is something not easy to hide; I can only hope that it will be misinterpreted. He is aloof, they may say, or abstracted with study.

HAY UNA PIEDRA DE POLLO EN LA SOPA.

The maids here are thick-breasted, like doves, and they coo with solicitousness. Montezuma's Revenge came to all of us, and they tended us mournfully. They insist that we not make our beds, and they smooth the sheets down with the sides of their hands as if we were all royalty. When we come down in the mornings for class, they escort us to the table for oatmeal. A couple of my housemates snarl at

them—these are the drinkers, who until tomorrow or Wednesday or August swear they have no money for books or new underwear and want to borrow from me. I just laugh and turn my pockets inside out. I am the one who has no money. I am the pauper along for the ride with these Gentleman's Quarterly types and fraternity boors.

In the morning oatmeal there are sticks. Small twigs, actually, whose function I have not been able to discern. I ask the maids, pointing, and their eyes light up at what they assume is a compliment. In the soup, yesterday evening, where vegetable slivers floated in clear broth, there was the upended foot of a chicken. Whole. All around are the trappings of wealth and refinement: linens with cutwork, baroque silver services. Senora O. certainly does not take us in for the money.

EL OJO DE DIOS VE TODO EL MUNDO.

It is a Jesuit university that we have come from. Bricks red as the dried blood of martyrs, the buildings ornate as cakes at a retirement party. We are talking Middle America. We are talking your long gray winter. You can understand my leaping at the chance to come here, tuition-free.

Bougainvillea and Mayan sun: I went right out and filched a good half-dozen travel brochures from the El Sol Travel Bureau, all colors and slickness and flowers and gauzy light. Fiesta, tequila, mañana, the whole shot, the whole enchilada.

Father Ferenczy offered me this trip, just out of the blue. I was his grader this year: interminable evenings over calculus papers. I tested my endurance and won, I paid half my first term's tuition with my earnings, and I apparently endeared myself to Ferenczy. Poor Ferenczy. He would come up and offer me hot cider while the snow fell. I ploughed through the fat manilla folders of looseleaf scribblings and wondered, in the way I suppose juniors have, at how very young freshmen seem. I pondered the inscrutability of the pair in the morning class who continued to submit identical homework. I wondered who copied from whom. I looked out into black, snow-shot night with the street lamps aglow, ho ho ho, holly decking the doorways, and envied the crowd who took winter vacations. I wondered what drove me to this fool's pursuit, working hard to become a math teacher so that I could wear sleazy bargain pants and spend my life as the butt of my students' barbed ridicule.

Ferenczy came in the room, through the holly door, quietly. He wore Romeo slippers in his office, as if it were a bedroom. Snowy night, he said. Do you know that I lead the Summer Abroad student program in Mexico? he said. Would you care to go? I could give you

a scholarship. He snapped his fingers. Just like that, he said. I picked up the cinnamon stick that had sat in my cider. Ferenczy always put in a cinnamon stick, as if correcting calculus quizzes were an occasion. I bit off the cinnamon stick with a crunch. He winced as if it were his finger. Sure, I said. So he did it: he got me the scholarship.

It was not until April that I had a hint. I was washing my hands at the sink in his office when he came up behind me and reached around me. To help me wash my hands, he said. I went stiff and I felt my eyebrows rising into my hair. I turned around. His breath smelled of wintergreen. Sorry to startle you, he said. I'm finished, I said. I wiped the unrinsed soap off on the woody brown towels. I'll be done with this week's tests by five, I said. You are a wonderful grader, he said. I did not look at him. Prompt and efficient, he said. I looked at my half-reflection in the window as I passed and wondered what in me had brought that on. I sat down at my desk. I thought: God sees it all. He must shake his head wryly.

¿VAS A MENUDO AL CINE?

The Mexican kids love the movies. There's one at the Churubusco, right near here, that breaks me up every time I go past. I always wanted to be one of those guys who put up the letters. I could make even less than I could as a math teacher. So there are the letters strung out on the marquee, all of them but the "w" in upper case. The "w" looks like a withered thing. I identify with it. JOHN TRAVOLTA Y OLIVIA NEWTON JOHN, it says, hyphenless. Next line, the letters are widely spaced: V A S E L I N A. I guess it will play the whole summer.

