Yuri Herrera

He spoke each word very clearly, without stressing any, without moving a single muscle that wasn’t strictly necessary. He stopped speaking and took one of Makina’s hands, wrapped his fist around it and said this is your heart. Got it?

Mr. Q didn’t blink. The light swept the steam from their coffee cups crossways, infusing the air with its bitter scent. Makina thanked him and versed out of there.

She stopped in the mirrored hall to think for a moment about what Mr. Q had said; sometimes she preferred the crass talk of Mr. Aitch, and certainly the slow celebratory tone with which Mr. Double-U spoke; but with Mr. Q nothing went to waste, it was always like pebbles were pouring from his lips, even if she didn’t rightly know what each one was supposed to mean.

She looked into the mirrors: in front of her was her back; she looked behind but found only the never-ending front, curving forward, as if inviting her to step through its thresholds. If she crossed them all, eventually, after many bends, she’d reach the right place; but it was a place she didn’t trust.
She couldn’t get lost. Every time she came to the Big Chilango she trod softly, because that was not the place she wanted to leave her mark, and she told herself repeatedly that she couldn’t get lost, and by get lost she meant not a detour or a sidetrack but lost for real, lost forever in the hills of hills cementing the horizon; or lost in the awe of all the living flesh that had built and paid for palaces. That was why she chose to travel underground to the other bus depot. Trains ran around the entire circulatory system but never left the body; down there the heavy air would do her no harm, and she ran no risk of becoming captivated. And she mustn’t get lost or captivated, too many people were waiting for her. Someone was covering her post at the switchboard while she was away, but only she spoke all three tongues and only she had mastered the poker face for bad news and the nonchalance with which certain names, oh, so long yearned for, had to be pronounced.
Most important were the ones awaiting her without caring what tongues she spoke or how she couriered. Her kid sister, who’d press close up beside her to eavesdrop on adult troubles, eyes round with attention, hands on knees. Makina could feel her absorbing the world, storing away the passions that came and went along the phone cord. (Of course I still love you, Very soon, Any day now, Hold your horses, Did you get it? Did she tell you? When was that? How did it happen? How in the name of God is that possible? His name is so and so, Her name is such and such, Don’t get me wrong, I never even dreamed, I don’t live here anymore.) She was growing up quickly, and in a man’s world, and Makina wanted to educate her as to the essentials: how to take stock of them and how to put up with them; how to savor them. How even if they’ve got filthy mouths, they’re fragile; and even if they’re like little boys, they can really get under your skin.

And the boyfriend. A boyfriend she had and who she referred to that way though they’d never discussed it and she didn’t feel like anyone’s girl, but she called him her boyfriend because he acted so much like a boyfriend that not calling him so, at least to herself, would have been like denying him something written all over his face. A boyfriend. She’d shook him for the first time back during the brouhaha about the mayors. The day it all ended Makina felt a little like getting wasted, but she didn’t so much feel like liquor, it was more an itch to shake her body, so she’d been reckless and gone and shook him as she had others on a couple of trips to the Little Town; what’s more, it had been an entirely forgettable foray. And, no question, she’d shaken off the exhaustion of an ordeal that was now over; but even though she hadn’t wanted to be fawned over, just wanted a man to lend himself, he had touched her with such reverence that it must have been smoldering inside him for ages.

She’d seen him before at the door of the elementary school where he worked, had noticed the way he wouldn’t look at her, looking instead at every other thing around her; that was where she picked him up, sauntered over saying she needed a shawl so that he’d put his arms round her, took him for a stroll, laughed like a halfwit at everything he said, especially if it wasn’t funny, and finally reeled him in on a line she was tugging from her bedroom. The man made love with a feverish surrender, sucked her nipples into new shapes, and when he came was consumed with tremors of sorrowful joy.

After that the man had gone to work in the Big Chilango, and when he came back months later he showed up at the switchboard to tell her something, looking so cocksure and so smart that she guessed what it was that he wanted to say and fixed it so she wouldn’t be left alone with him. The man hovered in silence for
hours on end until she said Come back another day, we’ll talk. But when he came back she asked him about his gig and about his trip and never about what was going on inside. Then she asked him to stop coming to her work, said she’d seek him out instead. And she did: every weekend they’d shuck, and whenever she sensed he was about to declare himself, Makina would kiss him with extra-dirty lust just to keep his mouth shut. So she’d managed to put off defining things until the eve of the journey she was being sent on by Cora. Then, before she could silence him, he threw up his hands and though he didn’t touch her she felt like he was hurling her from the other end of the room.

