

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

THE SUMMER HOUSE

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HENRÍQUEZ

Author of *The Book of Unknown Americans*

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Somebody was coming to pick me up that afternoon. Don Antonio had called earlier and said just that. He had given no name for who it would be, no time more specific than afternoon, and no explanation for why. “Be ready,” he told me.

I had lived alone for a very long time in the house where I had been raised. Aside from the telephone, it had few modern conveniences. Don Antonio was the only person who ever called.

Both of my parents had died by the time I was seventeen—first my father, in a boating accident at sea, and three months later my mother, of nothing identifiable. Heartbreak, the doctor who came to the house pronounced after he examined her, and I remember I sputtered with laughter at the word. It was only when the doctor looked at me with a puzzled expression that I realized he had not been making a joke. And maybe, I realized later, it was true. My mother had spent most of her time taking care of my father, getting him his cigarettes, ironing his undershirts, cooking his meals. What was that if not a version of love?

I was a slight, obedient boy, and after my parents died I had dropped out of school to work at a small restaurant in town. What choice did I have? My parents’ passing had left me alone in the world. Once or twice they had mentioned relatives, but I had never met any of them, and if they existed, none of them came for me. For twenty years, that had been my life—working at the restaurant most days, coming home by myself most nights—until five years ago when Don Antonio told the owner of the restaurant he was looking for help, someone reliable and local, he said, and the owner gave him my name.

Today, after Don Antonio called, I packed a duffel bag with a toothbrush, a razor, and a change of clothes, then walked out of the house to wait in the weeds along the dirt road. There were hardly any cars that drove this way—over the years, anytime I had heard one, I could only assume that the driver was lost—so I didn’t bother to look in either direction; I knew I would hear any vehicle as it neared. But after an hour, no one had come. The sun baked the earth. I looked down at the bag at my feet and saw a leaf-cutter ant crawling over one of the handles. Slowly, I crouched.

“What do you think?” I asked the ant. “Is anyone coming for me? Should I go back inside?”

I was considering it when I heard the growl of an engine. A blue pickup truck came barreling down the road. I flicked the ant off into the dirt and stood.

When the truck stopped, I saw that a teenage boy—I was old enough that I could have been his father—was driving it. He stared at me through the dusty window. I walked around to the passenger side, opened the door, and climbed in.

“Buenas,” I said, and the boy nodded.

As soon as I closed the door, he started off again, tearing down the road as the truck bumped over grooves in the dirt, sounding, as it bounced up and back down, like every nut and bolt that was holding it together was coming undone.

Half an hour later we arrived at Don Antonio’s summer house. The boy had stayed silent during the drive, so I had, too. At the foot of the driveway, he got out and dragged open the iron gate before steering us through, up the path toward the house. It would take another five minutes, I knew, before we got to it, and as we drove I gazed out the window at the lush tendrils of bougainvillea and hibiscus that lined the winding dirt lane. In past summers I had spent hours cutting back spiny points of ixora with a machete to keep the path clear. I had trimmed hibiscus with a pair of shears and pruned the breadfruit trees. I was forty-one years old and had been working for Don Antonio for long enough that I had learned there was a certain way he liked everything. I always did my best to oblige.

When the house at last came into view, I took a deep breath. I don’t know why I should have been nervous—Don Antonio had always been good to me, and fair—except that this time I didn’t know what was in store. Don Antonio occasionally called upon me at the last minute to do odd jobs that I did not expect. In the first year of my employ he was entertaining a group of dignitaries, men in stiff suits and fine hats, and when the cook called in sick, Don Antonio ordered me to cut the feet off two of the chickens in the yard and use them to prepare a large pot of sancocho for dinner. If I had been raised in the city, I would not have known what to do,

but in the interior, butchering chickens was common. Before she died, I had seen my mother do it dozens of times. I made the soup, and though not everyone finished theirs, Don Antonio had patted me on the shoulder and assured me I had done a good job. The summer after that, he had asked me to deliver a stack of small cardboard boxes to a man in Chitré. I had done that, too. But in both cases, Don Antonio had explained at the outset precisely what he wanted me to do. That he had been so vague this time, so unforthcoming, gave me the sense that something was amiss.

I stepped onto the driveway and dragged the duffel bag out of the car behind me, awaiting further instruction. The boy leaned across the cab and rolled down the passenger window.

"She's inside," he said, and then began rolling the window back up again, as if that was all I needed to know.

"Excuse me," I said. "Who?"

But he only pointed at the house as if I were an idiot. He threw the truck into reverse, then pulled forward again until he got it turned around, and roared down the driveway, blowing up pebbles and dust in his wake.

The house was beautiful. I had always thought so. It was modest by some standards, nothing more than a rectangular cement rancho with a barely pitched roof, but it sat alone at the top of a hill that, through the bramble of surrounding palm trees and ferns, looked out over the dark blue ocean. There were no other houses and no other people as far as the eye could see. Don Antonio, who was a businessman of some sort, lived and worked in the city, and he used the house as his retreat.

