

Luz De La Concha

By Bruce Payne

In 1937 Joe Dimagio hit his first grand slam. El presidente de Mexico, Lazáro Cárđinas, nationalized his country's oil production; he threw out Standard oil. It was also the year Gabino Montoya touched his first whale.

Gabino Montoya recounted his long day on the Sea of Cortez. It was his third day without Tuna. Evening emerged, Gambino looked up into the twilight. It was his favorite time. The day's half dark weaves into the day's last light like an old man holding a new baby, one comes one goes. Wind had kept a dull roar in his ears the whole day, now it felt sweet to hear it whisper on glassy water. Gabino wormed his toes in the cool beach sand, leaning against his panga; his tired dark eyes swept Baia Tortuga. No pangas approached; he was always the last in.

A lazy flight of pelicans returned to their rook. Gabino's thoughts turned to Octavio's cantina; he could almost taste enchiladas, hear the laughter of his drunk pescadoros. Their loose tongues would tell where they had fished, what color feather lures and what they caught and lost. He would say nothing, not tonight. He would drink two cervezas only then to his hammock and the sweet whore of sleep.

He tossed his sandals in the panga, rolled up his pants then jury-rigged the anchor line into harness. Why, he he asked himself, pulling in a huge breath, is the worst chore the last? He strained and grunted, plowing his panga through sand till it rested three meters above the high water mark. He dropped to his knees, again leaning the hull. Gabino rolled a cigarette and lit it. With the welcome first puff came the image of the baby humpback. He had actually touched it; two --no four times. The baby humpback had surfaced beside its mother not a meter from his panga. The baby rolled on its side, its curious unblinking eye stared at right at him. Gabino played with the baby's pectoral fin; the mother seemed to approve. Neither saw the thrasher shark's dark figure streak up from the depths. The shark ripped off a piece of the baby's fluke then disappeared into the blue light shafts. He knew the shark would return with others. Gabino lifted his turtle harpoon; when the shark returned he sunk three quick thrusts to its head. Mother and her baby quietly sounded. Gabino should have left the shark for the birds but he thought of the widow Zaragosa in the village with three children and dragged the shark into his panga.

Gabino blew lazy smoke into the still air. Three days in a row, not one tuna. A pangero had to row or sail twenty kilometers north and east; a distance not possible against noon wind swells but he today he

went even further.

The sun dropped behind two western peaks. Unfamiliar sounds roused Gabino. High on the cliff, through the curl of his smoke, he recognized the irritating bleat of goats. His eyes swept along the top muerto cliff; there she was, a beautiful silhouette in the pink flush of light on the brow. She looked down at him. He'd know Mirella Delgado's thin willowy figure anywhere.

Mirella waved. She had been there last night and the evening before.

Gabino lifted his sombrero, calling up to her, "Ola, Mirella. You look lovely, as always."

She waved again then turned. Her skirt pulsed with her sandals, her long braid flew as she chased a kid. She reappeared and paused one last time before a man's figure took her place; he did not wave and was soon gone. Jaime Delgado, her ass of a father.

How long had they been man and woman? Gabino would turn twenty-six in July. Only yesterday they had shared the tiny desk in the one-room school. Gabino still kept

the math book they shared and wrote notes on the margin. He could still hear their voices repeating multiplication tables. Other boys had tried but could never make her laugh or smile. Only he could bring that light into her dark lustrous eyes. He would mime and mimic the teacher under his breath till hilarious tears fell from her eyes. She had to cover her mouth. Oh, Gabino suddenly recalled, the sweet breath of orange blossoms in her dark silky hair.

Gabino looked back up on the cliff. He knew she would not return. His face fell a little, like the drunk outside the cantina hoping, searching for an abandoned drink. Gabino could survive a week on hope. He'd see her Sunday at Mass. Who could explain the mysteries of childhood attraction? Attraction which now had traveled from his heart to a place below his belt.

Jorge Romero thumped Gabino's shoulder with a playful slap.

"A good day, Negrito?"

"Terrible." Gabino sighed,

"One Shark?" That's all?"

"Full moon"

"The others did well." Even in half-light Jorge noted windburn in Gabino's face. His dark skin looked old and dry. Sometime in the fourth grade Gabino had grown tall, thick in the chest and shoulders. Gabino never spoke of money or women except to him. Gabino's parents had died in the hurricane of 1932.

Families in the village asked him to live with them; Gabino politely refused. Independent as an eagle, people said, you could ask Gabino anything but no one could tell him a thing. Gabino was always quick with a smile or a few pesos to lend if he could help. When Gabino spoke, his eyes connected with the listener as if to drive truth into his soul.

Evenings Jorge waited for Gabino, who would be too tired to clean his catch. Jorge cleaned the fish and iced them for Mr. Takahashi in the morning. Gabino would be on the water before sunrise while the others finished breakfast. Jorge shook his head. "There is no market for shark."

Gabino snuffed out his cigarette, dodging imaginary punches from his friend. "Mira-lo, Jorge."

Jorge whistled through his teeth, "Cabrón!"

Jorge pressed two fingers on his tongue; his shrill whistle brought half a dozen boys. Gabino handed each a peso. "Niños," he pointed south to a light under the cleaning palapa. He motioned to a beefy nine-year-old. "Pablito, take the shark. You. Pepé; help him, it's heavy." The boys struggled with the tiburón while Gabino emptied his clay water botellón then lit his lantern. "vamos," he grunted then balanced oars on his shoulder. He gathered more tackle with a free hand, "Jorge?"

Qué, 'migo?

"I've been thinking--"

"I bet it hurt," Jorge chuckled.

"You think Mirella Delgado would go to the fiesta dance Saturday?"

Jorge hefted bait nets on his shoulders. "With you? No es posiblé, negrito."

"Porqué?"

