



JOURNEY
TO THE
HEART

A NOVEL BY NORA CARON

“Authentic, close to her feelings, honest, true to self . . . this is what makes Nora Caron’s work so compelling. *Journey to the Heart* carries an eternal, universal message that many a lost-soul will turn to as the years unfold.

“Nora Caron has been blessed with the ability to see through social, cultural, political, and religious illusions, and in time she will build a readership based on her foresight and unique storytelling abilities. Nora well understands that we evolve as human beings, and that often it’s important to *not* be fully understood. There’s charm in *not* having all the answers, in being the student as well as the teacher, and this comes through in Lucina and Señora Labotta, fictional characters in *Journey to the Heart*, yet without a doubt also living aspects of this writer’s soul.

“Burned out, depressed, and let down by life and others, 25 year-old Lucina finally makes a break, leaving behind a neurotic mother, shallow friendships and her ‘pull yourself up by the bootstraps’ psychologist, and courageously sets off into the unknown. Only then does Lucina ‘by chance’ meet her real guide, Señora Labotta, who with the mysterious spirit of many great teachers, seduces the curious Lucina away from her linear scientific and technological way of seeing and believing and into a life of adventure, spirit and reward.

“With the wise assistance of Señora Labotta, Lucina and her spirited willingness to suffer through lost love and not escape her experience is what gives her the edge. In other words, Lucina doesn’t try to escape her joy and pain or whatever else comes her way. Instead, courageously, she feels it, lives through it and doesn’t remain life’s victim. As opposed to a large group of people who turn to drugs, chemicals, false religions and other abusive dependencies and escapes, Lucina’s suffering is not in vain.

“A great deal of the world’s population continues to suffer in vain; yet, this type of suffering is meaningless. One never finds redemption in neurotic suffering—one may find false comfort, but not redemption! This is where Nora Caron shines, in leading her readers away from false comforts and into the unknown where one can obtain a renewed and authentic life.

“This refreshing novel is sure to quench the thirst of many people, young and old, longing to find deeper meaning and greater fulfillment in life.” —*Amazon.com Review*

JOURNEY TO THE HEART

by

Nora Caron



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Openings

Chapter 1

Soft morning light streamed into the bright pink hotel room, bringing her some comfort. At least the weather seemed to be in a better mood than Lucina. She threw the hairbrush onto the single narrow bed, grabbed her heavy brown leather purse, and slammed the door shut.

“Breakfast time!” she pronounced to the emptiness around her.

Only in Oaxaca City for a day, Lucina hadn’t had the opportunity to explore much of the marketplace. She looked forward to hitting the little art stands she had noticed the night before, while passing through the city by bus. But first, breakfast. The only restaurant near the hotel was a quaint Italian coffee shop and that suited Lucina just fine. She sauntered in, ignored the Spanish sign asking for clients to wait for seating, and selected an isolated round table near the large sunny window overlooking Santo Domingo church. The coffee shop was nearly empty, except for a heavy older Mexican man, sitting with his feet up on a chair in the corner, puffing away at his thick cigar.

A short grinning middle-aged Spanish woman appeared and asked politely in English what Lucina wished to order. The waitress looked as though she had taken too much coffee that morning. Her hand fluttered to straighten her headband, as a nervous twitch appeared over her upper lip. It was disconcerting to look at her, so Lucina concentrated on the menu.

“I would like two eggs, two toasts, and strong, black coffee,” Lucina said, avoiding eye contact with the waitress.

"No problema, no problema, no problema," the waitress said, bowing as she left, still trying to straighten out her silly headband.

Lucina sighed, put her hands to her forehead, and closed her eyes. *Alone on vacation, how amusing,* she thought. *Alone after a burnout, with nobody but me, myself and I. Doctor Field should have prescribed some traveling assistant while he was at it.*

"Lucina, vacations need to be taken when we are empty," he had said during the last session. "Do you know what you have done to your body with all your work? You have burnt it, that's what you've done, and the only way to repair it, is go to a sunshine country. I recommend Mexico; the people there are friendly and the energy is good."

"Doctor Field, I don't need a vacation, I need to get this bastard back!" Lucina answered angrily. His look had silenced her. He walked over to the tape player, lifted a finger to indicate that it was quiet time, and pressed play. A soft melody began to play in the speakers.

"Lie down Lucina, and close your eyes. Anger is not good. We talked about this *last* week. Now breathe. That's it, breathe."