You’re scared of me, he said. Not cause of something I did, just cause you want to be.

He’d stood and was facing her, straightening his sky-blue shirt; he was leaving without making love, but Makina didn’t say anything because she saw how hard it had been for him to get up from the bed; she could play dumb—I don’t know what you’re talking about—or accuse him of making a scene, but the slight tremble betrayed by his lips, the bottled-up breathing of a man barely keeping his composure, inspired in her a respect that she couldn’t dismiss; so she said It’s not that, and he raised his head to look at her, the whole of him an empty space to be filled by whatever it was that Makina had to say, but she stammered We’ll talk when I get back and then . . . Before she was through, he’d nodded as if to say Yeah, yeah, just sticking your tongue in my mouth again, and then turned and versed with the weariness of a man who knows he’s being played and can’t do a thing about it.

Three years earlier one of Mr. Aitch’s thugs had turned up with some papers and told Makina that it said right there that they owned a little piece of land, over on the other side of the river, that a gentleman had left it to them. On the paper was a name that might have belonged to the man who had been her father before he disappeared a long time ago, but Makina took no notice and instead asked Cora what the deal was, what that was all about, and Cora said It’s nothing, just Aitch up to his tricks. But in the meantime the thug took Makina’s brother out drinking and washed his brain with neutle liquor and weasel words and that night her brother came home saying I’m off to claim what’s ours. Makina tried to convince him that it was all just talk but he insisted Someone’s got to fight for what’s ours and I got the balls if you don’t. Cora merely looked at him, fed up, and didn’t say a word, until she saw him at the door with his rucksack full of odds and ends and said Let him go, let him learn to fend for himself with his own big balls, and he hesitated a moment
before he versed, and in the doubt flickering in his eyes you could see he'd spent his whole life there like that, holding back his tears, but before letting them out he turned and versed and only ever came back in the form of two or three short notes he sent a long while later.

Two men ogled her in the bus ticket line, one pushed his face close as he passed and said Lucky's my middle name! He didn't brush against her but he felt her up with his breath, the son of a bitch. Makina wasn't used to that sort of thing. Not that she hadn't experienced it, she just hadn't let herself get used to it. She'd either tell them to fuck right off, or decide not to waste her time on such sad sacks; that's what she decided this time. But not because she was used to it. She bought her ticket and boarded the bus. A couple of minutes later she saw the two men get on. They were hardly more than kids, with their peach fuzz and journey pride. Since they probably had no notion of the way real adventures rough you up, they must've thought they were pretty slick adventurers. They jostled each other down the aisle to their seats, a few rows behind Makina's, but the one who had spoken to her came back and said with a smirk Think this is me, and sat down beside her. Makina made no reply. The bus pulled out; almost immediately Makina felt the first contact, real quick, as if by accident, but she knew that type of accident: the millimetric graze of her elbow prefaced ravenous manhandling. She sharpened her peripheral vision and prepared for what must come, if the idiot decided to persist. He did. Barely bothering to fake it, he dropped his left hand onto his own left leg, languidly letting it sag onto the seat and brush her thigh on the way back up, no harm intended, of course. Makina turned to him, stared into his eyes so he'd know that her next move was no accident, pressed a finger to her lips, shhhhh, eh, and with the other hand yanked the middle finger of the hand he'd touched her with almost all the way back to an inch from the top of his wrist; it took her one second. The adventurer fell to his knees in pain, jammed into the tight space between his seat and the one in front, and opened his mouth to scream, but before the order reached his brain Makina had already insisted, finger to lips, shhhhh, eh; she let him get used to the idea that a woman had jacked him up and then whispered, leaning close, I don't like being pawed by fucking strangers, if you can believe it.

The boy couldn't, judging by the way his eyes were bulging.

You crossing over to find a gig? Makina asked.

The boy nodded emphatically.
Then you’ll need every finger you’ve got, won’t you? Cause you can’t cook or pick with your tootsies, now, can you?

The boy shook his head no less emphatically.

So, Makina continued. Listen up, I’m going to let you go and you’re going to curl up with your little friend back there, and I swear on all your pain that if you even so much as think about me again, the only thing that hand’s going to be good for is wiping ass.

