

FLIGHT OF THE BLACKBIRD

One summer evening, in the middle of the night, my grandfather, Luis Alberto Ibarra, sent for his seven offspring and prepared to dispatch them to the hereafter with a Colt 45. This was their punishment, he said, as he lined up his children by order of height, for the misfortune of having a whore for a mother.

My uncles and aunts, shivering in their bedclothes, stood quietly where they were placed; all except my father, the youngest of the siblings, who began to cry.

Grandfather Luis was a neat and elegantly dressed man; a successful textile merchant with a penchant for pince-nez and pocket watches. His business took him out of town twenty-two days of the month, and though he spent the majority of his hours on the road, he enjoyed his work, for it afforded him ample time to contemplate his good fortune. He had a ravishing wife, a lovely house and seven healthy children – four of whom would one day take over his textile empire.

“When you are older,” he promised his sons, “I will take you on the Condor Express.”

“What is the Condor, father?”

“Only the most marvellous invention! A sleek bullet of technological perfection – you should see her – glimmers like a bird on silver wings, but she flies like a demon.”

“*Luis*,” warned grandmother.

“When you are older,” he continued, ignoring Ikela, “I will show you the demon in action.”

To his daughters he promised nothing. But whenever he remembered, he brought them something from his travels: a little trinket or a sweet.

On this fateful day – the day of this story – grandfather only pretended to leave for his business trip. He arose at 4:00 AM, packed a valise, kissed his wife on the cheek, and a few hours later, tiptoed back into the house to find Grandmother Ikela in the embrace of another man.

No one is quite sure what transpired between my grandparents. What is known is that Luis called for his progeny, lined them up in a row and threatened to kill them. Despite his accusations, my adulteress grandmother stood like a statue, while seven pairs of eyes burned into the back of her nightgown.

“What are you waiting for?” she said to her husband. “Go ahead and shoot me. But why are the children out of their beds? This is between us, old fool.”

“They are here so they can see the tramp they have for a mother!” he roared, the gun shaking in his hand.

“What’s the matter Luis; don’t you know how to use your pistol? Tell me you didn’t call us here so we can witness your incompetence? Now either kill me or release me so I can go back to bed.”

“The only place you are going is to hell, Blackbird,” spat my grandfather, his grip tightening around the Colt.

Ikela was 6 when grandfather first laid eyes on her as she shopped in the market. Her shiny blue-black hair shimmered in the sun like the feathers of an exquisite bird. Luis was reminded of the Legend of the Blackbird.

The story goes that the devil once took on the shape of a blackbird. He flew into St. Benedict's face, causing the saint to be tortured by an intense sexual desire for a beautiful girl he'd seen only once. In order to save himself, Benedict tore off his clothes and jumped into a thorn bush.

Luis was so smitten when he saw Ikela, he ran out of his store and followed my grandmother, trying to work up the courage to say hello. He knew then that if didn't conquer his fear, the image of her blue hair would haunt him until he went mad with desire like St. Benedict.

Ikela came from a humble family of cattle ranchers. The only girl in a line of five boys, tall and fearless, she learned to ride as hard, climb as high and swim as far as her brothers. Her mother had died in childbirth and although Ignacio, Ikela's father, cherished all his children, sometimes he forgot she wasn't one of his sons.

Ignacio's sisters rebuked him for this gross oversight, noting that the beautiful girl would never find a suitor if she was riding all day, ruining her hands and skin from being in the sun.

"Outdoor activities are for your boys. You must not let her grow wild, Ignacio," they advised. "In order to find a good husband, Ikela must do the cleaning and washing and learn to cook. She must feed the chickens and milk the cows. She must sweep the house and do the gardening. She must go to market and learn to haggle and negotiate with the sellers. She must care for every living thing in this house, ensuring that all your needs are met, dear brother. That is the job of a good woman."

Until now her father and brothers had done their share in the house without complaint. Upon being told that she would now be responsible for all of it, Ikela felt as if

she had been put into a sack full of stones and thrown into the water. She wanted to ride horses and swim in the river and feel the wind against her face. But her father would not budge. As much as it hurt him to see his daughter moping around the house, looking longingly out the window at her brothers, he knew in his heart that it was for her own good.

The only chore she enjoyed was the shopping; the only time she was allowed to take out the horses. Pinning up her long hair with a brown comb and putting on a shawl, Ikela looked forward to those long afternoons of freedom. She took her time choosing the weekly provisions and instead of haggling, she smiled her best smile and that was enough to win over the sellers.