Oh, good old Doctor Field, Lucina thought sadly. *Where is he when I need someone to talk to?*

Breakfast arrived. Lucina ate forcefully, chewing slowly and swallowing with difficulty. *Food lost its attraction a long time ago,* she concluded. *What is the point of eating if you no longer have the desire to live?*

A good-looking Asian couple passed by the large window at that moment, laughing and holding hands. Lucina groaned inwardly and stared at her black coffee. *Blackness is my friend,* she mused. *There it is, not moving, not talking, just being. I wish I were blackness itself. Then I could maybe pass off as being something other than empty and dead inside.*

After paying for the tasteless food, Lucina strolled out to the market square and began to look around with more interest. Although it was only seven in the morning, life in Oaxaca City had begun a long time ago. Children played in the water

fountains, older people sat under the shade of giant trees, barely talking to each other. Hand-made Mayan clothing was spread out on Mexican blankets on the ground. A few tourists scrutinized the contents on slanted plastic tables, trying to bargain with the local artisans.

Lucina began to feel less negative as she looked around the town square. Sometimes being around strangers does that to people; it takes away the feeling that one is alone in the blackness and temporarily removes fears and anxieties. *Where there is life, there is hope*, Lucina reminded herself. Doctor Field had always taught her that.

She walked randomly into a nearby jewelry store, roamed through the tiny little aisles, and squeezed her way around large, noisy Americans. Finding nothing of interest, she wandered back outside. Suddenly, a tiny little shop next to the jewelry store caught her eye.

"Libros de la Vida Azul," Lucina muttered out loud. Curious, she pushed the faded screen door and walked in. Lucina had always liked books, but read little of the great literature that permeated bookstores. Her sense of literature was limited to the Grimm fairy tales that she had always liked better than Walt Disney movies, as well as some Gothic novels that had stimulated her sexual appetite from time to time as a teenager.

Heavy Indian incense greeted her as she cautiously walked in. Lucina noticed the little aisles crammed to the ceiling with hundreds of books and the faint odor of dust in the stifled air. Lastly, she saw the woman behind the cluttered counter near the small window looking out on the market square. The woman was a large, imposing Mexican with long, black hair and big, brown, glittering eyes.

"Buenas días, hermana," the Mexican said in a deep, almost masculine voice. Lucina stood still, curious as to why she had been greeted as a sister when obviously she was not Mexican.

"Buenas días," she reciprocated politely.

Lucina was, for some reason, very uncomfortable under the stranger's gaze, so she immediately headed for a corner where the

woman couldn't watch her. When she realized that she was in the yoga and spirituality section, she steered abruptly back to the computer and science area and picked up a random book. *How rude to stare at customers like that*, she thought, feeling annoyed. *In Montreal, people bother you but at least they don't stare and make you uncomfortable.*

"Are you looking for something in particular?" rang the woman's deep voice again, this time in a light English accent.

"No, just looking."

"Would you like to read some Carlos Castaneda perhaps? I have here his *Art of Dreaming*, a very good read. It helps one realize dreams are more than dreams."

Carlos who? Lucina muttered a loud "no thanks" and carefully moved towards the exit. *I need to get out of here as fast as possible*, she was thinking in a panic. As she was about to squeeze her way through the screen door, a hand landed on her shoulder, causing Lucina to nearly drop her shopping bags.

"*Hermana*, always look both ways before crossing the road," said the book woman, looking down at her with a statue-like brown face.

Utterly at a loss for words, Lucina mumbled a faint "thanks" and took off down the bustling street. Anxiously, she turned to look over her shoulder several times to make sure that she was not being followed by the imposing woman.

Do witches still exist? Doctor Field could have at least mentioned the weirdos before suggesting Oaxaca City. I could have been murdered back there. Do Mexicans eat people? I wouldn't be surprised. You never know these days, what with all the weird events happening all over the world.

Sighing, Lucina continued on with her exploration and made her way back to the *Zócalo*, the town square. Opting for a bench in the shade away from the bustle, she sat down and pulled out a thick blue diary. Writing in a diary had become a daily routine since the burnout. As a child, Lucina's godmother had given her her first diary, suggesting that whenever the world was too much to handle, writing would find a way to guide her. Doctor Field had

also encouraged Lucina to continue writing in a diary, explaining to her that writing was an excellent introspection exercise.

“Writing is wonderful; it allows our demons room to debate amongst themselves,” he had said, laughing out loud.

Lucina took out a ballpoint pen, settled herself comfortably, and started jotting down fleeting thoughts. The noise of the market square slowly vanished and her mind was miles away from the bustling city life.

Dear Diary

December 2nd

It was a nice plane ride to Mexico City yesterday. I didn't sleep on the plane, but found a nice spot to sleep on the bus going to Oaxaca. So far, the weather has been warm and not too hot. I find myself wondering what I'm supposed to do with myself here. I speak Spanish well enough, but I don't want to talk to people that much. Talking is something that drains me these days, plus I feel as though no one understands me anyhow. What is the point of talking when only air comes out?

I guess having a burnout might have something to do with the fact that I don't want to speak. I feel tired and grumpy most of the time. Doctor Field kept telling me before my departure, “Flow and let go, flow and let go,” but I don't think I know how to let go. There are so many things I need to let go of: Lincoln, my old job, the pain and tears of the last months.