The boy opened his mouth but now it was Makina who shook her head.

You believe me? she asked, and as she did so pressed his finger a little farther back. You don’t believe me. You believe me?

Something in the boy’s tears told Makina he believed her. She released him and watched as he staggered back to his seat. She heard him sniveling for a while and his friend going Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit, over and over; in the meantime she let herself be lulled by the sight of the gray city fleeing past in the opposite direction.

It was nighttime when she awoke. The boy’s whimpering had stopped; all you could hear was the engine of the bus and the snoring of passengers. Makina could never be sure of what she’d dreamed, in the same way that she couldn’t be sure a place was where the map said it was until she’d gotten there, but she had the feeling she’d dreamed of lost cities: literally, lost cities inside other lost cities, all ambulating over an impenetrable surface.

She looked out at the country mushrooming on the other side of the glass. She knew what it contained, its colors, the penury and the opulence, hazy memories of a less cynical time, villages emptied of men. But on contemplating the tense stillness of the night, the darkness dotted here and there with sparks, on sensing that insidious silence, she wondered, vaguely, what the hell might be festering out there: what grows and what rots when you’re looking the other way. What’s going to appear? she whispered to herself, pretending that as soon as they passed that lamppost, or that one, or that one, she’d see what it was that had been going on in the shadows. Maybe a whole slew of new things, maybe even some good things; or maybe not. Not even in make-believe did she get her hopes up too high.

The youngsters kept their distance the remainder of the trip. When the bus stopped at gas stations they waited for Makina to get off first and then cautiously emerged, like fugitives, and returned to their seats before she did. They crossed the entire country without one comment on the view.
Finally the bus reached the end of the land, at almost midnight the following day. A string of hotels facing the river was doing well off the mass exodus. Makina cruised around wondering how she’d find Mr. Double-U’s contact, but couldn’t discern any glance of recognition so decided to go into one of the hotels. She asked for a bed, paid, and they pointed to a door on the first floor but gave her no key. On entering she saw why. It was a very sizeable room with fifteen or twenty bunks on which were piled people of many tongues: girls, families, old folks, and, more than anything else, lone men, some of them still just boys. She closed the door and looked for a space in another room, but found them all equally overcrowded.

She asked for the bathroom. There were just two per floor, one for women and one for men. She went into the women’s to take the shower she’d been needing the whole long road from the Big Chilango. She’d barely been able to take birdbaths at the gas stations. She’d scrubbed her armpits, neck, and face, taken off her pants to shake them out. Once she was almost left behind because she took so long drying herself at the hand dryer. Now she could finally wash all over, and didn’t mind that there was no hot water in the hotel shower; it was the same in her hometown. As she was soaping herself she heard someone else come into the bathroom, heard the same someone take two steps and stop, heard them deliberating and heard their hands dip into Makina’s rucksack and rootle through her things. She poked her head out. It was a woman in her second youth; she looked tired. She had Makina’s lipstick in one hand and started to apply it and didn’t stop despite the fact that Makina was watching her and the woman could see she was. She watched her gussy up. She did it slowly and confidently, slid the stick from one side to the other of each lip and then swooped it up as if she’d come to the edge of a cliff, smacked her lips together to even out the color, puckered them for an air kiss. When she was done, still staring into the mirror, the woman said Me? I tell you, I’m gonna start off on the right foot; don’t know if makeup will help but at least no one can say I showed up scruffy, you know? And only then did she turn to look at Makina. You look very pretty, Makina said. It’ll all go great, you’ll see. The woman smiled, said Thanks, hon, put the lipstick back and versed.

After her shower she went back to wandering the rooms where those in flight sweated out the night. Many were sleeplessly waiting for their contact to show and tell them it was time. She deciphered a letter for a very old man who couldn’t read, in which his son explained how to find him once he’d crossed. She taught a boy how to say Soap in anglo and explained to another that, as far as she’d been told, you weren’t allowed to cook
on the sidewalk over there. There were traders, too, who’d just crossed back the other way and slept with their arms around bundles of clothes or toys they’d brought to sell.

