



Dona Nicanora's
Hat Shop

Kirstan Hawkins

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Doña Nicanora's

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Kirstan Hawkins studied anthropology at Edinburgh University and has travelled extensively in her work in Africa, Latin America and Asia. She carried out fieldwork for her degree among the Ashaninka Indians of the Peruvian Amazon, and for her Ph.D. she spent time in the altiplano of Bolivia.



*I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

W.B. Yeats

The town of Valle de la Virgen lies at the bottom of a deep gorge, which, surrounded by eucalyptus trees on its upper slopes, descends into dark, boggy, luscious forest inhabited by hummingbirds, snakes and howling monkeys. Despite its legendary beauty, the town is largely untroubled by visitors, as the buses descending into the valley are in the habit of dropping off the road, making tourism a precarious business for the locals. The church, built by the colonial ancestors of the present-day inhabitants in honour of the Virgin of the Swamp, houses a weeping effigy, and is said to be one of the finest examples of the architecture of its day and an inspiration for the work of the great master Marrietti.

Travel books on the area have little to say about Valle de la Virgen, mentioning briefly that, while famed for its intoxicating charm and historical interest, the town remains an elusive tourist destination, reachable only by treacherous road or through dense forest marsh. One out-of-print guide even suggests that Valle de la Virgen is a creation of local legend retold in occasional travellers' tales and that the road simply descends into impenetrable swamp.



The town's only foreign visitor arrived one day in the back of Ernesto's pickup truck and, much to the consternation of Ernesto's mother, failed to leave. Doña Nicanora was at first less dismayed by the arrival of the dishevelled stranger in her front yard than by the sudden reappearance of her son, who only three months previously had been given a lavish send-off at great expense and relief to the town. It was her youngest daughter, Nena, who first alerted Nicanora to the return of Ernesto and to the presence of the stranger who was about to be mauled by their dog.

'Come quickly,' Nena shouted breathlessly, running into the kitchen, where her mother was squatting over a basin, peeling potatoes. 'Ernesto is back, and he's brought a strange man with him. Lucho is attacking him. I think it's because he smells.' Dropping the potatoes, Nicanora ran outside to quell the commotion, calling the dog off whilst trying to find the words with which to begin to admonish her son.

The uninvited guest was standing in the dry dirt of the tiny bric-a-brac-filled yard, surrounded by squawking chickens and looking bewildered. He was dressed in a stained orange shirt and dirty blue jeans, and had a battered red and black bag hanging from one shoulder. His hair was as long as Nena's, his beard looked tangled and he gave off an unwashed, milky odour. He needs to be taken straight to Don Bosco, Nicanora thought. The man was holding a small book, which he was flicking through nervously. A crowd of children had gathered nearby and were nudging each other and giggling, pointing at the stranger. Nicanora straightened her stained apron and pushed her hair from her face in an effort to appear respectable in front of the visitor.

'There are plenty more where he came from,' Ernesto said proudly, presenting the foreigner to his mother as the answer to her financial problems before passing out at her feet.



Doña Nicanora had not had an easy life, and the furrows she had dug over the years were beginning

show on her once smooth, dark face. At the age of forty, with one dead husband, two children buried and her three surviving children remaining at home, things were not getting much easier. Ernesto's desire to build his future in the city had come as a source of great comfort to her. She had begun to despair of his ability to apply himself to anything remotely sensible, and feared that his drunken antics in the town were starting to sully her own reputation.

Having ridden away on a donkey, with a fire in his belly and a determination to seek his fortune in the city, Ernesto had now returned home in an old truck with a fire in his balls and a determination to seek a cure, having received a sound dose of the clap in Dolores's Karaoke Bar in Puerta de la Coruña. Ernesto's ambition to become a city businessman had ended on the same drunken night. By the close of the evening he had exchanged his life savings for the battered truck and acquired the foreigner, who at the time had seemed to be a good business proposition. The foreigner, who had been hanging around Puerta de la Coruña for a few months, was apparently seeking a quieter location in which to spend some time and was offering 'top dollar' for the privilege of sleeping on a local floor. Ernesto, whose business sense had been sharpened at his mother's breast, could not let the opportunity pass him by.

Ernesto had already sought the help of several quacks in Puerta de la Coruña and was now prepared to place his faith in the traditional cures of his hometown. After a day of berating and beating by his mother failed to relieve him of his symptoms, managing only to elicit a confession as to the source of his ailment, he finally agreed to be taken by her to meet the new young doctor who had recently, and inexplicably, turned up in town. Doña Nicanora, who was always ready to try out a new innovation, had been anxious to make the doctor's acquaintance since his arrival. Ernesto's problem presented itself as an opportunity through which to do so. These are certainly unusual times, Nicanora thought to herself as she marched her son off to the clinic, two strangers arriving in town within a few weeks. It must surely be an omen.



Dr Arturo Aguilar was spending another morning of solitary contemplation in his pristine white clinic. He was enjoying the glimmer of the sun on the whitewashed walls and felt strangely proud of the freshly painted sign at the front, which told the townsfolk that the clinic had been brought to them out of the goodness of the hearts of the people of Japan. Fresh from college and with a keen interest in history, Dr Aguilar had come to see his year's posting in the backwater as a challenge, an opportunity to understand a people whom modernity had seemed to pass by. He was looking forward to trying out the array of cures that he had studied during his history of medicine course, and had been eagerly awaiting a visit from a patient for some weeks.