"You don't have the cojones to face her father."

"Her father!" Gabino grumbled, "A man who allows his beautiful daughter to smell like a goat?"

"You are stupider than I thought, negrito. You don't know there is another man? This man calls at their hacienda."

"Chuy Medina?"

"Not sure, the talk in the mercado points to an older man."

"What can he give her I can't?"

Jorge skirted the question. "So now you kill sharks?"

"Food," pendejo, "for the widow and her niños. The meat is good and with the skin she can make belts and wallets to sell in La Paz." Gabino repeated his incident with the whales, pointing his chin toward the island.

"You were lucky this time," Jorge warned. "You know pangas are too quiet. Pescadores were sometimes killed by surfacing whales, who could not see or hear them. Last March a humpback sank Jaime Cabrera's panga. "How far out did you go?"

"Fourteen, maybe fifteen kilometros."

Jorge paused to shift the nets to his other shoulder. "Wait for the boys."

The boys huffed into the dim light, their chatter broken by giggles. They approached the cleaning palapa; a chorus of laughing men grew louder. Gabino cautioned Jorge with a look.

Twelve pescadores carved their catch; One man stripped gold skin from a dorado to wrap future feather lures. They spoke of bait, wind, currents and birds. The unmarried ones talked of women.

Gabino and Jorge through a swarm of bugs, bending under the palm roof.

"Negrito!" an old man cried, pointing his bloody knife. "Jorge! You're late."

"We worried," Lorenzo Barroso said with a grateful grin."

"How was it today?" Alfredo Ramirez questioned. Ronaldo Garcia wanted to know if the wind and swells had delayed him.

Gabino nodded with a casual, "sí, another bad day."

The boys arrived breathless; three men relieved them of the shark. "Madre de Dios!" Old Sergio Albarán cried. Others stared in shocked silence. Albarán scratched his white whiskers, curious to know to know what caused the large lump in its belly. "God in heaven, Negrito, how far out did you go?"

"Oh," Gabino stalled, "past the island." Gabino sharpened a knife on a whetstone. "The wind and swell were down so I--"

"North?" Albarán pressed, "South?"

"I don't know, past the island," Gabino repeated. He handed a knife to Jorge then sharpened another for himself. The men knew better than to push. Besides, they'd be half drunk in the cantina soon.

"Why the shark?" Hippolito asked, "Takahashi won't buy it."

The others teased. Someone mentioned Javier Alvarez.

"Alvarez," Gabino said with a nasty edge, "that Son-of-a-whore!"

"Better not let him hear you say that, Negrito"

It took seven men to heft the twelve-footer onto the table; two others left to bury gut buckets in the desert. Reynaldo Vasquez started behind the gills, folding and cutting like a surgeon. Heavy Offal poured

onto the table. "Hijola! Mira!" he cried with a curious blink. "Look at his stomach. Something large hit the table with a dull thump. The skinny one they called zipper let out a surprised whistle. "Abalón?"

Abalone lived in shallow kelp beds; kelp beds were on the pacific side of Baja. How could a shark pry an abalone from a rock?

"Mysterioso," Gabino sighed. Old Albarán rinsed the shell in a bucket below. "muy bonita!"

No one had seen an abalone shell half its size; deep, luminescent blue light shined unearthly hues. It was perfect; round as a platter deep as a bowl. Sergio Albarán's finger tips probed tiny figures carved on the outside lip. "Jesús, Maria y Jose."

Gabino stared at the old man's frozen expression. "What, Sergio!"

peculiar chants flowed from Albarán's breast. The men hushed. Gabino broke the silence. "Say something, Sergio."

The old man they all admired was speechless. His dark, pouched eyes were clouded and blank. Albarán continued his weird song. When it ended he rubbed his whiskers mumbling something through broken teeth then turned to Gabino with a slow blink. "May I keep this?"

"Sure." Gabino nodded.

When The Fish were iced, Gabino and Jorge loaded them on a cart pulled by two sleepy burrows; "Ha! Burro!" Jorge cried. The cart plodded, Jorge and Gabino followed in the dark to their village, Los Barriles. Jorge turned to his friend. "Albarán's strange words?" he questioned, "what did they mean?"

"He is an Indian," Gabino said with a shrug, "what do I know..." "he still speaks guiacura."

"But he had a reason. You see the carvings? What does he know?"

Gabino was getting annoyed. "No sé." He changed the subject. "Tonight we drink horchata, he rebuked "four o'clock comes too early for a hangover."

The mix of tobacco, loud music and drunken voices drove Jorge and Gabino to the cantina patio. Gabino rolled another cigarette then leaned back on his chair, sipping rice water sweetened with cinnamon and sugar.

"What thoughts are in your face?" Jorge asked.

"I love her, Jorge. Tell me what to do. Mirella means more to me than my panga, than my own

mother." He crossed himself. "God bless her memory. You feel that way about Celia?"

"No man can love someone that much. Not healthy."

Gabino leaned close then tapped his chest. "She was born to marry me. No one else can give her comfort and strong children. I knew this when I was thirteen."

Jorge gushed with tolerant laugh. "That simple, eh?"

"I have twenty-four-thousand pesos in the bank in La Paz. The outboard motor is almost mine."

Only a handful of fisherman on the peninsula owned the new American outboard motors. Motors which, according to villagers, paid for themselves in a single season; outboard motors increased range to thirty, even forty kilometers. A pescadero could troll into the wind, against the swell; a motor panga could out race a storm and be safe on the beach before the others. "I could troll four or five feathers."

Jorge sipped his drink. "The only gasoline is in La Paz; we would need fifty-liter drums for storage."

"Next week," Gabino said, "we go to La Paz to make a deposit." Startling cries jerked their heads toward the bar. Loud obscenities followed from the Cantina. A brute named Javier Alvarez, -a huge man the villagers called El Brujo- slapped one of the pescadores down on his knees.