My housemates, the GQ crowd, date all the Mexican girls they can: there is the exotic element, of course, but also the challenge of culture-breaking, which is a different matter. These madres want chaperoned dates for their daughters. The girls in our Summer Abroad group date Mexicans, too, older men with bright rings and slick hair and fine cars, who want girls who have no madres anywhere in evidence, chaperone-crazy or otherwise. They laugh and call them their sugar daddies, but there is a rumor that one of the girls is going to announce her engagement to someone who exports clay donkeys and rainbow-striped fabric.

I date no one. On the flight down, my eyes lighted on a sophomore girl named Lenora—"Jinx"—Blackman, and woe was me. Blonde as a little-kid-type on the toilet-paper six packs. Innocence and doe eyes. Elementary ed major, by rumor. I knew there was no chance of my passion's being reciprocated. I would not voice it. What could I say:

would you like to go for a walk past the movie and watch the marquee? It was all that I could afford. She would want more. I could suggest that we walk past the other theatres and read their marquees too: La Guerra de las Galaxies. A re-run of El Mago de Oz. We would be so fatigued from the walk we would have to go back to Senora O.'s for an iced tea and intense talk, and she would wind up in my arms. Me and Jinx, in a clinch for the cameras of eternity: riiight.

EL ARPA ESTA EN LA SALA.

Senora O. studied in Europe. She has mentioned this several times. She has remarked upon what a fruitful experience is this cross-culturalism. She has black-and-gold shadowy Rembrandt reproductions in the dining room. None of us ever eats there, including her. The students eat out in the kitchen, at the servants' table. She takes her meal in her bedroom, on a tv tray that has French Impressionist water lilies on it. I am not sure where or how Senor O. is, though I have the clear impression that there is a Senor O.

Senora O. has dark-lacquered nails, blackish-red. She plays the harp in the living room and chips her nails, then goes off to the manicurist's to be restored to wholeness. The harp is enormous, the size of a man. It neck is all gold; a Corinthian capital—roses and curls—tops its column. All her songs are formless, dripping honey like layered Greek pastries and summoning images of muscled seraphim. Her eyes roll to the ceiling, and sometimes she cries.

¿QUIERE USTED EL BISTEC?

I came home to find a note in a familiar handwriting. It was Ferenczy's. The shorter of the maids had taken it from him at the front door and laid it on my pillow. I picked up the note, set it on the table, and then picked up the pillow and shook it, as if it were dusty. A visceral, reflex sort of action. Come to dinner, the note cajoled. With Chuck and me. U.S. food. Best, Armand. I had never called him Armand and he had never asked me to.

Chuck was my replacement. Ferenczy had given up on me toward the end of the term. There were syrupy glances, the gift of a navy-blue towel that bore the university seal, and the time at the filing cabinets, and then he moved on, before there was no one left on campus to choose from. I had been bending over the bottom file drawer one evening and Ferenczy had come up behind me. I heard the schiff-schiff of his Romeos on the wood floor but I did not expect his thin hand on my ass, patting me as if I were a fresh-baked loaf of bread. I

stood up, suddenly. I looked into his eyes. They were a fervent pale blue, the white around the lit irises pink. I heard my own breath suck in once. Father Ferenczy, I said, not knowing what I would say next. Father Ferenczy, I said, the key's got an error. On problem four, I said, marveling at the grace of it, the first derivative should be 2x - 3.

He found Chuck soon after that. Or perhaps he had him waiting in the wings. By the time we left the university for the airport, silly gringos all, testing our Spanish and joking about patent remedies for diarrhea, Chuck was wearing Ferenczy's digital watch that played the first seven notes of the school's alma mater as an alarm. By the first week we were in Mexico City, Ferenczy was wearing Chuck's high school ring. It was chunky, with a cut stone green as some tropical ocean.