The doctor was awoken from his reveries by the sound of Nicanora's remonstrations as she dragged her son up the path. By the time his patient reached the threshold of his clinic Dr Aguilar had been able to make his diagnosis. He believed himself to be a liberal and open-minded man. After administering a large shot of the antibiotics supplied to him by the provincial health authority, he covered Ernesto's body in warm jam jars to see whether there was in any truth in the belief that they would suction out the remaining fever, before hanging him upside down by his feet – resisting Doña Nicanora's suggestion to hang him by his *cojones* – as a brief experiment to see whether the force of gravity could draw the lust out of a man's loins. By the end of the visit, the doctor found that he had agreed to Nicanora's request to take her son on as his assistant, partly out of gratitude for having received his only patient and mainly out of fear that Ernesto's mother exuded a presence and strength

of personality that suggested she might be adept in the art of witchcraft.



Over the ensuing weeks, the foreigner, who became known to the townsfolk as the Gringito, or little foreigner – a reference not to his height, which was a match for any of the men of the town, but to his pitifully wasted appearance – became a fixture of Doña Nicanora's household. At first, Nicanora, bemused by the Gringito's desire to do nothing all day but sit in her front yard smoking, playing with his unsightly beard and picking his teeth, decided that he had probably had to leave his village because his mother had thrown him out of her house on account of his bad manners and suspect personal hygiene. She worried that the Gringito, who appeared to be quite harmless, might do something unpredictable in the middle of the night, like suck the fat out of her body while she was sleeping and sell it to a cosmetics factory in the United States to make into lipsticks. She had heard of these things happening, indeed her neighbour's sister-in-law had died of such an affliction after sitting next to a gringo on a bus.

But the arrival of the Gringito had also brought an unexplained tranquillity to her household. Nenita, who at twelve years old was always difficult to keep occupied, appeared to have adopted him as a sort of pet and now spent her time when not at school trying to teach him new commands and tricks. She had managed to convince him to stand on his head in the yard for an hour balancing a cup of water on his feet, 'to make the rains come early'. She had him repeating long lists of fictitious words, made up for his benefit, which were slowly evolving into a secret language between them. She had even tried to teach him to spin cotton backwards, much to Nicanora's amusement. Isabela, whose main occupation over the past year had been teasing the neighbour's son, had shifted some of her flirtatious attention to the Gringito and was consequently spending more time at home helping her mother. For the sheer amusement of seeing the Gringito's cheeks redden as she swept past him, making sure her bare flesh brushed against his, Isabela would spend hours at home helping her mother with the cleaning, cooking and washing. Ernesto, as Nicanora observed to Fidelia, also appeared to have uncharacteristically settled down. However, it was the young doctor to whom she felt indebted for this transformation.

'Nicanora,' Doña Fidelia warned her as they sat together in the market one day, 'you're my neighbour and my friend and what hurts you will also hurt me. You must have heard what people are saying. It's very odd, two strangers suddenly turning up from nowhere in a space of a few weeks, and both seem to have something to do with your Ernesto.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Nicanora said, feeling the sharp significance of Fidelia's barbs.

'You must be careful, is all I'm saying,' Fidelia replied. 'You can't go giving food and shelter to any old foreigner Ernesto decides to drag into your house.'

Doña Nicanora, wary of Fidelia's propensity for jealousy, omitted to tell her friend that the Gringito was now paying her more money a week for his board and lodging than she could possibly earn in months at the market.

'But Fidelia,' she replied, 'we must help strangers and then when we come to make a journey someone is bound to help us in return. Besides, what harm can he do? He's a friend of Ernesto's. The boy has calmed down such a lot since he arrived home with this foreigner, you must have seen how he's changed. He's now working for the doctor, and he has his own pickup truck.'

'Nicanora, don't be fooled,' Fidelia retorted. 'Your boy is wild, just like his father. He always has'

been and he always will be, pickup truck or no pickup truck. He has no sense for what trouble he may cause with his goings-on. Remember those disgusting giant lizards he dragged out of the swamp to sell to us as guard dogs – they ate all my chickens and killed your goat. He has no sense and no self-control. Who knows what further trouble he'll bring to this town? I tell you, Nicanora, there are many children running around with his hooked nose. And that doctor must be a simpleton as well, otherwise why would he spend his days hanging around here with your boy rather than making money from the people in the city? And what do you know about this Gringito anyway? Where does he come from?'

Nicanora, choosing yet again to ignore the various insults that peppered Fidelia's conversation, had to confess to her neighbour that she knew very little about her house guest. The Gringito appeared to lack any ability to converse in an understandable way with anyone except Nena, who had somehow been able to make sense of the sentences he occasionally tried to put together with the aid of the battered little book he kept in his pocket. What was more, she had no interest in knowing anything about him, sticking in this instance to her mother's philosophy of 'What you don't know can't trouble you.'

'All I'm saying to you, Nicanora, as a friend and neighbour,' Fidelia continued, 'is, be on your guard. These foreigners aren't always what they seem. I told you about my poor husband's sister. She went to the city to sell her vegetables and arrived home a mere shadow of herself after sitting next to one of these gringos. During the night she started to piss blood, then she got thinner and thinner and within a month she was dead. The gringo had drained the life out of her, and he took her fat back home with him to make into soap. Nicanora, be careful of this Gringito.' Nicanora had heard this story many times before, and had dismissed it as fanciful nonsense dreamed up by Fidelia's in-laws, but recently the significance of the tale had begun to grow in potency.