That is where Luis first laid eyes on her; so besotted with the pretty girl, he set out an elaborate plan for conquering her. He noted the times when she arrived at the market. He remembered her favourite stalls and what fruits she liked. He followed her, unnoticed, hiding behind tomatoes and cantaloupes.

He cornered her near some mangoes one afternoon. Taking off his hat, he introduced himself, asked politely after her father and family, and invited her to have a cup of coffee with him at the nearby *pasteleria*.

As customary, Ikela refused and went straight home to tell her father.

“What a strange man, papa. He has been leering at me from behind the vegetable stands for weeks. He thinks I’m stupid and can’t see him.”

“Luis Alberto Ibarra is a successful merchant, Ikela. Don’t be disrespectful. We should consider his intentions,” said Ignacio,

“But he is so old!”

“He is a decent suitor and rich too. He would be a good provider. He can give you many things. Don’t you want a big house and servants?”

But my grandmother wanted more. In fact she wanted so many things that sometimes her chest felt as if it would explode from longing.

Ignacio arranged for the daughter of a farmhand to act as a chaperone on the days his daughter went to market. Adelida flirted with the man who sold lemons and was told by Ignacio to sit at the back of the *pasteleria*, while my grandparents sat drinking their hot chocolate. Luis talked about his business, explaining in great detail what his textiles companies produced and how much money they made, while Ikela sat primly with her hands in her lap, waiting for the hour to be up, so she could ride home on her horse.

A colleague told Luis that all women loved to be wooed, so every week he brought Ikela a little gift: chocolates, flowers and perfume, but she showed no interest. He tried music, trinkets, beautiful silk scarves, all to no avail.

Then, one day, Luis gave Ikela a pair of old castanets he found in the bottom of a trunk.

“Did you get those on your travels?” she asked, tracing the etchings gingerly with one finger.

“I acquired them in Sevilla,” said Luis, who had never been to Spain. “Here,” he said thrusting them into her hand. “I brought them especially for you. They were a gift. From Dona Otilia to the finest Matador the world has ever seen — the valiant Juan Miguel de la Sierra.”

“Please, tell the story,” said the girl, breathless.

“The legend goes that upon seeing the Bella Dona in the front row of the stadium, the Matador felt his heart rise up and overtake his chest. Her skin was smooth like honey, her lips as dewy rose petals.

“Shielding his eyes against the harsh sun, Juan Miguel de la Sierra chanced another look toward the stands. At that precise moment she turned and he found himself staring into her perfect almond eyes. His heart threatened mutiny. In an instant he was down on his knees presenting her with the castanets he kept wrapped in a kerchief for luck. The castanets had belonged to his mother, the gypsy songstress Leonora Davilla.

‘Accept these as my humble gift,’ he said.

Otilia reached out with her white-gloved fingers, but then shook her head.

‘Will you at least come tomorrow and see me?’ he asked, but his words were lost in the noise of the crowd. When he looked up she was gone.

“Otilia was at the *corrida* the following day again in the front row, her ivory hair combs catching the light.

Juan Miguel tried to concentrate, but he could only think about her eyes.

The second time he saw her, he imagined she was covered from head to toe in black lace, with only her delicate throat exposed.

The third day he felt he was drowning. He was the helpless sea and she was the voluptuous pull of the moon.

On the fourth day, he no longer cared about bullfighting, only about seeing her face.

On the fifth day, Otilia came accompanied by a handsome man and the Matador felt the stirrings of something primal in his scrotum. He watched as the stranger leaned in so closely he was practically touching Otilia’s lips through the mantilla.

Juan Miguel's nemesis in the ring that day was none other than Negro Pablito, the fiercest bull in all of Spain. The crowd shouted its approval, but he only heard the blood in his own ears. Half-heartedly he waved the red cloth. Negro Pablito responded by snorting and kicking up his hooves.

Juan Miguel glanced toward the stands to see if she was watching, but Otilia was smiling at her companion, her teeth like little pearl daggers.

Temporary blinded by a mixture of hot tears and afternoon sun, the Matador stomped his black boots as hard as he could, defying the already incensed bull, who had been waiting for this opportunity. As he turned toward the stands to look at his faithless lover once more, Negro Pablito made his move and the Matador took a horn to his already shattered heart.