I recalled Ferenczy's hand on my ass. I had visions of submarine warfare, torpedoings. That whole realm of experience was beyond me. I convinced myself that it was beyond Chuck, too. He was a nice enough guy. Engineer type. As boring as hell. I could not understand him. Perhaps, then? Perhaps not. I ceased speculating. It was not my business.

At the restaurant, Chuck and Father Ferenczy sat at a white-linened table awaiting me. They were leaning together, calculating something intensely on a paper napkin that bore the restaurant's elegant logo. They looked up eagerly. Perhaps I was being recruited into a *menage a trois*? I quashed that idea. Ferenczy had given up on me. Steak? they said. How about good old American sirloin strip, rare as hell? I took quesadillas and soup.

Chuck complimented me on my accent. It is not that good. They ordered silly drinks, Hand Grenades frothing in coconut shells, for all three of us. What's up? I said. I haven't seen you guys much lately.

Ferenczy turned to Chuck. What's up, Chuck? he said, and the two of them laughed. There was this private language.

I can't get the hang of the language, Chuck said. Like futbol for football, which is really soccer, and bistec for beefsteak, but then all of these suckers like pez and quimica and recientement.

What's quimica? I said.

Again they laughed. Chemistry, Ferenczy said, stretching out the word languidly.

I left that stuff behind, I said. I only know it in English. All summer at the university we had been studying the murals of Diego Rivera and the myths of the bloody old Aztecs.

We have chemistry, Chuck said to Ferenczy, and they laughed.

Oh, shit, I said. I picked up a quesadilla. The cheese dripped. I caught their eyes and made as if to indicate that the Oh shit was in

honor of dripping cheese.

How much do you see of the others? Ferenczy said.

My housemates, I said. Jerkoffs.

None of the girls? Chuck said. Not that Cheryl with the sunglasses?

Oh, Jesus, wasn't she something? said Ferenczy. I tried to remember that he was a Jesuit and wondered what that meant. Tufts of slightly graying hair peeked from the open collar of his pineapple-printed shirt.

Not the one with the tits like Gibraltar? said Chuck. What was her name, Janelle? And not the blonde one either? Oh, not her. She's hooked up with that pre-med from Kansas.

I dripped cheese and feigned casual disinterest. Jinx? I said. That Jinx Blackman girl? I had seen her across open courts, in the sunlight, and passed by the house where I knew she was staying, just hoping to catch a glimpse. Hooked up with a pre-med from Kansas?

Oh, those two are really tight, Chuck said. He ordered another round of Hand Grenades. What do you call it, Chuck said, she's his amiga, novia. What?

Nymphomaniac, Ferenczy said.

They both laughed.

I wanted to run through the streets to the pink stucco bungalow where she lived. Wanted to throw myself at her feet and protest that she was throwing herself away, wanted to contact the school and officially alter my major to something prestigious and lucrative. I would go after an M.B.A. and found an empire if she liked. I tried to be cool. Taste these jalapenos, I said. Hot damn. Burn your tongue out of your head.

While I watched them smart and water at the eyes, I raged inside. Jinx was rolling between the ironed sheets of her rosy pink bungalow with someone else, while I languished. The innocent face of the sweet little girls on the Northern six-packs, and she rolled in salt splendor with some damn pre-med from the flatlands.

LOS ANGELES TOCAN Y ALABAN A DIOS.

Dogs run in the street, sniffing after the smell of my lunch in its bag. They are all thin and hairless, pale tan or sleek black. They run between my legs and I barely escape falling flat on my face on the sidewalk. I round the corner by the day nursery. It is surrounded by a high wrought-iron fence with straight spikes. An ancient tree thick with dark foliage leans over the fence, canopying the yard. It is a tree the Aztecs sat under, no doubt, and hand picnics on human flesh, wiping their lips on gold napkins. Tiny birds rush in a shiny dark

cloud from the tree's branches, their green-black plumage glittering in the late- morning sun. The sign over the gate says La Casa de los Angelitos.

