

We Were Animals

Rosa Navarrete

A RESTING SPOT

IF MY MOTHER WAS AFRAID, SHE DIDN'T SHOW IT. She made everything a game for me and my little sister Lily. We were now in Central America, miles away from Peru. It was a full day of walking. We were tired. That's when we met Eduardo, a man supposedly of Christian faith. He'd let us sleep in his home for the night. Eduardo hailed a taxi and told my mother he'd return for her friend Carmen afterwards. Eduardo instructed the taxi driver to take us to his home, but he didn't give an address. "Its a few miles up" was all he said.

My mother sat with her back to the driver. Eduardo sat across her and put Lily on his lap and spoke to her in a baby voice. Cumbia played on the radio. The driver leaned into my mother's ear and whispered so that Eduardo couldn't hear, "Do you know where you're going?" She whispered back, "No." Eduardo was singing for Lily, but she was too tired to smile. I sat next to mother, near the window, drawing on the glass with my breath. It was all jungle mosquito land everywhere. The taxi driver told her we were headed into a region where children are abducted and killed for their organs. "A farm for the black market," he whispered. The taxi man told her what to do. My mother held onto me and she asked my sister if she wanted to sit on her lap. *Te ves cansadita mi amor.* "You look sleepy," she said. Lily leaped off Eduardo and into my mother's arms.

Eduardo told the taxi driver where to stop. There was nothing there. "My house is up this dirt path," he announced. Mother smiled and nodded. "You first," she said and waited for him. He slid the van door open, jumped off, and he extended his arms for Lily. "Give her to me." My mother held us tight and braced herself as the taxi driver sped up and swerved around - the tires screeched and burned as if playing chase with the wind. We didn't fall out. He drove us back into town. My mom put us aside and slid the door closed. The taxi driver yelled, "You must really be careful in this city!"

Carmen was waiting on a bench. The taxi driver offered his home. Both my mom and Carmen agreed it was the best choice. He took us up another road, and there were houses everywhere. My mother breathed in and said, "Thank you." But she wasn't talking to anybody in the van.

HE THREW OUR PASSPORTS OUT THE WINDOW

The taxi man yelled, "Gorillas!" and I looked over, expecting to see big monkeys jump out from the bushes. Instead, I saw men wearing black masks. They were holding big guns and blocking the road. The taxi man told my mother to give him all of our passports. She obeyed without question. He threw our passports out the window before we reached the Gorillas.

Lily was sleeping in my mother's arms. I was sitting next to Carmen. The Gorillas yelled, and the taxi driver put his hands up. They opened the van in a matter of seconds. One big Gorilla spit as he yelled. I didn't know why they were mad. We were just sitting there, doing nothing.

Another Gorilla looked through my mother's bag. He was looking for something, but he only found make-up. He laughed to the others and waved his gun around my mother's beautiful face. She didn't blink. She held her breath. She waited. My sister woke up, turned around and looked at the Gorilla. "Why are you screaming?" Lily was fussy. Her sandals and little feet were brown with dirt and rain. Mother patted her back. Lily burrowed her head into mother's neck. The Gorilla threw her bag into the bushes. Two more Gorillas came in and looked through the van. They poked with guns and Carmen held me close as if I belonged to her. She was beautiful, and she was also afraid. They slammed the door shut, disappointed that they didn't find what they were looking for. They tapped the van, and the taxi man lowered his hands and drove on. We rested for just one night.



ARRIVAL

After weeks of obstacles, sacrifices and finding people willing to help us along the way, we finally reached Mexico. The three of us were inside a large tire, floating on a river, being pulled by the Coyote on the other end. My mom sang to us so that the black water wouldn't scare us. I watched the Coyote closely. I had waited the whole day to meet him, but he didn't look like a Coyote at all, and he didn't howl. He was a Coyote who pulled rope. Carmen was last.

We got into another van. Inside it were all the people who had crossed: wet, exhausted and dirty. My sister and I looked like little monkeys. We were dirt from head to toe, and we were small -- just three and five.

My mother leaned on Carmen for support and smiled at me. Her smile told me we were almost there. We were going to see Dad. I got happy. Lily and I started playing but the Coyote told us to be quiet. My mom said we should play the quiet game. The winner would get chocolate.

The van was dark for a long time. I thought I was going blind, so mother told me to close my eyes. I closed my eyes and pretended I was dreaming but the noises wouldn't let me sleep. There were a lot of people in the van with us; one man breathed like a Bull. After some time, all the people in the van began to breathe the same. In and out. It felt like we were one huge animal trapped within the darkness, waiting to run out into the wilderness. We waited, like a deep secret wanting to be let go.

The doors swung open to reveal my father. Tall buildings painted the sky behind him. You could tell by his face that he thought we wouldn't be there, but we were. Lily and I jumped and hung on him like monkeys on a tree. We laughed, and he cried a stream on our dirty dresses. My mother and Carmen came out rubbing their eyes. For the first time in the entire trip, my mother cried. She embraced us, and we were together again.

NOW

I am a proud American Citizen. I love this country. It has provided opportunities beyond anything my family could ever imagine. However, that does not mean I will denounce or forget my roots. I was born in Peru. I was once an illegal immigrant. When I hear negative comments towards immigrants, it hurts, as if I came here to steal something from someone. That's not why my parents came to this country. They came so that I could be better. They worked hard so that my sister and I could have the opportunities that many women in our country don't have. Our country is doing much better than it was in the eighties, but it still doesn't compare to the United States. In order to assist with the overwhelming problems people face in Peru, I have to start here. This is what I know. I strive for change. Men and women put their lives in danger for a dream. For a promise. Some make it. Some don't. There has to be a better way.

We were animals on the trip. Lily and I were little monkeys. We met Gorillas, Coyotes, and a Bull. We met men who were good and some who were not so good. Who could we tell? Nobody. You can't tell anybody. You have to pretend like it never happened.

At our first American school, others looked at us like we were animals. We are not animals. I do not appreciate people looking at other human beings as if they are animals. We are people. We want a better life. Just like you.

We were animals in your eyes. And in our eyes we thought -- we are beneath this --- we thought --- just like you, maybe, that we deserved less. But now I know. We are people. You should know, too: We are human beings. ♦