"Apologize!" El Brujo yelled, "or I kill you now!"

The man on the floor screamed his sorrow.

El brujo let him go but not before a savage kick and orders to stay out.

Gabino's breath quivered. "Bastard!" He balled his hands into a fist. "Why hasn't some one killed the cockroach?"

Jorge pointed his chin to a dim corner.

Two men sat grinning, amused by the agony on the man's face on the floor. They licked salt and sucked lemon juice from their wrists, slamming shots of tequila. Vulgar photographs from a porn magazine were taped on both corner walls. This was Miguel Arriano's private corner. Miguel and his partner -a man the villagers called chongo, had one function, to keep an eye on Javier, their jefy.

No one could prove it nor would anyone even suggest to the rural police that Javier cultured and sold Marijuana but the village knew it just the same. Javier's tomato fields could never have produced his kind of wealth. No one questioned his six bedroom hacienda, new tractors and trucks. It was accepted that Alvarez' marijuana fields were in the desert behind the mountain, protected by two arroyos on the west end of his tomato fields. Alvarez had a separate well and irrigation system. At night the whole village could hear the pump engine. Alvarez's money bought everything but respect. Father Castro provided a special pew for Alvarez in the church. It was said Alvarez' contributions paid for the new school.

Jorge jabbed Gabino with an elbow. "I know how you can take Mirella to the dance."

"Talk to me."

"I told you. Ask her father."

Gabino rolled his eyes.

Jorge followed with a long laugh. "The worst he can say is no. When a lime is hard, you soften it in the sun."

"So?"

To tell Gabino anything was suicide. "I offer this: get to him through his wife."

"Lupe?"

"Of course, cabrón. Listen. Day after tomorrow when Jaime is in his field and Mirella is with her chivas, go to la Señora with flowers. Say something like what a grand day it is and you want to speak with her husband about taking Mirella to la fiesta."

"Flowers! From the desert; fool."

"Jorge waved a disgusted hand. "You have been too long on the water. You know? The villagers feel sorry for me because they know my best friend is stupid. What they do not know is that you are blind! Look around. It's June, cabrón. The pitaya and cholla are full of blossoms. Pick her a big handful. Take them to her and for Christ's sake smile. Laugh it won't crack your face."

Gabino agreed.

He returned the next evening. The gunnels of Gabino's panga were a quarter-meter above the water line; yellowfin tuna were stacked. His sail luffed in a slack breeze. That morning Mirella kept burning in Gabino's brain. He tried to recall her voice but could not; he tried to remember when they last had a conversation, and could not. Each Sunday he saw her at mass she spoke only with those dark eyes and a sweet smile. Gabino heaved on his oar, repeating new words Jorge had taught him. Proper words, polite, respectful words he would play on Jaime Delgado like a winning hand. Five meters from the beach Jorge swam out in his clothes, picked up the bow line and towed him in.

"Jesu Crtisto!

Gabino let out a rare laugh. Half-moon, half a boat load." He told Jorge about the pink flame of morning, in this same light. "Corta Blanca cove." I first threw my bait net. The sardines were so many. They brought me the most successful day of the year, maybe my best day ever.

Jorge looked down in the hull to confirm the tails. It was not a dream. Fourteen yellow fin tuna, the smallest over twenty kilos.

"I must mark this day on the map of my mind." Gabino said. "Current, wind direction, most important the place where I drifted under the big bird work. "You should have been there, Jorge. Cormorants and pelicans rioted over a the biggest bait boil I've ever seen, chased to the surface by the tuna. Caramba! what a day. In some unexplainable way Gabino knew they would be there tomorrow.

Friday morning came. Gabino's bank balance was beyond any dream. Jorge stepped into his stick hacienda. "You can't go see Lupe in those pants!" He loaned Gabino his new khaki slacks. "Go to La Señora. Now! ándalé! rapido!

Gabino walked the narrow dirt road through the thick agave and mesquite; he felt uneasy with the new words he would use. Turkey vultures perched on the lofty cardón seemed to laugh at him. He gathered pink poppies, mixed them with yellow Pitaya blossoms and red Cholla blossoms till he had a bouquet. Soon he lied to himself with deceptive thoughts of bravado, even convinced himself that he was known and liked by all and, like the salesman in the mercado, he would let it out he was connected in La Paz. "Ah, Señora, Delgado," he practiced, "God made these just for your hacienda." No! It will not work. A little past noon he found himself facing Lupe Delgado outside her door, her thick fingers sticky with maza. "nino," Her round cheeks lifted with a wide surprised smile. "ninito? What a handsome young man." She laughed, "If you wish to grow older that is your business but not I,"

Gabino said something about her still being the lady he knew as a boy. He handed her the bouquet.

Women make such a fuss over flowers. Gabino came to the point.

Lupe listened thoughtfully. "I understand," she nodded, humming a little song, putting the flowers in a vase. "It is reasonable," she granted, "Let me speak with my husband. Come here after dinner, say, around seven?"

Gabino thanked her and left. It was all so simple, he thought. Gabino could not, nor would he try to hide his complete elation. "Jorge Romero," he cried to the desert, "you are a saint."

That evening Gabino sat before Jaime Delgado. Jaime hunched, elbows on his knees; snapped twigs and sticks, todding them into a clay-pot fireplace.

He could not understand it, but Gabino lost any apprehension he had felt before. He looked at Delgado staring into the fire. Jaime would not look at him. A fire in June? Gabino wondered, this man was uneasy, he needed to do something to avoid him. Good. "I come to you tonight, Gabino began, "sir," he added, "because your daughter is too beautiful not to dance at the fiesta, even if it is with me. She is too talented to heard goats." There it was; out in the open.

Delgado did not speak nor lift his head.