Despite her worst fears, life had become immeasurably easier in Nicanora's household since the arrival of the Gringito. The money he supplied was helping to keep food on the table, finally pay off Ernesto's numerous debts, buy Nena's school books and hold the moneylender at bay. And now she found she had enough left over to begin to refuel her dream of opening Valle de la Virgen's first ever hat shop. In the middle of the night she started to see scenes of the grand opening. She could visualize the queues of anxious people waiting for the latest fashions to arrive from the city, and the sheer beauty of the handmade hats that she would bring to the town. She would wake up with a long forgotten but familiar voice repeating in her head, 'Nicanora, it is your destiny,' as if the ancestors were trying to tell her that she finally had a purpose.

Knowing instinctively that location is of the utmost importance to the success of any business, Nicanora had her eye on the small shop on the corner of the plaza, opposite the church and near the mayor's office. It was the only premises suitable for her exclusive merchandise, its interior lending itself perfectly to the display of elegant hats. Being in the main square it was passed by everyone on route to the market, or taking the road out of town. The only obstacle that lay between her and her dream was that the shop was owned by Don Bosco the barber, had been for over twenty years, and the afternoon meetings at Don Bosco's shop to discuss the events of the day were a greater tradition among the men of the town than paying homage to the Virgin herself. She even ventured to discuss the hat shop with a few friends and neighbours, to test out the level of demand that existed for such an establishment. Her idea was met with stupefied derision.

‘You’re becoming as bad as that son of yours,’ Fidelity warned. ‘Nicanora, you’re not a young woman. I notice new wrinkles appearing on your face every day. You can’t go gallivanting back and forth to the city to buy ridiculous hats that will only fall into the swamp the first time we wear them. Be content with what you have, as I am, and, God willing, your children will look after you. Nerina studies hard, she’ll probably grow up to be a teacher if she doesn’t ruin her eyes reading before she’s old enough. Isabela, well let’s hope she’ll marry a rich man, she’ll certainly have to get married soon if she carries on the way she is. And Ernesto – of course the less said about him the better, but perhaps he’ll finally leave home one day and stop bleeding you dry. Anyway, where would you get the money from to start up such a thing?’ And there Fidelity had the last word. Even the moneylender would refuse her any more capital. In her feverish half-sleep, Nicanora worked out that if she could keep the Gringito with her for a few months she would have time to convince Don Bosco to retire and sell the shop, and to save enough for a down payment on her first consignment of hand-made Italian Borsalinos, the finest hats in the city.

Doña Nicanora and Don Bosco had a history, a history that they had both worked hard over the years to forget. Don Bosco had considered Nicanora to be a great beauty in her youth, an idea that Nicanora had dismissed as an illusion created by his poor eyesight. More than twenty years on, he still believed her to be the most beautiful woman he had ever known.

In her early days, Nicanora had enjoyed the attention that Don Pedro Bosco lavished on her. He would walk her to the market every morning, talking with passion of the day he would turn his barber's stall into a respectable business in the plaza. She listened to his plans in apparent awe, laughed at his ridiculous jokes and toyed girlishly with his affections. He waited for her every Sunday afternoon outside the church to walk her round and round the plaza, buying her numerous useless presents from the stalls. His particular favourites were the brightly coloured balloons, which he bought from the old balloon seller who mysteriously appeared every Sunday morning and then vanished at the end of the day back to her unknown village.

Nicanora would return home from her afternoon strolls laden with the most luxurious and bizarre objects her suitor could find: sugared apples and toffee bananas, watermelon slices and carved mangoes on sticks, paper windmills that spun in the breeze, raffia dolls and wooden dogs whose heads nodded in agreement every time Don Bosco spoke, tinted glasses that he put on her to make the world look pink and hopeful, and scented balms that were made from the fat of the *tigre* that roamed the forests. He bought for her to protect her 'beautiful and succulent lips'. Don Bosco would walk her home, picking up fruit and bunches of flowers along the way, talking of the day that he would make her the envy of the town. Nicanora listened and laughed, never indicating that she had the slightest understanding of his intentions. Nicanora's Sunday exuberance was always expertly deflated by her mother as soon as she entered the house.

'How long are you going to lead that poor man on for?' her mother scolded. 'What are you going to do when he finally asks you to marry him?'

'I haven't thought about it,' Nicanora lied.

'Well, you had better start to think about it, my girl, because he is bound to get around to asking you sometime, the hopeless fool. You've been parading yourself in the plaza with him for the past two years, like some careless hussy. Everybody has seen you. If you break his heart, people will find it hard to forgive you. He's well liked.' Nicanora managed to ignore her mother's warnings, convinced that Don Bosco had taken so long to buy the barber's shop that it would never really happen, and that even if he did he would still never manage to pluck up the courage to ask her to marry him. Besides, she was young enough not to care what anyone thought of her. She knew her future lay elsewhere.