Where do I begin?

“*Estás escribiendo un libro, señora?*” a young voice asked Lucina, snapping her out of her private world. She looked up at a young Mexican boy and smiled.

“No, I'm not writing a book, only a journal,” she replied in Spanish.

“You look like a writer, with your nice pants and shoes,” he commented, grinning.

“Really? Why, thank you.” Lucina stared at the reclining figure

of the boy. To be young, innocent, and happy, *that* was what she really wanted. She didn't want to be twenty-five with a serious case of depression and lack of financial stability, not to mention bad luck with all men who happened to cross her path.

"Bloody life," Lucina muttered, slamming the diary shut. She didn't feel like writing anymore. What was there for her to say other than, life sucks?

* * * * *

Around 3 p.m., Lucina bought some burritos from a nearby stand, some fruits and vegetables, and decided to head back to the tranquil hotel near the Santo Domingo church.

My introspection has not been that productive up to now, she thought sadly to herself. Maybe I should give it a few more days. Maybe I'm just not inspired enough.

All of a sudden, Lucina noticed the bizarre book woman sitting on a bench nearby. The woman was reading, absorbed in a book. Lucina's first instinct was to duck behind an old German couple, in order to hide from the intimidating stranger. *I don't need another encounter with witches, she mused, observing the stranger from afar. I can't handle these type of people.*

"Ach Gott, Wilhelm, was hast du gesagt? Das Wetter ist perfekt. Du jammerst immer wie ein kleines Kind!" the woman was saying to her husband. The man shrugged, looked angry, and stared straight ahead, ignoring his wife.

Lucina's endeavour to hide, however, was in vain. Abruptly, the woman looked up right at her and a half smile appeared on her thick lips. *Oh God, not another trip to the Twilight Zone.* The Mexican waved Lucina over. Smiling uncertainly and feeling like she wanted to vanish off the face of the planet, Lucina nonetheless ventured over to where the stranger was sitting.

"Please, sit down," the woman said in her soft English accent, watching Lucina like a hawk. Lucina sat down nervously and placed her shopping bags on the ground next to her. Silence hit. Lucina tried to think of something to say to make the awkwardness

go away.

“Please, tell me what you meant when you said, ‘Look both ways before crossing the road.’ Are you some sort of fortune teller?” Lucina said at last, feeling at a loss for words.

“Even if I were, you would not believe me. No, señorita, I am only like you, someone in search of answers. What I meant was that there are always two opposite directions in life, but all roads cross at you.”

“Pardon me?”

“Ah, you Americans. . .”

“Canadians, please, Canadians.”

“Canadians,” she resumed. “You are all the same. You do not get it right away: too intellectual, too caught up in the head, not enough in the stomach and heart.”

Lucina decided not to resume the topic seeing that they were getting off to a bad start, and she certainly didn’t want to be on the bad side of a witch. Cautiously, she asked where the stranger lived. The Mexican replied that she lived ten minutes out of town, on a quiet little property, far from the noise of the city.

“Oh, that sounds nice,” Lucina said, trying to imagine what kind of house the stranger lived in. Probably a cave of some sort, with books piled to the ceiling, herbs in big glass jars, and a few dead animals hanging from the ceiling. “I am staying at Posada Margarita, do you know of it?”

The Mexican didn’t reply. Lucina fidgeted in her seat, trying to look calm. In reality, her heart was beating furiously and her palms were sweaty. Then the woman looked up at Lucina and smiled. Her big yellow teeth caught the early afternoon sun.

“Do you like camping?” she asked.

“Camping?”

“Yes, camping.”

“Ah, I guess so, yes, I do,” Lucina answered, wondering where the conversation was leading this time.

The woman paused, apparently thinking hard about something. She chewed on her thick lip and mumbled to herself in Spanish.

“Yes, camping. I have a big land and tourists often like to camp on my land. I do not charge anything, except I ask that people help me on my land, to take care of my plants and things like that. Are you interested in camping on my land?”

Lucina began to feel the laughter rising. Laughter was Lucina’s mechanism of defence. When things would get out of hand, Lucina would laugh like a silly child. One time, her best friend had fallen from a bike and split her knee open and instead of flipping out, Lucina had burst out laughing and her friend had been greatly offended. That was how Lucina dealt with unexpected, scary things in life—she would laugh like an idiot.

Camping on this weird woman’s land? I don’t even have a tent. And camping entails weird insects, such as, big Mexican spiders, and also flies and other strange things that fly. Camping means cold showers, and sleeping on the hard ground, and waking up feeling stiff and old and crabby. Camping means being afraid that some crazy Mexicans might break into my tent, and kill me during my sleep.

Lucina’s facial expression must have given her away, for the woman patted her arm reassuringly.

“Don’t worry, it’s very comfortable, my tent.”