"Since school," Gabino continued, "this young woman," he emphasized woman twice, "has struck my heart, Señor. With your permission I would like to escort her to the dance."

Half a face appeared in the lantern light near the kitchen. God in heaven! It was Mirella. Gabino tried to catch Jaime's eye. "Of course it is your right to refuse, Señor, but

would remind you we were class mates for years. If you refuse I will ask again until Mirella herself refuses." Where did these words come from? Not from his tongue. God must have planted them.

Jaime Delgado's dull, brooding eyes finally settled in Gabino's. "She's got no time to waist in the village," he argued, "not with a fisherman."

The face in the corner stepped into the full light "Gabino, I would never refuse a dance with you__"

"Silencio!" Jaime Delgado rose. "Mirella, leave us."

Lupe Delgado's round figure appeared beside her daughter. "No,Jaime! This young man wishes to dance with this young woman. It is not for us to interfere."

Jaime shot them a chilling look. But Lupe's defiant hands stiff on her hips suggested a lifetime of misery. She nailed her husband back with a cold, fixed stare.

Jaime returned to his stool. "Very well, Gabino. I, ah, we wish you both a good time." His eyes darted from his smiling wife to his elated daughter. "Come when you like but return before midnight."

The six kilometer walk back to the village was a stroll through a new land. Mirella's voice lingered like a song. 'I would never refuse a dance with you' she had said; and when she spoke his name, oh, Dios Mío the angels had touched him. Clearly she felt for him as strong as he did for her; it was apperent in her eyes and the plea in her tone. For the first time Gabino felt the desert's nighttime beauty; moonlight was almost as peaceful as on the water. He sniffed in pungent agave and sage, kicked dust from the road and sang to the stars. "Tomorrow," he repeated, "four o'clock." Even goat shit smelled good.

Saturday morning came with cooing doves and cocky roosters. "Jorge! What the hell will I wear? It's too hot for a coat. I need a shirt with buttons and a collar."

Jorge laughed with amused disgust. "Mr. twenty-four-thousand pesos in the bank? We go shopping."

Gabino finished his coffee. "Vamanos"

Jorge dumped three spoons of sugar in his coffee, "Momentito, negrito. The cup chimed with his annoying stir. "Wear your fishing clothes. I volunteered us for the decoration committee."

"Jesú Christo!"

"I said we'd be at the placita before nine. We get free tickets for the dance and free drinks."

"But__"

"So we hang a few paper lanterns, set up the tables and bar then go buy some clothes."

Three thirty that afternoon Gabino drove Jorge's model T to the Delgado's rancheria: his new shoes shined. He had bought a ruffled shirt and high-wasted tuxedo slacks. Jorge instructed him not to shave till after two and to use alovera on his face. The closer he drove to Delgado's the greater control he felt. One problem: If they drove her with the windows rolled down, half the desert would cover their clothes. If he rolled them up, their clothes would be clean but they'd be dead before they got to Los Barriles.

He got out of Jorge's Model T in front of the hacienda. Jaime was in his fields, Lupe, all smiles and coos, brought out her brownie camera. Mirella and Gabino posed three times, said good-by and left. Two kilometros down the road Gabino stopped. Minutes passed, then he spoke. "You look like a cinema star in your black dress. You know?" Gabino stroked her arm, "I've waited my whole life for this."

Mirella folded his callused right hand and kissed it. "You've been in my mind for a long time." They agreed to drive with the windows half down and drive slow.

AFTER TEN THIRTY the small orchestra played romantic bolleros. Mirella curled under Gabino's chin. Without thought or hesitation he lifted her chin and kissed her.

She returned the kiss.

"Do you believe a person can love someone from childhood?" he asked.

She blinked slowly, "I have loved you from the second grade."

"Then why__"

"Shh!" She touched his lips. "Don't ask. Not tonight."

They walked on the beach, stopped to rest on the hull of his panga. She looked even more beautiful in starlight. From the way she held his hand and stroked his cheek, he knew, the way a puppy comes to you even when others call, she loved him. Neither spoke on the drive back. He stopped at the front door, their eyes settled in each other. "It is still before midnight," he said then walked around to open her door. "I'll never forget this night."

She kissed him. "For tonight," she said in a wispy voice, "this is forever." She kissed his mouth a long time, pulling his lips between hers. Mirella turned, walked quietly into the house and did not look back.

SHE FILLED GABINO'S head awake and asleep. He saw her image dressed and undressed. Because of her he'd lost fish, fouled a net and tackle in his panga. At sunset Jorge waited on the beach; he had fun poking fun at his helpless friend. "The hens in the mercado are clucking about you two."

Gabino took it well. "Good. Old hens need to remember."

"She's just a woman," Jorge tormented.

Mirella met him each evening. After Jorge had dragged the fish to be cleaned she ran down the slope into his arms. Always she brought something to eat and orchata to drink. They talked of aimless things, drinking, sharing an enchilada or tamale. Sometimes they just looked into each other's eyes and said nothing. "You made me so proud," she said once as they nibbled, "the night when you told my father I wasn't meant to be a goat herd." Something in her tone bothered Gabino. Twice he had asked when he should speak to her father of courtship, twice she had changed the subject. When he asked what she planned to do with her life, the light in her eyes faded, she looked away.

A MONTH LATER. On a sweltering Sunday morning in July Gabino dressed for mass. Protocol or not he would face Jaime alone. The little church was crowded; parishioners spilled outside onto the steps, peering through the high doors. Gabino stood with the crowd searching for her blue laced mantilla. Behind his back he clutched a bouquet of desert poppies wrapped in wax paper. Women from the mercado nodded in silence to him with polite approving smiles. A pinch-faced woman winked at him. He didn't care if the whole village knew his happiness. He spotted Father Castro in green and white vestments, but he could barely hear above crying babies and clack and rustle of women fanning themselves. The homily was apparently over. Father Castro mounted the pulpit to announce the usual marriage bans.