Don Bosco had worked tirelessly to save up the money to buy the lease for the shop in the plaza which he believed to be the finest in town. It was owned by the family of Doña Teresa, as were all the best properties in Valle de la Virgen. The purchase of the shop involved some very unpleasant dealings with Doña Teresa's great-nephew, Rodriguez Ramirez, who had recently arrived in town to look after the affairs of his great-aunt. The memory of the negotiations still caused Don Bosco acute pain. The haggling went on for over two years, during which time Don Bosco took great care in his courtship with Nicanora to reveal gently his intentions towards her and to convince himself that she returned his feelings. Don Bosco was certain that if he could secure the business and show Nicanora

that he was destined to be a man of standing, she would agree to marry him.

Don Ramirez was asking for more than money. Recognising Don Bosco to be a man of future influence, he wanted the barber's commitment to act as his friend and ally in all his political endeavours, an agreement that Don Bosco steadfastly refused to make. Every time Don Bosco came close to achieving the amount agreed, the price of the shop inexplicably rose, taking it just out of his reach again. Finally, desperate to buy the business and terrified that Nicanora would think he was no longer serious about her, he agreed to the terms set out by Don Ramirez. The next day the shop was his. Don Bosco had never breathed a word of what he had done to anyone.

The day that Don Bosco held the keys to his shop in his hand was the proudest and happiest day of his life. The following day marked the beginning of a lifetime of loneliness, sadness and regret. He told only his friends Julio and Teofelo of his plans, and they helped him work through the night to prepare for the occasion, filling the shop with bunches of wild flowers gathered from the forest. The following morning, Don Bosco ran to meet Nicanora to secure his final triumph. He led her, laughing and blindfolded to the plaza, and revealed to her the flower-strewn interior of the shop. Then, on a bended knee, he offered her a corner of the business from which to sell her woven shawls, if she would agree to be his companion on his life's journey.

At the age of eighteen, Nicanora did not consider that Don Bosco's life journey would take him so far from her very far, and certainly not in the direction that she wanted to go. He was ten years older; and kind and attentive though he was, she thought him far too settled and contented with his lot in life. Besides, she had a secret lover who was much more exciting, although a good deal less respectable than Don Bosco. Nicanora had dreams, which certainly did not include a barber's shop. She was determined that she would not spend the rest of her life rotting in a corner of forgotten swampland when there was a whole world full of cities and adventures just waiting for her.

Nicanora first met Francisco during the fiesta of the Virgin. Francisco was everything that Don Bosco was not. He was tall, and handsome, and full of the danger and carefree vitality of youth. He was the cousin of one of Nicanora's neighbours and had recently set up a business in the river town of Puerta de la Coruña, 'cleaning the filth from the shoes of the rich'. He told Nicanora he was saving enough money to buy a ticket to travel to a distant and exotic location on one of the many boats that came and went along the river. Francisco offered to take Nicanora with him. After a day of festivities which involving countless bottles of beer and vast quantities of *aguardiente*, Francisco and Nicanora made their way into the forest to pay their own tribute to the Virgin, a state that was very quickly lost to Nicanora. Francisco disappeared back to Puerta de la Coruña two days later, promising to return in a few weeks. Nicanora was convinced that she now knew what love was. She could not get the thought of Francisco out of her mind. During her Sunday strolls with Don Bosco she started to imagine that he was her secret lover who was buying her presents and flowers and talking about the future. She managed to close her mind during the long musings about the barber's shop and to imagine that it was her lover talking to her about travelling on boats and visiting foreign lands.

'Don't you ever want to get out of here?' Nicanora once asked, coming back to earth during one of Don Bosco's ramblings.

'Why would I?' he replied. 'When everything I want in the world is right here in the plaza with me.' He gently squeezed Nicanora's hand and her heart missed a beat and then died a little.

Francisco started making frequent visits back to the town, always being careful to meet Nicanora in the forest. Nicanora went to great lengths to ensure that her lover remained a secret, the clandestine

nature of their meeting adding to the passion of their moments together. Her mother, who had an unnerving sixth sense, announced to her one day when they were working together on their small plot of land: 'These leaves help to stop babies coming when they are not wanted, and these ones help them come out quickly once they are there.' Nicanora had no idea why her mother had suddenly decided to impart this information to her. She supposed that she must be priming her for marriage and no more was said on the matter. Nicanora kept quiet about her plans to leave, until one day Francisco arrived saying that he had almost saved up enough money to buy their tickets to paradise. He convinced Nicanora that she should leave with him when he returned to Puerta de la Coruña the following day. The day that Francisco offered Nicanora her ticket out of town was the day that Don Bosco clinched the deal on the barber's shop.

Nicanora was so filled with excitement at the prospect of leaving with her lover to discover the mysteries of the world, and with fear at the thought of the perilous journey ahead, that she hardly listened to Don Bosco's prattling as he led her blindfolded to the plaza to show her the great surprise. She did not listen as he told her that the shop would always smell of flowers as long as she was near it, and she did not hear him say that he no longer needed dreams now that he held the keys to their future happiness in his hands. It was only when he got down on his knees in front of her that she realised what he was asking of her. She looked down at the man staring lovingly up at her, his legs half buried in flower petals, his eyes smiling with a spirit and warmth that made her heart question her head for the first time, and said nothing.