Lucina wasn’t the least reassured. Why was this stranger inviting her over? Did she want to murder her, make her into a human burrito or something?

Doctor Field’s words echoed in Lucina’s head at that moment.

“Lucina, the minute you feel your old feelings of paranoia creep up, stomp on them! Stomp on them, like we are doing!” and he had leaped out of his chair and actually slammed his foot down on the floor. But Lucina had known better: it wasn’t as easy as some people thought. Anxiety was not something that just vanished into thin air. It was not something you could brush under the carpet and hope no one would notice. People noticed her anxiety.

“Doctor Field, I don’t know how to shut the voices in my head,” Lucina had replied, looking sadly at him. Mozart’s flute concerto was playing in the background, trying to soothe her tired mind.

“You simply tell them to fuck off,” he had answered, giving

Lucina a big grin.

Good old Doctor Field, he had known all about the injustices. She had told him about how her boss had fired her and stolen her invention, her own original programming invention, which would have made her rich. Doctor Field had been kind and sympathetic and he knew how to respond to Lucina.

At least someone knew how to talk to her.

Somehow, at that moment, despite her fear of the woman, Lucina knew that she couldn't let her old self take over and ruin things again. She didn't want to return to those patterns. She stared a few long seconds more into the Mexican's burning eyes and tried to relax. *If I am going to get over the past and the fears, I have to start somewhere, right?* she convinced herself.

Reluctantly, Lucina told the woman that she would accept her proposal but that she really wanted to pay for the stay. The stranger held up a large hand and shook her head, explaining that she never accepted money; rather, she would accept help with planting and weeding on her property. Lucina explained hesitantly that she knew nothing of plants, that she was a computer programmer in Montreal, not a weeder.

"You cannot help me with that. I hate computers. They are vile things and deserve to be burnt," grunted the woman loudly. "No, rather you will do yard work. Yes?"

"Fine, that's fine with me. Thank you very much," Lucina answered somewhat shaken, still shocked that she was accepting such a proposition from a woman who obviously was not normal by Canadian standards.

"I live at 78 *Calle de los Aves*. Come early tomorrow morning and we will eat breakfast together. You can take the 45 bus. It stops right next to my street. *Hasta mañana*," said the Mexican as she got up to leave.

Still filled with skepticism and fear, Lucina moved aside and watched the witch walk away, book in hand.

What the hell am I doing? I am probably losing my mind altogether, Lucina thought sadly. *Well, it doesn't matter since I have nothing to lose anymore anyhow.*

* * * * *

It was already dark when Lucina returned to the peaceful Posada Margarita. She walked through the front white wooden gate and quietly made her way to the room situated in the back of the courtyard. It seemed like she was the only tourist in the little hotel, which was odd because it was nearly Christmas, the big season in Mexico. The tourists were probably all in Cancun, sipping on cocktails, receiving massages, and eating fatty foods.

After putting the food on the counter, Lucina sat down in the over-sized faded brown leather sofa and closed her blue eyes. The only sound was the ceiling fan, swishing respectfully above the bed.

Out of nowhere appeared Mr. Steve's face floating in the mirror.

"Men are the source of all evil," Lucina muttered to the darkness. "The world would be a much better place without them. We should have sperm banks and that's it."

She took a bite from a red juicy apple and munched loudly, the apparition vanishing from the mirror.

Chapter 2

Lucina stood at the crossroads of 78 *Calle de los Aves* and the main road, watching the bus drive away, with her bags in hand and feeling slightly nauseous. She straightened up, taking a deep breath, trying to calm her body.

After explaining to the owner of Posada Margarita that there was nothing wrong with the hotel, that she simply wanted to try camping, Lucina took the early bus to meet the strange woman for breakfast. She wasn't sure what she was doing standing in front of a stranger's house, but she felt like her life was about to become more interesting.

78 *Calle de los Aves* was more of a yellow shack than a house. The porch sagged, the windows were cracked, the roof looked like it was about to cave in, and the paint was peeling. A thick, spiky green carpet surrounded the dwelling, and here and there, coconut trees offered some occasional shade. The area looked rather peaceful, and since there didn't seem to be too many neighbours, Lucina concluded that it was indeed an attractive change and certainly more exciting than a hotel.

Maybe this was what Doctor Field had meant when he had told her at the last therapy session that life was like a river. One had to learn how to let go of the shore and let the current do the pulling. Lucina had not understood it at first.

"But I don't even know if I'm in the water or on dry land, Doctor Field!" she had replied.

"Lucina, we are all in the water; some have it up to their knees and others have it above their heads. I think you are the latter.

Just remember that if you stop fighting with the water, you will float. Humans float naturally, yet we seem to constantly forget this.”

How I wish I could have his advice right now, she thought. Where is the shore now, miles away or only a few feet?

“*Hola, señorita,*” called out a familiar deep voice from behind her.