There was little anyone could do. As Juan Miguel lay dying in the dirt of the bullring, he called over an assistant and placed the castanets in his hand.

'Take these and give them to that woman you see there,' he whispered. 'And tell her, tell her...'

"What did he say Luis Alberto?" said Ikela, tears streaming down her face.

Here my devious grandfather smiled, refusing to divulge the dying words of the matador. "Marry me first," he said. "Marry me and I will regale you with a lifetime of stories."

From that day on, everything changed between them. Instead of presents, Luis gave Ikela stories. There was something about a well-delivered tale that made her face come alive. Luis forgot about giving her useless presents and instead focused upon the

recitation of stories, poems, bits of gossip and even conversations he overheard on trains. When he talked of distant and exotic places, she took on a dreamy look.

Sometimes like the virgin Theresa, she bordered on the ecstatic.

You see, my grandmother was possessed by a severe case of wanderlust. She was certain the grass was greener in other lands, and far more interesting than the same boring trees and rivers she saw every day. She was tired of the sight of the southern mountains that were as familiar to her as her own two hands. In her dreams, Ikela visited places where there was ice and snow and ladies with golden hair lived in castles that were so tall they went up until they reached the very heavens.

“If you marry me, I will show you these things,” Luis promised. “Our lives will be one adventure after another. We will have porters and monogrammed luggage. We will ride camels and elephants.”

“And where will we go?” said Ikela taking his hand.

“To Egypt, to the pyramids. To uncover the secrets of the Sphinx.”

“And after that?”

“The Taj Mahal where I will buy you rubies.”

“And then?”

“To Africa, for lions and bears and zebras. And after that my love, we will go home and make a baby. Don’t you want to make a baby with me Ikela?”

And the dreaming would stop for kisses.

My grandparents’ wedding day was the happiest of Luis’ life. He turned to look at his treasure, resplendent in a simple white gown with a wreath of delicate hyacinths on her

dark hair. He was so taken by the power of his desire that his knees almost buckled underneath him. *That woman will be the end of me*, he thought.

He purchased a *quinta* for his bride – a large country house surrounded by acres of land and a little peaceful brook. He bought cattle, horses, pigs and chickens and servants to take care of it all, just as Ikela's father had promised. Then he set about doing the two things he wanted most in his life: starting a family and expanding his business.

Within two years, they had three children: two boys and a girl. Ikela tried to tell her husband that three healthy and beautiful tots were enough for anyone. If they didn't stop, they would never be able to visit the lovely places he'd promised.

But Luis had his own dreams. He would sire an empire of strong sons to help him in his business. He continued to woo my grandmother with stories. With each elaborate tale, a new child was conceived.

And the children kept coming.

After their fifth, Ikela began to lock her bedroom door. It only made Luis more desperate. Relishing the new challenge, he purchased atlases and maps, travel books and globes and scattered them around the corridors of their house, hoping to entice her.

After their seventh child, Ikela hired a builder to extend the nursery into a separate wing. It was here that she spent most of her time hiding from her husband, her days a flurry of children, nannies and activities, but, sadly for my grandmother, few adventures.

Ikela watched Luis come and go from the windows of her bedroom: the same windows that looked out onto the beautiful panoramic view of verdant hills, cattle and horses.

When Luis heard the whispers about his wife he couldn't believe it. Not his darling Ikela. But just to be sure, he started spending more time at home. He noticed things he hadn't before. Had she always worn a silver rosary? He didn't remember her being overly religious. She certainly seemed different than he remembered. Sometimes she sang songs to the younger children, her voice so full of longing and loneliness, it made him feel empty inside. Funny, he didn't know that his wife liked to sing. He wondered what else she wasn't telling him. But still he could not bring himself to believe that his beloved wife could betray him. Besides she never wanted to be touched by him. Why would she want the hands of a strange man upon her? No, she was definitely not the type.

"You lying viper, you harlot, you whore! How dare you!" said Luis, waving the Colt at her. "What kind of mother, what kind of *woman* are you?"

"The kind who needs a real man, not a desiccated dinosaur."

"Like the parasite I found you with? That low-life, scum-bucket, bible salesman? I should have listened to my mother. She always said you were *common*."

"Eduardo is *not* a bible salesman Luis. He is an organist from the church and as I told you before... we were *praying!*"

"If you were both praying, my *darling* wife, why were you the only one on your knees?"

The terrible accusation hung in the silence for what seemed like an eternity. No one uttered a single word: neither a protest nor a plea. The only sound was the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

Then my father, Diego, started to cry.