'Everything I have is yours,' he said, laughing with pride. She stood looking at him. He got up, dusting the petals off his trousers and held her hand. 'You never thought I would manage it, did you? But look – I have – it's mine,' he said, dancing with delight. 'I mean it's ours, if you will have me,' and he bent to kiss her on the cheek. She stood silent.

'So will you, will you have me?'

Nicanora said nothing.

'Will you have me?' he asked again.

Still she was silent.

'I can't,' she said finally, in a whisper.

'What can't you do, my love?' Don Bosco replied, holding on to his self-deception to the last.

'I can't. I'm sorry. I just can't. I can't marry a barber.' He stared at her.

'What did you say?' he asked, almost inaudibly.

'I ... I can't marry a barber,' she repeated.

He looked at her and then looked at the floor. He tried to speak, but the room resounded with his words. In an instant the shop was transformed. Where there had been bunches of flowers and petals strewn over the floor he now saw a mess of rotting vegetation that needed to be cleared away. Where there was a future home and happiness, he saw a small dingy shop that had cost him his life savings, and for which he had signed away his integrity for ever.

'Why?' he said finally. 'What's wrong with marrying a barber?'

'Nothing,' she said 'I didn't mean ...'

'Would you marry me if I were a tailor instead?' he asked, as if all the wrongs that had been done in the last minute could be undone with a swift change of career.

'I don't know. I don't think so,' she replied candidly.

‘Well, I’m pleased to hear that it isn’t just barbers that you have such distaste for. But you will marry a shoeshine boy?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, tears of shame now pouring down her cheeks.

‘At least marry someone worthy of you,’ he said gently and squeezed her hand for the last time. She ran out of the shop and home to tell her mother that tomorrow she was leaving to travel the world. He locked the door, pulled down the shutters, sat among the flower petals and wept.



Francisco and Nicanora did not make it to the boat. They got as far as Francisco’s small rented room on the outskirts of the town, from which it was possible to see the ferries coming and going, along with Nicanora’s dream for her future. Despite his promises, Francisco always remained one month away from having the money to buy their tickets.

The first couple of months in Puerta de la Coruña were ones of blind happiness for Nicanora. Even though they were living in a damp room with nothing to cook on and nowhere private to wash, she enjoyed the excitement of having her own home and she thrilled with the touch of Francisco’s beautiful body at night. All day, while he was out working, she would long for the smell of his sweat and the touch of his warm dark skin against hers. He would return home with little presents from the market where he sat cleaning shoes, and with stories of the people above the feet he spent his days staring at, which made them both breathless with laughter. He would imitate the voices of his clients and the way they stood looking down on him, and he would tell her glorious lies about the generous tips that they promised him next time they came to the market. He assured her he would be able to buy the tickets within a month.

The tickets never came. At first, she willingly forgave Francisco for his inability to move their lives forward at the pace she had hoped for. She reprimanded herself for being too demanding, heeding her mother’s last words to her before she left home still ringing in her head: ‘You always were an impetuous and impatient girl. It will be your downfall.’ Gradually the thrill of lust began to be replaced by the gnawing disquiet of distrust. Francisco started to return home later and later at night, apparently too exhausted from his day’s work to stay awake long enough to even begin to satisfy her desires, although usually just long enough to satisfy his own. He would lie lifeless, snoring in her arms, as if the passionate and caring husband of the first few months of their marriage had now been replaced by an overgrown baby with the sour stink of booze, rather than the sweet smell of the bread on its breath.

Nicanora blamed herself. She was not beautiful enough or a good enough lover to keep her husband interested. Francisco would complain that he was simply too exhausted from his long hours of work to be able to be both a good worker and a good husband, and that the pressure to save up so much money so quickly was affecting his manhood. Nicanora sensed the resolve in Francisco to leave the security of his wretched life dissolving with the midday heat of the river town. His absences, which at first only encroached into their nights together, soon began to stretch into days at a time. Nicanora was certain that if she could take Francisco away from the monotony of the life they had so readily slipped into and from whatever temptations were pulling him away from her, the beautiful young lover from the forest would be restored to her. She made up her mind to change their fortunes by not only selling her woven shawls at the side of the road during the busy afternoons, but cleaning the houses of the rich in the mornings.

After six months of hard labour, she had gathered enough money to buy two single tickets to Manola, from where she understood they could sail to anywhere in the world. When she presented the money to Francisco, she lied as to how she had come by it, so as not to make him feel he had failed. She told him that a wealthy elderly patron whose house she had been cleaning had died suddenly, and that his family had given it to her as a thank-you gift. She was surprised at how readily he accepted the unlikely story. They celebrated their good fortune with a feast of roast chicken, throwing liberal quantities of beer on the ground to thank the Mother Earth for her help along the way. The next day Francisco went out proudly with the money in his pockets to buy the tickets, and did not return for three days.

Nicanora had not told Francisco about the bouts of sickness that she had been having for a few months, which at first she put down to the stench of the busy streets. The monthly bleeding, which initially she was relieved to be without, showed no signs of returning. Despite there being scarcely any food in the house, a growing belly had begun to accompany the sickness. She wanted to keep her condition a secret from Francisco until she had saved enough money to buy the tickets, worried that the thought of the added responsibility of a baby would put him off leaving for ever. She convinced herself that she could quite as easily look after a child on a boat as she could in a dingy little rented room. He only commented on how life in Puerta de la Coruña must be agreeing with her as she was looking fatter than ever. When Francisco returned home after his three-day absence, he came carrying a handful of coloured stones and a pocketful of foreign coins, offering no explanation for his disappearance.