Lucina spun around and came face to face with the short, over-weight brown-skinned woman. The Mexican wore a faded sleeveless red summer dress, a wide straw hat, and carried some dark roots in her left hand. Her stringy long black hair fluttered around her bulky body in a rather eerie manner.

A real witch, Lucina mused. What should I wear to protect myself from witches? Vampires don't like garlic, but what do witches not like?

“Hola, Señora. . .”

“Señora Labotta.”

“*Encantado, I'm Lucina Pilano,*” Lucina replied, relieved at the formal introductions at last.

Labotta it was. The two women looked at each other for a few long seconds. Finally, Señora Labotta walked past Lucina onto the rickety porch, pointing to a small table and some run-down white plastic chairs to the left. The porch was a good forty feet long by twenty feet across. Above it was a decaying roof, which apparently nested a variety of bird species according to the many different nests scattered underneath it. Large pots decorated the four corners of the porch, and in them grew a variety of exotic, colourful flowers, none of which Lucina recognized. Flowers had never been an interest to her; she couldn't even take care of a cactus. The last cactus had dried up years ago and she had left it on the windowsill as a reminder never to buy another plant in her life again.

“Sit, and we will have *huevos a la Mexicana,*” Señora Labotta said loudly before the screen door slammed shut. Lucina looked down at the square-shaped wooden table and did a double take. There, staring back at her was a pair of huge golden eyes.

“Like my eyes?” asked Señora Labotta, returning with a tray of delicious smelling food. “They are the eyes of the conscience.”

Lucina nodded and looked again at the golden eyes, dropping her bags at the same time. She waited for Señora Labotta to sit before she sat down at the tiny table. The two women ate breakfast. Lucina observed how the woman ate quietly and cautiously. Although the eggs tasted delicious, she was careful not to eat too quickly in order to be polite.

A few minutes later, the stranger asked Lucina what she thought of the eyes on the table. Confused, Lucina was uncertain of how to reply, so Señora Labotta explained that she wanted to know what the eyes reminded Lucina of. Still bewildered, Lucina fumbled for an answer, and at last blurted out that the eyes looked angry.

“Angry eyes? Are you angry, Lucina?” Señora Labotta asked quietly.

Lucina gulped down her orange juice and didn’t look up. *What is that for a question? Do I have to answer? It’s really none of her business.*

Doctor Field’s words returned to her, louder this time, “Flow and let go, flow and let go.” She at last decided there was no harm in answering the question affirmatively.

Señora Labotta prodded her further. “Why are you angry?”

Lucina looked up at the stranger, her anxiety churning inside. She hated that feeling.

Señora Labotta looked tranquil, nonchalant, which gave Lucina the confidence to explain her reasons for being angry. Quickly, Lucina summed up how her boss had fired her from her computer programming job, how fear had driven her last love away, and how now she was mentally and physically exhausted. Señora Labotta nodded the whole time, looking deep in thought.

“Lucina, which cat over there is the male and which cat is the female?” Señora Labotta questioned. Lucina looked up, turned around, and observed the two cats sleeping on a loveseat at the other end of the porch. She shook her head, more confused than ever.

“I don’t know,” she replied.

“There you go,” sighed the Mexican, pulling hair back from her slightly wrinkled face. “Sex is a secondary issue. What matters, is that there are two cats and they are next to each other. You have hate against men, but it’s not men you hate: it’s ignorant souls.”

Lucina swallowed more orange juice. *Keep busy and look cool. This woman is just a freak, I shouldn’t tell her too much about my life.*

“In your country,” continued Señora Labotta, “people only see sex. They do not see the soul, only the sex. You hit some bad human shells in the past few years, and they happened to be male shells. Get over it. Life is like that.”

Lucina gaped at the stranger in front of her for some time, and then reminded herself how impolite it was to be staring. *She certainly has a way with words, and she certainly lacks politeness, yet there is something quite honest about her.*

Nervously, Lucina replied that maybe she was right, but that most humans who were rotten were men. Men made war, raped women, beat their wives, and couldn’t be gentle if their lives depended on it.

Sighing, Señora Labotta shook her head and patiently explained to her guest that since men shells were the ones in power during this day and age, and had been for quite some time, it was normal that they did as they pleased. Women shells would reign again, she promised Lucina, and when the time would come, men shells would become the second sex, as they had been at the beginning of time.

Incredulous that they finally agreed on something, Lucina asked why she believed women would rule again. The Mexican woman was quiet and then slowly answered that women shells had suffered enough, and now the tables would turn. The two women were silent for several minutes. The only sound was that of birds chirping in the distant jungle behind the yellow house. Lucina looked up at the mysterious woman.

Whatever has made me come to this place and be with a person like this? Is it destiny? Do I even believe in destiny?