“Stop your hysterics this instant,” shouted Luis turning towards him. “Or I’ll shoot you first.”

At that moment, the Colt leapt out of his hand as if by its own accord, and fired a bullet.

At precisely the same time the gun went off, (grandfather was later to say it was the hand of God) little Diego, struggling to breathe, fell to the floor, just missing the bullet’s trajectory. It lodged itself instead in the clock inches from where he had been standing, stopping time precisely at 12:42.

“*Dios Mio!*” cried Luis, finding himself entangled in Ikela’s hair. “Release me woman! Can’t you see you’ve made me shoot our son?”

Yanking and tearing away at the thick tresses until he was free, my grandfather pointed the Colt at his own temple and offered to kill himself if it made God change his mind and bring back Diego instead.

In an amazing feat of cooperation that was never again to be repeated, Oslo, Orlando and Otterdam, the three eldest boys, ran toward their patriarch and wrestled him to the ground. Oslo yanked his hair, while Orlando took magnificent swipes at the old man’s knees. Trembling and foaming at the mouth, Luis muttered blasphemy after blasphemy, threatening to shoot his progeny in quick succession if they did not release him.

Quick as anything Otterdam stole the gun away and flung it out the window. It fired a round into the portico, narrowly missing the cook who was eavesdropping, her ear pressed against the patio door.

Meanwhile, my father was prematurely pronounced dead by his sisters, who raised-up such cacophony that it awoke Ikela from her stupor. She found the children weeping

and holding hands in a circle, while her husband lay on the floor; her sons like Lilliputians sitting on his chest.

Ikela's curses were almost a relief after the silence, the words like incantations, each one growing louder and louder until the walls themselves shook from the power of her rage.

It was then that my father chose to make his re-entry into the world. Sitting up, the bewildered tot rubbed his eyes.

The family stopped mourning and turned to stare at him, uncertain if he was a dream, a ghost or a demon.

"I'm *hungry*," Diego announced fluttering his eyelashes. "Why are you all crying?"

The death and resurrection of her youngest proved too much for my grandmother's nerves. She fainted dead away. While her industrious daughters promptly revived her with strong smelling salts, Luis went to fetch the doctor.

For the next few weeks the occupants tiptoed around the house like it was Sunday. Medication and bed rest was prescribed for Ikela's migraines. She lay quiet and pale in her dark room with a cloth over her eyes, while Luis rounded up the children and the servants and gave a speech about compassion, forgiveness and most importantly, about the need to maintain secrets.

This was a family matter, he told them and they should *never* mention the incident with the pistol to anyone, not even amongst themselves. Effective immediately, the servants were to cease whispering in the hallways and the children were to carry on making noise as before.

“Not one more word. The subject is permanently off-limits,” said Luis as one of his daughters raised her arm to ask a question. “You are not even to *think* about it. Do you understand?”

They did. Taking their father’s words to heart, my aunts and uncles learned to hold their tongues; hiding their secrets under their pillows like sweets.

Luis hired a team of builders to erect a brick fence around the perimeter of his property and had the doors and windows barred, so the purple mountains and green grass that Ikela has known all her life, were now permanently obstructed by wrought iron crosses.

“For protection,” he said. A man is supposed to defend those he loves from intruders, even from themselves if need be.”

He put his remaining energy back into his work, doubling his business trips so that he was always away from home.

As for Ikela, some people said she never recovered. Overnight the world lost a beauty and gained a monster. All that remained of her were her tresses, although no one was allowed to see her crowning glory. It lived permanently on top of her head like a snake, coiffed and coiled and ready to strike at a moment’s notice. She even began to take on asp like characteristics, her eyes cold and her cheekbones angular. A doting mother before, she now delighted in the retribution and humiliation of her loved ones, hoarding their shortcomings like poisonous ammunition to use later.

She left the storytelling and singing to the nannies and locked herself away from the children with the same determination she once used to keep her husband away.

One night, a few years after the pistol incident, my grandmother, Ikela Echevarria de Ibarra, threw wide the only doors in the house that weren't barred and stepped out onto the ledge.

Those who saw her said she stood like a magnificent statue, the winds picking up her hair and raising it behind her like gossamer wings.

Legend has it my grandmother stretched out her arms and took flight, a flock of blackbirds pulling her by the hair through the night sky, until she disappeared into the darkness.