‘And the tickets?’ she said expectantly.

‘I bought them,’ he said, unable to meet her eye. ‘I did buy them.’

‘Well, where are they?’ she asked, thinking he was playing a cruel game in which she momentarily saw all hope disappear before he finally produced the promise from his pockets. It was no game. This was the start of her life’s disappointments.

‘I lost them,’ he said.

‘Lost them?’ she repeated. ‘How could you lose them?’

‘I just did. In a game. It was a chance, a chance to win us the tickets around the world.’

‘You gambled them?’

‘It was a good bet. I knew I could win. I had already won these,’ and with a sheepish grin he pushed the stones and coins down on the table in front of her. ‘They told me I could sell them. They’re rare gemstones – look at the colour. Have you ever seen stones that colour before?’

Nicanora picked them up, green and blue flakes of paint peeling off as she turned them over in her hands. She had never felt rage like it before, not even when conversing with her ancestors. She threw the stones on the floor and flew at him. She grabbed him by the shirt and shook him. She reached for his hair, trying to pull it out by the roots. She slapped his face and then sank down, sick and exhausted.

‘We’ll try again,’ he said, still unable to look at her. ‘I’ll get the tickets. It’ll be all right, my promise.’ Then he left the room and disappeared for a week.

★

Nicanora was determined not to give up. She could not face the shame of returning to Valle de la Virgen with a child and no husband, to be chastised by her mother and neighbours for having failed.

easily. And she could not face looking every day into the eyes of the man whose feelings she had so carelessly dismissed. She made up her mind that whatever it took she would save enough money to buy the tickets to transport them to a world of hope. For the next three years, Nicanora sat on the streets selling her weavings while Francisco drank, gambled their money away and filled her belly every year with another child. It was during this time that the idea of the hat shop first came to her. She had seen the groups of mountain women who made their way down the treacherous pass for a opportunity to sell their produce in the markets of Puerta de la Coruña, their bowler hats perched meticulously on their heads. She remembered how, as a child, her mother would tell her stories about life in the mountain village from which her ancestors came, and in particular how she would lament the poor standards of dress in the swamp town to which her husband had brought her. 'In the village where I was born,' her mother would say, 'no self-respecting woman would dream of stepping outside without her smart black bowler on her head.' Or she would click her tongue after her neighbour had walked past bare-headed and mutter: 'Where I come from you could tell the sort of woman your neighbour was by the state of her hat.'

Nicanora would challenge her mother as to why she had let her own standards drop so low and had abandoned her precious bowler. Her mother would simply reply, 'It doesn't do to stand out from the neighbours. I don't want them killing me with their envy.' It was true. Nicanora had never seen anyone wearing a hat in Valle de la Virgen, with the exception of Don Bosco, who always wore a smart black trilby sent to him by his brother Aurelio to go with his Sunday suit. Don Bosco would not walk out without it, even on the most stifflingly humid days. 'It stops the mosquitoes biting my head and stealing my thoughts,' he explained to Nicanora as the sweat dripped off his face during the Sunday strolls.

For many months now Nicanora's daydreams had been drifting unchecked back to the safety of her hometown. No longer did she wish to be transported to foreign parts and exotic locations. She craved the comfort of her mother's house, and with a regret that was too painful for her to acknowledge, she thought of how one day she might still set up her business in the plaza, selling her shawls, if she could bring herself to look humiliation and sadness in the face.

Her decision was made the day a travelling salesman stopped by her roadside stall. He stood for a long time looking at her woven shawls, touching them gently, running his fingers over the fine fabric of the weave. At last he spoke to her.

'You're very clever,' he said, 'these designs are works of art. Where did you learn how to do them?' Nicanora, at first thinking he was making fun of her, did not answer.

'They really are beautiful,' he said again. 'I'd like them for my shop. The colours and patterns are exquisite. But I'm afraid I would never be able to sell them to the ladies in the city. These are peasant clothes.'

'So what do the women in the city wear?' Nicanora asked, feeling both indignant and deflated. The man pulled some pictures out of his pocket. The photos were of women in glittering jewellery and elegantly laced skirts, and all wearing the most glorious hats. She could not take her eyes off them. She ran her fingers over them as if trying to conjure the hats out of the photographs and into the reality of her world. She imagined herself returning home in one to prove to the townsfolk and above all to her mother, that despite what they thought of her she had made something of her life, and that she could dress like a glamorous city woman.

The man stood quietly observing her. 'Would you like one?' he asked finally. 'I have one here in

my bag. I will give it to you in exchange for your shawls.’ He bent down to undo his travelling case and pulled out a pink box. It contained the most exquisite hat Nicanora had ever seen. It had a so delicate sheen that subtly changed colour in the light, transforming itself through shades of pink and blue. It was trimmed with a lace that looked as if it had been woven from diamonds. Nicanora could not bring herself to touch it.

‘It’s yours,’ the man said at last, coaxing her. ‘I could sell it for a fortune. It comes all the way from Europe, handmade in Italy. You can have it in exchange for all the weavings you have.’ Nicanora knew, in that moment, that destiny had tapped her on the shoulder.