“What is important is that you go beyond the shells of humans,”

the Mexican emphasized, putting her fork down. "Do not blame men. Their souls contain both sexes. You should say that there are many rotten souls in the bodies of men and that would be more justified. There is no point in hating a shell. It is useless, believe me, a complete waste of time."

That's true. Perhaps I should start looking beyond shells, into the soul of people. Maybe Mr. Steve and all my previous boyfriends were just bad souls. I must have some sort of bad karma or something. What is karma anyway?

* * * * *

After breakfast, Señora Labotta helped Lucina carry her things to a large, somewhat beat-up, white, four-person tent near a grove of coconut trees. The spot looked cozy and private, just what Lucina had hoped for. Señora Labotta excused herself, saying that she had things to do, but told her guest to unpack and make herself at home.

After tossing various possessions into her new sleeping quarters, Lucina stopped dead in her tracks when she spotted a smaller tent through the low bushes some thirty feet away. Intrigued, she dropped her bags and ventured towards this mysterious tent, all the while attentive to her surroundings.

One can never be too careful. It could always be a gringo, or some other crazy Mexican person waiting to pump me full of lead, just like in the movies.

"Hola!" said a male voice from behind Lucina.

She whirled around to face the intruder, putting her fists up to her face automatically. When she saw who it was, she lowered her fists in embarrassment. Doctor Field had told her not to over-react. Why couldn't she follow simple advice? She had to stop being paranoid. She shook her head slightly, dropping her hands into her jean pockets.

Kung fu lessons still come in handy.

"Whoa, I am not a burglar, you can relax!" the man said, laughing.

“*Hola,*” Lucina reciprocated, giving him a quick annoyed glance.

The man looked no more than thirty, had a warm smile, and brown coffee skin. His emerald, green eyes stared back at Lucina innocently, as if asking why she was not more welcoming. As he walked closer, she couldn’t help but notice the silkiness of his raven-coloured curly hair that was cut just above his broad shoulders.

“Is *that* your tent?” Lucina asked, pointing to the green one-person igloo tent some thirty feet away.

“Yes, it is,” said the man in a good English accent, holding out his hand. “I’m here visiting my mother. I’m Teleo.”

Lucina was so shocked that she stared at him and didn’t respond for a few seconds. A man was staying here, close to her, and that woman had never warned her. This was terrible! At that moment, she wanted to pack her things immediately and return to her peaceful hotel room.

“Nice to meet you, my name is Lucina,” she said, rapidly shaking his hand firmly. *That is the last thing I need,* Lucina thought in a panic.

Another horny man prancing around near my terrain, trying to seduce me with roses and ballads and God knows what other tactics. I’ve had enough romance in my days, enough to fill a novel.

Explaining that he had errands to run for his mother, Teleo wished her a good day. Lucina was not surprised that he had errands to run for that woman.

“Teleo. What an odd name. Everything is odd around here,” she muttered as she made her way back to the larger tent. “I hope he won’t bother me playing guitar or something. Those Mexicans are known for partying all night, and being a man, he might want to make noise all night.”

* * * * *

Sometime later, Lucina noticed Señora Labotta in the backyard and hesitantly offered to help with some yard work. The Mexican

smiled, handed over a pair of cutters and a green garbage bag, and indicated what needed to be weeded. Lucina looked lost as to which plants were weeds and which were flowers, so the woman gave her a short five-minute botany course.

“Some plants look like flowers, like this one,” Señora Labotta explained, yanking out a long, purple flowery plant. “But in reality they are weeds and don’t belong here. Sometimes it is hard to tell weeds from flowers, but once you recognize the weeds, you cannot be fooled any longer.”

Rather reluctantly, Lucina began pulling weeds from the flowerbeds. Nodding in satisfaction, Señora Labotta left her to the task and returned to the kitchen to prepare supper. Lucina worked hard for two hours, pulling out random plants, hoping they were weeds. Feeling good about the accomplishment, she went to see the Mexican in the kitchen to say that she was going for a walk in the nearby mountains. The woman surprised Lucina by offering a mare named Luna for this adventure, telling Lucina that surely it would be safer on horseback than on foot. Canadian women had more trouble fitting into the jungle scenery than Mexican women, explained Señora Labotta. Lucina accepted gratefully, relieved that the Mexican had shown some concern for her safety.

It’s a good sign, Lucina thought, following her host to the barn. At least it doesn’t appear that she wants to roast me alive. Yet.

After explaining to Señora Labotta that she had ridden a horse at least a few dozen times, Lucina urged Luna on through the jungle. The day was hot and humid. She was grateful for having cut her brown hair before the trip. Short hair always made her feel lighter and younger. Lucina and Luna traversed a tiny brook and after a few minutes of riding harmoniously, Lucina felt the strangest urge to talk to the horse.