The angelitos are all bankers' children, to judge from the stuff that they're wearing. Like little suits, navy blue, with little ties like the tongues of hummingbirds. Like little rich-kid dresses, puffy with stiff lace. It rips me up to look at them: on the one hand, I think if I were one of them I would climb the fence—taking the risk of impaling myself on the torture-points—and run screaming to some Yugoslavian tourist to take me away; on the other hand, I wish that I were a banker's kid. My Mercedes would be just as blue as Chuck's ring was green, and as seductive. Jinx Blackman would ride in the front seat let her hair grow long to wave in the wind.

I think of her as I pass the church. (When do I not think of her?) Out in front of the church the smut vendors are set up. Their four-legged wooden easels are lined with paperback books with bright covers in yellow and orange and blue, like the ocean on fire. Closer up, the shiny flesh of women is clear among all the bright colors, on woman to each book. The books look half-read, slightly dog-eared. I never have stopped and looked, but from a six-feet-away moving vantage point, each time, the flash of tan legs calls the image of Lenora-Jinx to my mind, young Miss Blackman in shorts as the group goes off here to play tennis or there to climb pyramids.

Inside the church, where I stop every day, cradle Catholic that I am, lumbering along under donkey-loads of superstition and sweetness, there are angels. Galore. Only steps away from the smut vendors, those happy Camel-smoking entrepreneurs, the stairs of the church lead me up into this haven of angels. Some artist aspiring to glory has covered the ceiling with angels. They trail flame-colored cloaks, which would seem to impede flight. Their hair waves like my sweet girl Lenora's in my blue Mercedes. Their fingers, which crook at odd angles, are raised high, as if they are sticky with syrup or heaven's own sensuousness; or perhaps they are blessing me. All of them sing, as if this steamy day in July were a small Christmas, Glory to God in the highest.

YO VIVO EN LA CALLE DE ESCORPIO.

It is an odd name for this most domestic of streets: the street of the scorpion. Coming home in the evening from the university, I round the corner where the bankers' angelitos play. The schoolyard is empty now. The birds have gone home, and the dogs have grown furry and fat in some faraway courtyard. I have learned a little today, about

serpent-gods and their cannibal thralls, about weevil-shot harvests and enemies, and the restorative properties of human flesh. The twilight is weighty with ages.

Up the driveway I trudge. Senora O.'s white sofa is just beginning to glow with the evening. I cannot understand its sitting here, amid the lawn creepers. It is all quite neat: I suspect the maids wash down the upholstery and insist the gardeners trim the vines that try to climb its legs.

I have seen Jinx Blackman today and she has smiled at me, wholesomely, her white orthodontia-bred teeth gleaming. It is a sisterly smile. I am no one to her but a fellow gringo from the student tour. She is with no one. Her hips swing. Her skirt is all tropical flowers and swirls around her legs like hungry dogs swarm around mine. Perhaps the whole tale of the Kansas pre-med in Chuck's own fabrication. Perhaps my grief is all uncalled for. I wave back, and my heart feels like fool lyrics in some forties song.

I have seen Father Ferenczy, laughing with someone I do not recognize. He is waving his hands with great drama, outlining some spellbinding anecdote in the air. I do not see Chuck's sea-green stone sparkling on his finger. But then I am not sure about which hand he wears the thing on. The anecdote listener seems to think him a true charmer.

The street of the scorpion purples with evening. I have lived on the street of the scorpion two months now. I understand that the bite of the scorpion, though it is painful, is rarely a fatal event. It is much like this feeling I have for Lenora "Jinx" Blackman. I expect that I will survive.

EN LA NOCHE, LA CANCION DEL ARPA ES MUY TRISTE.

The maids have gone out to a movie. I have heard them chattering about it. It something with Clint Eastwood. I am resolved to catch up on the last three chapters of art history, though it is Saturday. Tomorrow the tour group will go to the floating gardens of Xochimilco. I do not have the money, and neither do I have the lightheartedness all these adventurings require. I will invent some necessary chore. All of the GQ's and high-breasted girls with their legs and their sunglasses will go floating on the oared boats, bright and blossom-trimmed, bearing picnics and souls light as styrofoam. Father Ferenczy will flirt with someone to keep Chuck's attention, and Jinx Blackman will capture the eyes of the Mexicans with her blonde angel hair.