Her mind was now made up. She could no longer stand the squalor and disappointment of her life in a single rented room with only Francisco’s lies to support her and the children. She would face her mother and anyone else in Valle de la Virgen who might wish to judge her. She no longer felt she had to hide from the man whose goodness she had spurned and whose hopes she had destroyed. She knew who she was and what she was worth and it was far more than the life she was living now. In that moment of inspiration she knew where her destiny lay. She would bring joy and elegance to her hometown. She would save every penny she earned, and one day soon she would open Valle de la Virgen’s first ever hat shop, and this was the jewel in her collection.

She rushed home and gathered the results of her hard labour and handed them over to the man in exchange for the pink box. He tipped his hat to her as he departed and wished her a life full of surprises. She packed a small bag, and with the precious hatbox in her hand, a baby on her back and her children beside her, she made her way home for good. It was only when she arrived at her mother’s house, beaten and worn after three weeks’ travelling and with sick children to nurse back to health, that she realised she had been cheated. She had tentatively peered inside the box, but it was wrapped so beautifully in soft pink tissue paper and tied with ribbon that she wanted to leave it in its pristine state until she presented it to her mother. When she finally opened the box to reveal to her mother the woman she had become, she found a plain straw hat on which sat a bright pink plastic rose. It was the only possession she had to show for her three years’ toil on the streets of Puerta de Coruña.

Several months later, Francisco arrived back from one of his many long absences wandering the area in search of profitable work to find another miserable and hungry family living in their rented room. It took him several hours to recognise that the sleeping children were not his own. It was only when their mother returned home and pleaded with him not to hurt them that he realised they were strangers and that his family had disappeared.

★

Nicanora put her mind to feeding the rapidly growing appetites of her children. She continued to weave her shawls, which she hawked around the surrounding villages, but nobody ever again picked them up with such tenderness and appreciation as the man who had shown her that perfection could exist in a single object. She set up a small stall selling fruit and cooked food for the men who passed through the market on their way to and from the estate and their small plots of land. The money she earned was barely enough to pay for the food to feed her family. Her dream and the straw hat were safely locked away – alongside her cherished hopes for her children – in a mental box marked ‘Life of unfulfilled promises’.

She saw Francisco only one more time. He arrived suddenly one night at her mother’s house some

years later wearing a smart suit, and regaled a wiser Nicanora with stories of how he was on the brink of making his fortune from his endeavours in gold prospecting, pig farming, matchmaking and storytelling. She listened to him with no more interest than she had listened to her mother's warnings in her youth. He stayed for one last night, a night in which some of the passion of their first few months together was rekindled for old times' sake, and then disappeared the next day promising to return with the money to change his family's destiny. Nicanora sensed that she would not see him again. She did not expect, however, that his body would be found three days later splattered at the foot of the cliff. He had been seen the day he left by one of the townsfolk, who had passed him stumbling drunkenly near the cliff edge, shouting about the great future he was about to give his wife and children. He left one lasting reminder of his visit. Nine months later Nena was born. As Nicanora stared into the eyes of her freshly delivered bloodstained daughter, she knew that Francisco had on his final journey been able to leave her with the most precious gift possible.



Don Bosco in the meantime resigned himself to a lifetime of bachelorhood and the removal of unwanted beards. He seldom ventured outside his shop, sleeping in the small room above and trying hard to keep himself out of the affairs of the town. His self-imposed isolation was thwarted by his natural good humour and charm, which despite all his efforts to the contrary drew people to him. Within a couple of years the barber's shop had become known as the place to seek solace and advice for all manner of misdemeanours and problems, ranging from neighbourly disputes to marital infidelities. It was Don Bosco who settled the long-running and deeply felt quarrel between Don Julio and Don Alfredo over whose goat should be allowed to be tethered to the post situated equidistant between their houses. Don Bosco finally came up with a compromise position, allowing each of them access to the post on alternate days and declaring Sunday a rest day for the post, during which time both goats wandered freely into Don Teofelo's yard, causing another grievance that took a further year to settle.

Don Bosco's barber's shop became the unofficial meeting place of the men of the town. They would gather to watch and commiserate over the ritual humiliation of the national football team played out on the rickety black-and-white television, which at popular request had been installed in the corner of the shop, whilst airing their grievances against the goalkeeper, the president and the mayor. 'He should be shot,' was the usual cry that echoed around the shop, directed towards all three.

For over twenty years, Don Bosco's had been the place where the disgruntled and disaffected would meet and talk confidently about how, if they were mayor, they would do things differently. Nobody could understand why, when the first free elections took place, Don Bosco refused to stand. Despite the insistence of his patrons that nobody would vote against Don Ramirez unless he gave his public support to a challenge, Don Bosco stood firm. He simply said that he wanted a life of peace and quiet away from the ups and downs of politics and that he was better suited to the business of cutting hair than cutting remarks. 'Why don't you stand yourself?' Don Bosco would challenge the most belligerent among them, to which nobody could think of a better response than that they were either too busy or too unreliable to take on such an important task. In truth, nobody was prepared to make a challenge to the family who owned the homes they lived in. Don Bosco, on the other hand, who owned his business and had no wife or family to support, apparently had nothing to lose.