“Ever since I arrived here 3 days ago,” she began, “I have felt that the world here is so alien yet there’s this tranquility that I have never felt before in my life. Normally I need my PC to feel good, but now I feel like I need a bit of nature. It’s funny because I never really liked nature back in Montreal. *Is there nature in Montreal, anyway?*”

The mare trotted at a good pace, twitching her ears from time to time, giving the impression that she was listening to Lucina's chatter.

"Spanish is rich and somewhat romantic," Lucina continued, "And here, people also seem rich and romantic in a weird way. They don't seem pressed by time and work; rather, it seems they don't really care about work. When I talk with them, they usually smile and take their time. I guess their way of life is totally different from what I first imagined."

As Luna stopped to chew on some grass, Lucina gently stroked her gleaming white mane and admired her strong neck.

I have always liked horses more than other animals, Lucina realized. Perhaps it is because my mother read Gulliver's Travels so many times to me, and I learned about the Houyhnhnms and their greater reason so often.

"My life is not that bad, I guess. I'm glad that I program computers rather than sell things, or else I would have killed myself a long time ago. Imagine spending your life chasing people in stores and saying the same things over and over? 'Why, sir, this looks lovely on you, just lovely!' or 'Madame, you need another television, a bigger one, even if you already have three. It doesn't matter.' Argh, it's so disgusting. At least people chase after me and not the other way around. Yes, Doctor Field told me I have to learn to count my blessings. I guess I am blessed because I don't sell things all day long."

The horse was trotting again at a good pace.

"Señora Labotta is the weirdest person I have ever met. Yet sometimes, she says very deep things and I like that. I never hear people talk like her. She told me this morning that I should try to see beyond the shells of humans. That sounds like something coming out of the movie *Ghost in the Shell*, I still have to think about that one. Anyhow, she makes me very nervous at times with her intense staring problem, so maybe I'll only stay a few days and then excuse myself and return to the hotel. We'll see."

Luna was leading the way now. Lucina pulled on the reigns to steer her back in the direction from which they had come.

As human and horse slowly turned back, Lucina wrapped up her short monologue.

“Teleo seems like a nice guy, but I am really not looking for anyone right now. Men are only trouble, you know Luna, only trouble. It’s always the same story: they want sex and I want intelligent exchanges. Good Lord, it’s amazing that men rule when quite obviously the connectionist networks are more developed in us females.”

They continued their journey together in silence thereafter. Lucina was filled with a peaceful feeling. Perhaps it was better to talk to a horse than a human because it could never give her advice: it could only listen. Perhaps Lucina needed someone who would listen.

* * * * *

The sun was already setting by the time Luna and Lucina had retraced the path back to Señora Labotta’s. Pink, blue, purple, orange swirls, swept across the sky, and at that moment, Lucina felt like a child again, observing the world with new eyes.

Truly, Doctor Field was right about sending me to Oaxaca, she thought happily while jumping down from Luna.

“Oaxaca is filled with magic,” Doctor Field had said. “All you have to do is sit back and wait for the spell to begin. And bring a hat, so you don’t get sunstroke meanwhile.”

Up ahead, Lucina spotted open land and saw the lawn behind the Mexican’s house. She noticed again what a funny house Señora Labotta lived in, with its dusty little square windows, shaggy porch, yellow peeling paint, and white wavering shutters.

This kind of place in Montreal would belong to the nearest bum. Yet, the gorgeous flowers give it some charm and the square table with the golden eyes some magical element.

After taking Luna to the stable, Lucina headed up the uneven stairs of the house. Upon entering, she was amazed by the cleanliness of the home. Although the living room was no larger than her bedroom in Montreal, it was neatly organized and

everything had its proper place. A single brown couch lay against the wall to the right, a tiny television sat on a high, plain wooden table to the left, and a dim Mexican carpet hung on the wall in front of her. On it was the image of two eagles circling the same tree. The only window in the living room was to the right, above the couch.

“*Buenas tardes,*” called out a male voice from the kitchen. Teleo soon appeared in the living room, wiping his hands on a cloth.

“Good evening, Teleo,” Lucina replied with a swift smile. “I tied Luna up to the post near the stable.”

“*Gracias,* come on in the kitchen, we saved you some quesadillas,” he smiled.

The kitchen came into sight with the tiny little Mexican hats hanging on the orange and green walls. To her right was an oak table surrounded by four old wooden chairs. A vase of multi-coloured flowers had been placed in the center of the round table, giving the kitchen an ever more colourful aspect.

Clearly, Mexicans have a different color palette than Canadians, Lucina thought as she settled on the seat close to the wall. Teleo brought over a basket of quesadillas and some guacamole. After thanking him, Lucina eagerly ate, realizing that she was famished.

“Excuse me, do you have some meat?” she asked Teleo after a few bites.

He raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t you know what Ovid said about meat-eating? That the Golden Age stopped when we started eating meat.”

“Ah no, sorry, I take it you don’t eat meat here?”