In the living room, Senora O. is at her harp. She does not have the

lights on. The room is all shadow. She ignores or pretends to ignore me as I pass the archway. Beside her in the semi-dark is a tall bottle of wine. Sometimes she has a glass in the evenings.

I study my Aztecs. My fierce and my pot-bellied clay figures, my rituals of initiation and fertility, my pyramids and my ball courts and temples. I think of my father, a clerk at the bus company in St. Louis, a man who has never been south of the state border or north of LaHarpe, Illinois. I wonder what summoned his image. The harp, I decide: *el arpa*, LaHarpe. His life is circumscribed as a busride. I know he considers himself happy. I wonder whether I might not be better off not knowing what to thirst after.

Senora O. startles me. I leave the door open for breeze, and tonight is especially hot. She stands in the door wearing a man's robe, dark brocade, the deep red of the wine that she holds in her hand. You are studying, she tells me. Yes, I say. There is much to learn.

She sits down on my extra chair, inviting herself. I have a son, she says. He will be fourteen. Senor O. sent him to military school. He stands quite straight. They wear . . . she describes epaulets with her hands. Epaulets, I say. They wear epaulets every Friday, they march in parades on a big grassy field. Senor O. sent him there.

I feel bold. Where is Senor O.? I say.

She drinks from her wine and sighs and looks out my window into the rear garden.

I had a daughter, she says. Very pretty. Four years old. She drowned at the gardens and then Senor O. went away. He is on business, she adds, but he does not come back. He visits my son at the school.

The one with the epaulets, I add. I hear myself and am appalled, but it does not seem to matter to her.

Do like my home? she says. I nod that I do. I think of the chicken-foot soup and the hot nights when I stand at the window. The house must be four of five times the size of my parents'. I cannot say which is sadder.

My daughter had hair that was shiny as . . . she searches for a comparison. I saw a horse once, a race horse. Shiny flanks, gleaming chestnut. That is as my daughter's hair was.

I rearrange myself in my chair. She seems settled for a talk. We never have spoken like this before.

What do you think? she says. Will my son grow up strong from this school? Will Senor O. find his healing perhaps and come back to me, this winter, next winter? Will I see my daughter in heaven? Do you believe in these things?

My father has spent his life cataloging and inventorying bus

furnishings, I say. Tokens and drivers' hats. Keeping accounts of which bus has a ripped seat. I wonder why I say this.

Do you see my white sofa, she asks, on the driveway? Senor O. and I had an argument. We never argued, but we had an argument then. I dragged the sofa out to the driveway. I was crying and shouting. Both of the maids tried to quiet me. Senor O. was like stone. We had already buried our daughter.

It glows at night, I say.

It does, she says. Sometimes I think I will sit there and ride away, up to Our Lady and all the saints. She leans toward me, intense in her desire for heaven. She is thirty-eight years old, and the gaping of her brocade robe reveals breasts that are still firm, with dark chocolate tips that look edible. She is distracted and blurred with wine, and though I know I am taking advantage of her unawareness, I do not feel shame as I gaze.

The maids trim the vines around it, I say, don't they?

They do, she says. They always beg me to take it in. They say the rain will ruin it. She shakes her head firmly. I will not.

The maids are strange, I agree. She shifts in her chair, and my eyes trace the shape of the undercurve of her breast inside her robe. She is still looking over my shoulder, to the garden window.

Tomorrow you have an event with your student friends, yes? she says.

I shake my head no. They are going to Xochimilco, I say, but I can't afford it. I am on scholarship.

Is this why you study so much? she says. Because you have no money? She is shocked.

I shake my head yes.

Then you must go, she says. As she rises to leave the room, going to her room to bring me money which she will press on me, she cinches the belt of her robe in. Her breasts disappear.

I refuse the money, and she cries, not because I refuse, but because of the sofa, the epaulets, and the drowned daughter, because of my sad inventorying father, because Senor O. once was young as me.

VAMOS A XOCHIMILCO

In the morning I dress with a new spirit. I may not eat for the next week, but I will go out today, to Xochimilco, and float in the crater of this vast volcano we live in. Perhaps the drowned daughter will rise up to meet me.