Don Bosco and Doña Nicanora maintained a respectful distance from each other over the years.

exchanging pleasantries whenever their paths crossed as if nothing had passed between them. Don Bosco's playful remarks always left Nicanora with an uncertain aftertaste, unsure whether they were meant as a sour compliment or a sugary insult. 'And how is your exuberant brood?' he would ask with interest as she passed by with her screaming and giggling children. 'They do you proud, my dear Nicanora,' he would add, surreptitiously pressing sweets into her children's clammy, searching hands. On other occasions he would compliment her, saying, 'My dear Nicanora, your children are just like little rose blossoms, with the possible exception of Ernesto.' He would bend down and pinch the children on their cheeks before Nicanora had a chance to wipe away the dirt and food that had invariably stuck to their faces. Or he would stop with a remark such as, 'You must be so proud of Ernesto. My dear Nicanora, there can be no greater sacrifice than to give your life to the rearing of our nation's future intelligentsia.' Then, checking himself, he would ask with a gentle look of concern, 'But you, Nicanora, you're content and keeping well, I trust?'

Nicanora always left her encounters with Don Bosco with a confusion of emotion. In all their years of pleasantries, neither she nor Don Bosco had ever mentioned the events that had passed between them and neither had ever made any reference to Francisco. The regret that Nicanora felt for the arrogance of her youth, which had led her to tread so roughly over the feelings of a man who with the wisdom of experience she now recognised was kinder than any she had known, had troubled her over the years. And yet she felt unable to move beyond their casual banter and offer the apology, which although it could never change their past, would at least give her heart some peace. Instead she usually replied with formality, saying something like, 'As well as can be expected under the circumstances thank you, Don Bosco,' never really sure which circumstances she was referring to.

Until the day he died, Francisco remained blissfully ignorant of the full details of the history that had preceded his marriage to Nicanora. But it was Don Bosco who had been there when Nicanora had needed him most. He had quietly and discreetly helped with the arrangements for Francisco's funeral, making sure that the ceremony was carried out with solemnity and dignity. Francisco's body had been too dismembered, picked about by carrion, to be fully recovered from the valley after the fall. And so Nicanora had lain Francisco's suit in the coffin, along with the old stones and coins he had brought back for her from his first gambling trip, and said a final farewell to the illusion that had taken away her youth.

Life at the clinic was becoming a little more settled for the young doctor, who had quickly established a comfortable daily routine with his assistant, Ernesto. As soon as Arturo heard the first rumble of the pickup's wheels making their way along the potholed mud road, he lit the gas burner and placed a pot of coffee on top, knowing that by the time Ernesto reached the clinic the thick, strong, sweet brew would be ready. By this point in the mid-morning he had carried out his daily check of the medicine cabinet, swept the rotting vegetation and dead insects off the clinic floor and polished the microscope, a parting present from his father. Even though Arturo had no work to give to Ernesto and was paying him a substantial portion of the allowance that his father had sent him off with, he was extremely grateful to have a companion to talk to.

At first, nobody had paid much attention to the arrival of the young doctor in town. His presence had not been noticed for at least ten days, when he was eventually spotted in the market trying to buy fish and potatoes during the annual shoe fair. Dr Arturo Aguilar had arrived in the middle of the night on a donkey from Rosas Pampas arranged for him by Ramon, the mayor's assistant, and had spent the first week of his stay in Valle de la Virgen lying on the floor of the clinic in a feverish state, only occasionally venturing outside to vomit and relieve his twisting and watery bowels in a small public latrine. Ramon visited him on his first day, bringing him a few supplies of fruit as a welcome present, a box of medicines sent by the provincial health authority and a mound of forms to sign and a stack of paperwork to fill in. Ramon had been so appalled by the state of the new arrival as he lay moaning on the clinic floor that he at first suggested taking him to see the medicine man. Realising that this was inappropriate under the circumstances, he then decided to leave the young doctor to his own devices and hope he would soon sort himself out.

Ramon mentioned to a few of his neighbours that a sick doctor had arrived. Some of the most interested and concerned townsfolk wandered close to the clinic to try to catch a glimpse of him and offer a variety of concoctions known to be good for troublesome bowels, including a plate of papaya seeds, a dish of cold fish soup, a variety of herbal teas and a half-drunk bottle of Coca-Cola. Fear that the doctor might have brought a highly infectious disease with him from the city prevented them from getting too close. When Arturo finally emerged from his malaise, the only sign that he had had any visitors was the little line of offerings left at the end of the path, which by the time he stumbled across them were swarming with ants. It was only after the first appearance of the young man in the market that word really began to get around and rumours and suppositions started to spread. Once Arturo had recovered from his bout of dysentery, brought on by drinking the rancid water served to him in the guise of coffee at his guest house in Rosas Pampas, he made a diligent effort to get to know his surroundings and make the acquaintance of the townsfolk visiting the market every day.

He struggled considerably in his early encounters with the market, his initial approach having been to go there with some thought in mind of what he wanted to buy. The market, it seemed, always had other ideas for him. During his first week of recuperation he had gone there with a growing desperation to buy fish and vegetables with which to prepare a nutritious meal, only to be confronted with row upon row of stalls piled high with old boots and a range of sandals made out of used car tyres. Three months later, when the soles of his shoes had completely rotted away, he realised with regret how foolish he had been not to stock up with boots when the opportunity of the annual shoe fair had presented itself. There appeared to be no rationale to what was on offer on any particular day

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