"Mirella Delgado," he proclaimed, then gestured in her family's direction, "and Javier Alvarez."

The bouquet fell on the steps. Father Castro's words stabbed Gabino's heart. His knees grew weak. "It's a mistake," he said under his breath. He must have misunderstood in the noisy confusion. Hush swept through the congregation; faces turned in his direction.

Gabino saw Mirella in the second pew, in the dress she'd worn to the dance; Mirella was on her knees, her bowed head draped in a quivering mantilla.

After Mass the crowd tittered and gossiped in their shuffle to the door. Gabino pushed against them inching his way to her, toward the altar. "Mirella! Let me hear it from your mouth!" He stood next to her but she refused to look up. Jaime Delgado pressed against Gabino with a contemptuous glare. "You asked to take her to the fiesta; I granted you permission. What more do you want?"

"But, Señor, I__we__"

"My daughter could never be the wife of a fisherman. Please go. She is promised to a worthier man."

"Mirella!" Gabino knelt beside her. "Mi vida! tell him it's__"

"Enough!" Jaime roared then lowered his voice, "this is family business. Please leave my family alone." Lupe did not speak.

That afternoon Gabino sat on the beach in the shade of his panga so drunk he threw rocks at the sea, so numb he did not feel the crabs crawl over his bare feet. Jorge poured tequila. Celia held Gabino's hand, squeezing limes with the other. "I know your pain, Nino," she soothed, "it is the same as a broken bone, your heart will mend with time."

"We'll all laugh," Jorge added, "one day."

Gabino collapsed. All feeling washed from his body.

TIME DID NOT, it would not mend. The hole in his heart grew with the tear in his shirt. Days stretched, becoming oppressive as the heat. Gabino bought his new outboard motor. He stayed out longer; when he returned she was not there. Many times he stayed overnight. He ran further out and returned with unbelievable catches. The Pescadores began to think of him as wealthy. One day north winds swept down from California creating swells so large Gabino and the others decided to stay in; Gabino would not risk swamping his new outboard. He and Jorge drove fish into Los Barriles, to the Mr. Takahashi's tienda in the mercado. Takahashi helped them load the crates in his basement. Gabino told him he would put the packages in Takahashi's ice chests; Takahashi returned upstairs. Then the impossible

became a reality. Gabino heard her voice on the stairs as she greeted Mr. Takahashi. Mirella came to his arms. Wordless, she pushed him gently on a pile of grain sacks and, in the noisy shuffle of feet above them, she gave herself completely.

IN THE outdoor mercado Gabino dropped vegetables in a bag.

Jorge stepped up. "You spoke to her, Negrito?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"We will meet downstairs tomorrow and the next and__"

"Shit."

Gabino avoided discussion. He looked around, pulled in a deep breath of fruit, flowers and greens. "Wonder why I love this place so much."

"Because," Jorge complained, trying his best to be patient, "you spend your life away from people and their voices. You see one color, blue. Look at the meat vender, Salvador Bravo; He stands beneath a purple canvas awning, his face is purple. And Irma Lizaola, she stands under yellow, her face looks like gold. The flowers the musicians. This is life, cabrón. Enjoy these colors and sounds, negrito because in a few days you'll hear and see nothing."

"He'll have to kill us both."

Gabino and Jorge bought more produce and water. Rosaura Guiterrez, a round, prune-faced woman, who had delivered them both into the world, fanned her shiny neck and face. "Everyone knows," she whispered through gold-capped teeth.

"Qué?" Jorge questioned.

Jaime Delgado arranged this marriage. Javier owns the only well. Jaime needs water to irrigate. So Javier promised her father fifty hectares of land if he would let him marry his daughter."

"Alvarez!" Gabino spit the name like poison. He is older than her father. A loud-mouthed bully and drunk."

"I am sorry for you both," she said then shrugged in Jorge's direction.

Gabino and Jorge bought clothes from another booth, hardware for the panga and tackle. Señora Aurelia Chacón, sold them netting. "My heart goes out to you both." She said.

TEN DAYS PASSED; Mirella waited for Gabino on the beach. He landed later each night. "Gabino!" she called in the moonlight. He ignored her. She stamped her feet, pained by his indifference. "Listen to me!"

He paused with a wordless stare. "Yes?"

"Talk to me?"

He answered her questions, his tone distant but polite. But when he looked into her eyes, her soft quivering mouth, he thought of their lovemaking in Takahashi's basement, her skin and curves, her breath on his body: Gabino weakened. She pushed herself into him. "Look at me, Chucho! I give myself to one man. My heart and body are yours. Forever! "Let's run away."

Gabino kissed her over and over. "I know you mean it, but -"

WITH THE FIRE of dawn came August 27th. The day two lives would be destroyed. Gabino had slept on the beach of Cerralvo island. He supposed the hour to be six-thirty as he pushed off his panga. All night he had cursed the stars; now he felt a little better. In a few hours half Los Barriles would be crowded in the hot, sticky church. Gabino tossed his bait in the water beside the hull; the sardine swam in innocent circles, instinctively schooling, though he was alone. Why? Gabino wondered, was he drawn him to live on the water? His Father was a blacksmith. Maybe, he thought it was because only fisherman knew both worlds, of the creatures in the water world and the mess that lived on land. A small dorado bumped his bait; Gabino looked down in the water, admiring its long, deep blue pectoral fins. The dorado turned, bit the bait but another stole it from him. In that moment the answer to all his dreams and sorrows were answered. Gabino cut his line and started the motor.