“No, my mother and I believe that humans can survive without killing other creatures. Most animals sold in stores have been badly treated before being butchered, so their blood is contaminated with fear and suffering, a bad thing to digest. Also, nowadays there are so many chemicals in meat that it’s giving people cancer. Do have some beans; they contain a lot of protein, and they’re not animals.”

Lucina looked at the beans and shrugged. *Why not?* After having

made sure that no one else was going to accompany her, she dug into the food with hunger. The beans were spicy, a little too spicy for her taste buds, so she reached for the glass of water.

Teleo asked her how the stroll had been, if she had enjoyed the sights and the sounds of beautiful Oaxaca valley, and if she had seen any exotic creatures. Lucina admitted that she had never quite enjoyed nature as much as that afternoon in the jungle. Teleo smiled and sat down opposite his guest. His presence had a strange, unsettling affect on Lucina. Her stomach contracted slightly and she quickly took several sips of a second glass of water. Through the rectangular kitchen window, she noticed that night was slowly descending on the valley.

"*Mi madre* tells me that you don't like men shells? What a pity!" Teleo said, his eyes bright and piercing. He leaned forward in his chair, brushing a few rebel hairs from his eyes, smiling.

Lucina began to feel the color rising to her cheeks.

"Yes, I seem to have encountered some bad male shells in my life," she answered, trying to repress her embarrassment. *Now I know to watch my mouth around here*, she thought angrily.

At that precise moment, Señora Labotta came sauntering into the kitchen as if on cue and sat down at the table. Her long hair was braided on top of her head, making her round cheeks seem even rounder than usual. She nodded to both Teleo and Lucina, and began rolling herself a quesadilla. Lucina noted that she mostly filled it with beans, onions and sour cream.

Teleo laughed and patted his mother on the shoulder. "So, *mi madre* has been explaining to you her theories on shells and souls," he said with a grin. "Do you consider yourself a lesbian then?"

Lucina's face grew hotter still. Señora Labotta turned an attentive ear towards her.

"Pardon me? It's not because I dislike men that I am a lesbian!" Lucina replied, somewhat ruffled. The familiar feeling of defensiveness crept up and she bit her lip. Teleo smiled, raising both his hands as a sign of surrender.

"Okay, okay," replied Teleo. "Have you thought of becoming

a lesbian?"

"No, I don't think you can just flick your fingers and become gay. I think you're either born gay or straight. You can't just become gay, that doesn't happen," Lucina said, avoiding Teleo's serpent eyes. "Anyhow, I never said I hated men shells: I just had really bad experiences with men up to now."

"You think you are born straight or gay?" Señora Labotta asked. Lucina nodded her head. *Oh no, here we go, another discussion on sexless realities. Is this ever going to stop?*

"I would not say that," continued the woman squinting at Lucina. "I think we are all born bisexual, señorita, and that the world forces us to focus on the opposite shell. Really, we should have no preference. It should be natural to be attracted to both male and female shells. It is not the *shells* which attract us but the *spirits* in the shell."

She paused as she bit into her rather over-stuffed quesadilla.

"You know, in dreams we couple as much with men as with women, if you have not noticed," she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "It is very common. We are driven by our sexual impulses in all realms, and within the dream realm, our egos cannot interfere and tell us, 'This is bad, this is good,' when it comes to sexual attraction."

At that moment, Teleo got up, went to the fridge, and pulled out three cold Sol beers. Lucina gratefully accepted one and drank in silence, still fidgeting in her seat. Sweat began to dribble down her forehead. She quickly wiped it away, hoping no one had noticed.

Teleo asked his mother in Spanish to change the subject, pointing out that Lucina was obviously uncomfortable, but Señora Labotta continued as though she hadn't heard him.

"Señorita Lucina, when you were young, did you only play *el doctor* with the boys? Or did you also play with the girls?"

Lucina shrugged, unsure of how to reply. The conversation was beginning to seriously aggravate her. Regretfully, she flashed to the quiet room at Posada Margarita, the brightly lit bathroom with its rusted taps, the small claustrophobic shower with its broken

showerhead, and the comfortable little bed in the corner.

Teleo coughed loudly. Lucina jolted back into reality.

“Well, señorita, you seem lost in your thoughts. I hope we haven’t offended you,” he said, softly fingering the cap of his Sol beer.

Lucina gave him a quick smile.

“Not at all, I’m just not used to hearing such notions,” she said, coughing.

I need to get out of here fast. I’ll feign tiredness—that should do the trick.

After a few more minutes of innocent conversation, she excused herself from the table, pretending to stifle a yawn. Preoccupied by what had been discussed, Lucina returned to her tent in the still dark night. Could she indeed be bisexual without knowing it? Worse still, could all humans be bisexuals and just not know it? This notion was very disturbing to Lucina. It would take some time for her to fall asleep that first evening.

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