She versed to the street. Small groups walked the length of the line, moving farther from the glimmer of the northern city till they found their point of departure. Among them she saw the two boys from the bus negotiating the price of crossing with a couple of men. The men retreated a moment to consult together, talking anglo so the others wouldn’t understand. Should we just take ‘em? asked the first, and the other said Let ‘em wait, too bad if they’re in a hurry. Plus, word is that security is tight. For real? For real, Damn, then we really should take ‘em, or act like we are: got another little group’ll pay us more if we cross ‘em right now, Let’s put these scrubs out as bait and get the others over. Just what I was thinking. That’s what they said, in anglo tongue, and Makina heard it as she sidled up and past them. She kept on going and when she got to where the boys were said Watch it, without turning toward them. The one who had touched her flinched, but the other seemed to realize that Makina was talking about something else, not about what a badass she was. Watch it, they’re out to screw you; I was you I’d find someone else, she said and kept on. The youngsters looked at the men, the men guessed Makina had said something, both parties swiftly saw the deal was off, and the men went to find new clients.

She walked up and down along the riverbank until the night waned; then she sat at the water’s edge to scan the horizon as she ate one last hunk of brittle, sweet and thick with peanut salt, and just as the sun began to rise she saw a light flicker meaningfully on the other side. Against the clear dawn glow she made out a man and saw that she was the one he was signaling to, so she raised an arm and waved it from side to side. The man switched off his light and went to get something from a truck parked a few feet away. He came back with an enormous inner tube, like from a tractor, tossed it into the water, climbed inside and began to cross the river, propelling himself forward with a tiny oar he’d brought along. As he made his way across, Makina could begin to distinguish the features of the silhouetted man: his skin had the dark polish of long hours spent in the sun, a short salt-and-pepper beard softened his face, in the center of which a large nose, slightly hooked, jutted out; he wore a white shirt darkened by the water scaling his torso, and he carried his own rucksack. Though he gave the impression of being short, as soon as he emerged from the river she saw that he was at least two hands taller than her. And wiry. Every muscle in his arms and neck seemed trained for something specific, something strenuous.
Hey there, he said as soon as he was out of the water. So you’re going over for a lil land, I hear.

Ha, said Makina, land’s the one thing we got enough of. I’m going for my bro, he’s the stupid sap who went over for a little land.

Chucho, said the man, holding out a hand.

Makina, she reciprocated. The man’s skin was weather-beaten but pleasing to the touch, warm even though he’d only just versed from the water.

Chucho took a pack of cigarettes from his bag, lit two and gave one to Makina. She inhaled deeply, held the smoke in her lungs – in her head she could see it spiraling gaily – and exhaled.

How’d you recognize me? she asked.

They sent me a picture, full body shot.

For a moment Makina thought he’d make some comment about her looks: You’re even cuter in the flesh, or What a tasty surprise, or A sight for sore eyes, or any of that oafishness that makes men feel they’re being original, but Chucho just kept smoking, face to the dawn.

Wouldn’t it be better to wait till it’s dark again? she said. Wouldn’t it be too easy for them to spot us now?

Nah, they’re tied up somewhere else, he said, winked at her and added I got my contacts.

They finished their smokes and then he said Alright, we’re off. He pulled another small oar from his pack and handed it to Makina, pushed the tube back in the water and helped Makina get in in front of him.

The first few feet were easy. Makina could still touch bottom and felt his legs tangle with hers as they advanced; she even, before things got rough, felt him lean in close and sniff her hair, and she was glad she’d had the chance to shower. But suddenly the riverbed ducked away and an icy current began to push their feet away like a living thing, relentless. Row, Chucho said; Makina already was but the tube was being tugged into the current as though adrift. Row, repeated Chucho, this is going to be a bitch. Hardly had he spoken when a torrent of water bounced them out, flipping the tube. Suddenly the world turned cold and green and filled with invisible water monsters dragging her away from the rubber raft; she tried to swim, kicking at whatever was holding her but couldn’t figure out which side was up or where Chucho had gone. She didn’t know how long she struggled frantically, and then the panic subsided, and she intuited that it made no difference which way she headed or how fast she went, that in the end she’d wind up where she needed to be. She smiled. She felt herself smile. That was when the sound of breaking water replaced the green silence. Chucho dragged her out by the pants with both hands: they’d reached the opposite bank and the inner tube was swirling away in the current as if it had urgent business to attend to.
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They lay on the shore, spent and panting. It had hardly been more than a few dozen yards, but on staring up at the sky Makina thought that it was already different, more distant or less blue. Chucho stood, scanned the city at their backs and said Well, now, next part’s easier.