RATTELING FLOOR FANS heaved their lame breath over the quiet congregation. Father Castro, already melting in his long garments, lifted two rings from a cushion held by a small boy and girl. He made the sign of the cross, looking a long time at Alvarez, who knelt beside a quite Mirella. "What God has joined together," he said softly, "let no man ___"

A rusty crash against adobe announced a break in the doors; Gabino's barefoot figure blocked the light, his shadow reached to the alter, his trousers still rolled above the knees. "Don't!" he bellowed, "Mirella! Don't do it!"

She turned her face to him, the congregation gawked, then oed and gnawed. When she ran into his arms, some snickered and chortled their joy, even Lupe Delgado. Before anyone could voice further surprise the two were in Jorge's model T speeding out of sight. The old ladies from the mercado shrieked in victorious laughter.

Gabino and Mirella leaped from Jorge's car onto the beach; Gabino took her hand, running to his panga. Mirella managed to undress to her slip; her wedding dress drifted in the waves while Gabino started his motor then raced for Isla Cerralvo. both waved good-bye to Jorge.

When they were out of sight in Corta Blanca cove, Gabino looked deep into her face. "This is our home," he said, "for a while." She took off her slip, attacking him with kiss after kiss, till their bodies became one; over then over and over into night. When they were spent, like the waves she pointed to a lonely star with no constellation. "This one," she whispered in his ear, "this little one is ours."

He turned to kiss her. "You don't know the trouble we're in."

TWO DAYS LATER Jorge rowed out to Cerralvo. He brought them water and food. He looked tired.

"Well?" Mirella asked."

"Malo." Jorge sighed, shaking his head, "Very bad. Alvarez and his men look everywhere. He has offered a reward. They think you two went to La Paz."

Gabin reviewed their situation. "We can't stay here."

"Albarán says you can stay with them. His little place on Punta Colorada has no road."

Gabino wrapped his arms around them. "We leave Mirella with them; you and I go back tonight. I need my fishing gear."

Mirella protested, "Let Jorge do that."

"I'll see you before sunrise. No one can keep up with my motor. Let's go."

NEXT MORNING Gabino's panga had been stove-in, his sail slashed and his four-thousand American dollar motor burned. The pescadores did not go out. They gathered under the cleaning palapa to discuss el brujo. Rumor in the village said he was moving in on Mr. Takahashi's seafood business. "If he would do this to one of us," Gonzalo Beltrán complained, "for the sake of a woman, will he do when we disagree with him?"

"Let's can set fire to his fields," Arnaldo Macias piped.

Hippolito Gonzalez added, "Kill his livestock."

The withered Sergio Albarán, scratched his white whiskers then opened his ruck-sack. "Here," he said, handing a half rusted revolver to Gabino, "You'll need this."

The pescadores replaced four ribs on the panga's port side. By three that afternoon new planks had been screwed in. A little past five-thirty lap-strek siding and paint was finished. Gabino's Panga was ready. He would have to row again. But he had a new sail. The say was over, all headed for the cantina. Jorge and Gabino would sleep beside the panga, with the revolve. "We go to the Cantina," Jorge said,

For blankets. They gathered round three tables pushed together. Gabino bought beer. "On me," he smiled raising his beer. "Salude," they returned. Gabino told them what direction they'd find the tuna schools feeding, demanded they be early. "Corte Blanca cove. Take your throw nets. When you have ten dozen baits follow the slick north by east from punto coyoted, at least two hours. You'll see the birds and porpoise."

Javier Alvarez watched them. he set his drink on the bar, turned, lifted half-closed eyes in their direction. Two of his friends had told Alvarez where the woman was.

When he saw them Gabino's jaw grew so ridged he couldn't swallow. Something inside told him he might be dead tomorrow. That it would happen now, tonight. He should be afraid; he didn't know why, but he was not. His father had taught him how to beat down a man of anysize with a single punch to the throat.

Alvarez lifted his Taquilla, his dull, bloodshot eyes stared at them.

Gabino's fathers voice railed inside his head. 'If a man cannot breath' Gabino's father had taught him, he cannot hurt you.' Gabino grinned at Alvarez and the two chongos in the corner. He placed a bundle of pesos in Jorge's fist. "Buy those two something mixed with rum and tequila, should slow 'em down."

"But -"

"Go, Let me handle Alvarez. Hang around the apes . . . if we get into it, take out Miguel Arriano first then the other chongo."

"But -"

"Don't let them get to their car. They've got rifles."

"Listen! You can't -"

"Now!"

"Okay, okay."

Alvarez' imposing figure hovered beside their table. "Sorry about your boat, hope you don't think ___"
The men in the corner snorted with a sarcastic laugh.

Gabino struggled to control the rage shooting through his veins. He rose slowly; his face inches from Alvarez. "Some men no one can speak to," he said "a man like you wouldn't know reason from his own shit." Gabino held up a single middle finger. "Really stupid men only understand sign language."

The Changos stood. Alvarez motioned for them to sit. Jorge served the strong drinks.

Gabino threw three rapid punches into Alvarez' larynx, knuckles first to cave in the wind pipe. Alvarez staggered backwards chocking.

The Changos jumped up.

Jorge and the others broke chairs over their heads. Two more pescadores blocked the door while the rest joined the party, kicking and beating the chongos into a dream world.

Alvarez croaked, rasped, breath came only with struggle. He collapsed. Gabino kicked in Alvarez's ribs -the way his panga had been smashed- then his jaw, teeth and nose. It took four men to pull him off. Every vein and muscle showed in Gabino's throat. The fire in his wild, darting eyes suggested another person. "Enough!" the men shouted. Gabino pulled away but not before kicking Alvaraz again.

Sometime between ten and eleven, Gabino and Jorge spread blankets on the sand, under the bow. Gabino stretched on his back. He should have faced Alvarez a long time ago. He linked his hands under his head, looking for their star. "It was her idea to run away with me. Did did I tell you?"

The only sound punctuating the night was Jorge's light snore.

BEFORE SUNRISE Arnaldo Macias and Hipolito Gonzalez walked from their huts to the beach. They drank coffee from foil-wrapped fruit jars surveying the flat, glassy water. Pelicans cruised a cloudless sky. It would be a calm day they agreed and began pushing their boats to the water.

"Where are Chucho and Jorge?" Arnaldo questioned.

Hipolito walked over to the place where the two had been sleeping. Guttural sounds escaped from his lungs, he could not speak; he made the sign of the cross, falling to his knees.

Arnaldo screamed like a woman.

Jorge lay face down, the back of his head gaped open. Sand flies buzzed around his open brain, sticky with drying blood. Gabino sat propped against the hull of his panga. Dried blood streaked down his face, his mouth and eyes wide open in a fixed, unblinking stare. Gabino's right hand lay in his lap, clutching the

pistol. He did not move.

"Madre de Dios!" Arnaldo's voice quivered. He poured water from his botellón over Gabino's head.

Gabino moaned, trying to speak but his jaw had been broken.

Hipolito let out three shrill whistles, waited a measured minute then three more.

The pescaderes came running from the village.

Hipolito was in tears. "Jorge is dead! He cried, "we can't help him. Quick get a truck, Gabino is still alive."

Gonzalo Ramirez pulled his a model A next to Gabino. The men eased him on top of soft nets in the back. "He did this on purpose," Hippolito whispered, "Alvarez wanted Chucho to witness the death of his friend."

FIVE WEEKS AFTER Jorge's funeral Gabino was still in the Hospital in La Paz. Mirella had taken her things from her home to be with him. Doctors wired his fractured jaw, cracks in his skull and cheek bones slowly mended. Blue-purple veins in his swollen eyelids gradually disappeared. Mirella told him what a fine funeral Jorge had and how she'd become a close friend with Celia.

Life was simple now. Gabino only had one task, to kill Alvarez and his men. He'd planned everything systematically. He just couldn't figure how to square it with God and the church. But people in the village could not go on living in fear. He asked questions with a note pad and pen: 'what were the police going to do about Alvarez and his two men?'

"I don't know, my love, " she shook her head with a helpless sigh, "I only know that I must be with you."

SERGIO ALBARÁN, the old white beard, drove his truck into La Paz. He'd acquired an enormous admiration for the stubborn Gabino. Not just the way he stood up to El Brujo, but how he caught more fish than the others. Determination, pure determination, he thought. Albarán saw in Gabino Montoya, himself fifty years earlier. It was an honor to be the one to return Gabino and Mirella to the village.

Soon the three of them headed south on the dusty road which cut through the desert the along the coast, everything shimmered in the heat. While Sergio drove he admonished his young friend not to speak, even though the wires had been removed from his jaw. "You asked about Alvarez," he said, waiving his

hand in disgust. That son-of-a-bitch has the rural police on his payroll, even the district judge." He tipped back his sombrero, apologizing to Mirella for his careless language. "They all say there is no evidence, the gutless bastards. But the merchants have refused to sell to Alvarez or his men. When he walks into the church, the congregation walks out."

Gabino's face looked empty with frustration.

Mirella clutched his hand.

'I'm going to kill them,' Gabino scratched on his pad. 'I only worry about her.'

"You are safe with in my Hacienda." Sergio's face opened with a triumphant smile. "My dogs will kill anyone who comes close; that is if my wife doesn't get to them first. He let out a wheezy phlegm-filled laugh. "Save your energy, you don't have to risk prison."

Gabino shot him a blank look.

"This time next week Alvarez will be dead, and not by the hand of any man."

Gabino and Mirella blinked.

HORTENCIA ALBARÁN, SERGIO'S wife of fifty-three years patted tortillas. Her round happy figure glided around her kitchen with the same easy assurance her husband once ruled his boat. She brewed tortilla soup for Gabino with shrimp and beans. Mirella helped the old woman, she liked everything about her especially her kitchen songs. Later at the table, in the flickering light of three candles, they ate listening while Sergio spoke of Alvarez'a impending death. "At two thirty tomorrow afternoon." Like train schedule." He said.

Gabino slurped soup exchanging blank stares with Mirella. He tried to chew on a soft tortilla but it hurt. How could Alvarez die at the whim of another? God in heaven knew he deserved to die, but how?

After dinner Hortencia motioned Mirella to join her on their tiny verandah, "cool air from the water." Hortencia knew her husband needed to be alone Gabino; somehow the shell would be involved.

When the women were gone Sergio disappeared into his bedroom. He returned with the abalone shell. It looked even larger than Gabino remembered.

Sergio told him to stare into its blue luminescent center. He pointed to detailed carvings around the lip. "Place your fingertips in these."

Gabino raised his brows with a questioning look.

"Petrogliffs," Sergio explained, pointing to a particular carved God, larger than the rest. "This is the

great spirit Niparaja, the Pericúe Indian God. These carvings are over a thousand years old."

'Why?' Gabino scribbled on his pad, 'are you showing me this? If it is so old why is it not in a museum?'

The old man let out wheezy laugh. "This shell has super natural powers. Power which may come from our lord or it may be Indian magic, but it can make a man or woman die. It can make the blind see, even an infertile woman have a child. I've seen it make rain and wind. My father has found fish where there were none."

Gabino pushed his chair back, doubt pulled down the corners of his mouth. 'Does it come with a sacrificial virgin?' He scribbled then laughed through his nose.

Sergio ignored the pun. "In 1535," he went on, scratching his whiskers, "after Father Salvitiera founded the mission in La Paz. An old Pericúe shaman named Guama decided the black robes had to go. This shaman had seen hundreds of his people die from tuberculosis, syphilis and fever, not to mention the slave pearl divers. In one week three hundred people died of pneumonia. The black robes forced his people to wear clothes, told them they could marry only once. They fed his tribe posolé to get them into church." Sergio repeated places and dates as if he'd been a part of it. "Mission San Bruno, he added, "Then Santiago and San Jose del Cabo. The old Shaman put a curse on the black robes through this shell. The next day his tribesman -including women- burned the mission Santiago then moved in the night to the mission San Jose del Cabo. They decapitated Father Taraval, women did unspeakable things to his naked body."

Whether from fear or fascination, Gabino didn't blink.

"It took two years," Alberán continued, "to get Spanish reinforcements from the mainland. By that time the mission had been rebuilt. This shell remained on the alter. The new black robes tried to remove the shaman's curse by blessing it.

"How did you get it?"

"Long story. It was my father's and his father's." My great grandfather was a pericúe, a pearl diver. He dove with the last of the pericúes. They taught him how to work the magic. But his panga was lost in a gale . . . then your shark."

'Is-is this scientific?' Gabino scratched.

Sergio explained that his father had shown the shell to a physicist from Germany. "This scientist came to La Paz to study marine life . . . in the twenties, I think. He told my father that light and sound are waves. When wave frequencies of light and sound are the same, something happens in the human mind. Whatever our mind perceives can become real. I-I can't remember."

'With sound and light you can__'

"Anything natural, Gabino said, anything. This combination of light and sound enters our spirit. The pericúe believed the eyes are the window of the soul and by singing one precise note, the same time looking into moonlight reflected from the bowl, it's power enters the body . . . wishes, thoughts become reality."

Gabino had never known Sergio to fabricate anything. He threw down pad and spoke, pain or not. "That's it? Just sing, stare into this thing and wish? Make me a hundred-thousand pesos. Right here on the table."

Sergio was amuzed. "Natural things," he laughed, "earth, sky, water, animals . . . love, hate, things like that."

"Death?"

"Oh yes, death."

"You have made these things happen?"

"Sure."

"But -"

"The moon rises in a half hour. Mirella will sing Coo-coo-roo-coo-roo. It is the perfect note. She knows this song?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Good. The note comes before 'Paloma'- that's the note. We must concentrate -I mean actually see it in our mind."

"What?"

"Alvarez being struck by lightning."

"You're serious?"

"Tomorrow he'll die, I promise."

The moon rose above a mirrored sea of Cortez; its path of silver light shined straight to the hacienda.

Mirella stood barefoot in the sand, a silhouette beside Sergio. They joined Hortencia and Gabino, sitting in a circle around the shell. A blue glow filled their eyes. Eyes that glowed like deer seen in the night. They stared into the center, focusing, their thoughts were one. Mirella began her song, she lifted her voice to a higher register. Hortensia could only think of Miguel Arrilano, the man who had beaten her sister when he was drunk. In her mind lightning pierced him over and over. She saw him jerk and twitch.

Mirella came to the long, lyrical note, holding it till she was out of breath.

The old man stood. "Good! It is done, let's sleep."

JAVIER ALVAREZ cursed orders to men and women working his tomato fields. He stepped down from his new tractor, kicking dry dust. His tomato yield would be meager, even with his new irrigation system, which he'd been using from the arroyo -the fertile fields of marijuana. He mopped his neck and face with a dirty rag, searched the parched sky for a trace of a clouds. But the rains wouldn't come for at least two months.

The peons eased away to avoid his sharp tongue.

Alvarez checked his new watch. "Two thirty is too early to quit!"

Without thunder or wind a blinding knife of lightning cracked out of clear air, driving its silver sword through Alvarez's body. Alvarez fell without a sound. Two more shafts burned off his clothes, cooking him to unrecognizable charred meat.

Men and women returned, slack-jawed, gawking at el Brujo's smoldering corpse. No one spoke or touched him.

Miguel Arrelano picked up el Brujo's rifle, running to his Jefe's body. "Get back!" But before Miguel could touch the barrel a thick bolt shot from the dead man's body through Miguel's heart. He fell without word or motion across s Alvarez's feet.

The field workers dropped to their knees, their eyes huge. The bodies had formed a crucifix.

"A miracle," one woman shouted.

News spread through Los Barriles with the speed of the same lightning. "Yes," three women murmured, "Lightning . . . not a cloud in the sky. A punishment from God."

SATURDAY EVENING, Gabino and Mirella's joined their lives. This time the whole village was there; everyone watched in proud silence as though these children were their own. A few people from La Paz attended, Mr. Takahashi included. When the marriage was complete the Bride and Groom stood on the steps beneath in front of the tall doors. Gabino shook hands with Jaime, kissed Lupe and held Mirella. The four shielded rice from their heads. Mirella's veil floated in a fresh breeze. "we love you all so much," she cried, and blew kisses.

A chorus of happy voices wished them many babies and good health.

Gabino and Mirella slipped into Jorge's model T.

Everyone was still talking of cloudless lightning; god's retribution. Gabino spotted Señor Martinez and jumped out of the model T. "I am not a greedy man," he told Martinez. He explained he'd learned Martinez was Executor of Alvarez's estate.

"Yes," Martinez nodded, "It is true."

"I would like to petition the estate for my outboard motor. Alvarez destroyed it."

Martinez convulsed with laughter. The crowd stopped talking, their eyes fixed on him.

"Don't you know?" Martinez asked, loud enough for the village to hear?

Gabino looked inside the Model T, in his bride's amused face. "I don't get it."

"Ask your wife," Martinez said, nodding his head toward the car, "everything goes to her, bank accounts, land, cars and house."

Gabino returned to the Model T.

Mirella kissed him. "I was going to tell you tonight."

Sergio Albarán opened Mirella's door. Something heavy fell into her lap. It was abalone shell.

"Our gift," he smiled, "It will protect you and your children."

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