My own house, the same house I had grown up in and lived in all my life, was less than half the size, with clay walls and an aluminum sheet for a roof. When I wanted water, I walked to a pump outside. To cook, I struck a match and lit a fire in the stove. It was how many people in our remote town used to live, and I had never been able to afford anything more.

I walked around back to the chicken coop and found it, strangely, empty, save for a few stray feathers and a scattering of feed. The clothesline that usually extended from the south corner of the house had apparently snapped and was coiled on the ground. I walked closer and spread open one of the many hammocks hung around the property only to find a huddle of dead beetles in the middle of it, their dry shells scraping against each other as they tumbled out of the folds of fabric. I knelt and with my hand swept

together the carcasses that had fallen, then nudged them off the edge of the cement slab and covered them with dirt.

I made my way to the side door and knocked. When no one answered, I turned the knob and stepped inside.

“Hello?” I called.

Still nothing, and when I glanced around, there was no evidence that anyone was there. In the living area, a leather couch faced a small television that sat on top of a rolling cart. In the kitchen behind that, there was nothing on the cement countertops except for an unplugged toaster and an empty fruit bowl. The white refrigerator with its small dent on the door rattled softly against the wall.

“Hello?” I said, louder.

Then, from the back bedroom I heard a voice.

“Alberto?”

I put down my bag and walked toward it, stopping at the bedroom door. “Doña?”

“Alberto, is it you?”

“Yes.”

“Come in, then.”

I pushed open the door and saw Doña Lola, Don Antonio’s wife, lying in bed. The thin sheet that she had pulled up to her waist was sunk in the valley between her legs. Her blouse was open at the neck, and she had one hand on her chest near the base of her throat. Her smooth black hair curled around her shoulders, but her face was bare—I had never seen her without makeup—and the effect was as if she had literally faded. It startled me as much as if she had been lying there naked.

“Thank God,” she said when she saw me. “I’m so glad it’s you.”

I felt myself blush. I was still staring at her.

“I haven’t had anything to eat all day,” she went on.

I assumed my role. “What can I get you?”

“I don’t know what the boy brought. I told him to get ham. Good ham, I said, but I don’t know if he knew what I meant.”

“I can check.”

“And a glass of lemonade.”

“Of course.”

Lola—that’s how I always thought of her, how I had thought of her since we were in primary school together, though I knew better now than to

refer to her that way out loud—closed her eyes briefly and sighed, either from relief or from exhaustion, I couldn't tell which. I watched the rise and fall of her hand on her chest, her palm against her bare skin.

"Is that all?" I asked finally.

She fluttered her eyes open and smiled, just barely. "For now," she said.

I had spent my life serving other people. It seemed to be the only thing I was good at, or else it was the only thing I had been allowed to be good at, never having had a chance to discover if I could be good at anything else. When I was young it used to worry me, the idea that perhaps God had granted me some other gift—maybe I could have been a wonderful pianist, or I had a talent for mountain climbing, or I could have solved a mathematical problem that had been unsolvable before—and due to circumstance, I would never know what it was. But they were useless thoughts. And service, I told myself, was an admirable purpose.

Long ago, when I first started at the restaurant, clearing the tables and sweeping dust and chicken shit off the floors and taking the trash out as many times a day as was necessary, my former classmates used to come in sometimes. There were groups of them, joking with one another and smiling broadly as they sat down. Most of the students, when they saw me, were kind. Even when I had been in school, I was an outcast, shy to the point of humiliation sometimes, consumed with my studies. I had no real friends, and certainly no one had ever invited me to go anywhere with them or do anything with them. But my classmates knew what I had suffered, losing both of my parents, and when I was not the recipient of their compassion, I was at least the recipient of their pity. But some of the boys apparently thought that my new station in life granted them the right to deride me, to treat me as lowlier than them.

"Berto," they would say (that's what people called me in those days), and they would snap their fingers to summon me. When I arrived at their table—and not sooner—one of them would knock over his bottle of soda and say, "Will you clean that up?" They laughed as I swabbed the table with my damp dishcloth. Once, one of them complained that his corn cake was too greasy, and he told me to try it to see if I agreed. I knew it was some

sort of ploy, but not until I took a bite and the boys doubled over in hysterics did I realize they had stuffed horseflies into the corn cake for me to eat. I spit it out into my hand with an urge to throw the mush at the boy's head. But I didn't. I closed my hand and walked to the back of the restaurant and flung the mush in the dirt.

When they weren't being out-and-out cruel, the boys enjoyed ordering me around, creating more work for me however they could. Because I needed the job, I did what they asked. Lola was with them sometimes, not because they were her friends necessarily, but more because she was tagging along. When the boys laughed, Lola did not, and though I never heard her tell them to stop, she frowned sometimes as if she were ashamed of their behavior, and I accorded her a bit more humanity than the rest of them because of that.

One day, after everyone else had walked out, leaving behind oily paper napkins and plates strewn with bones and beans, Lola stayed behind. She lingered in the open doorway and watched me clear the table. I retreated to the kitchen to throw everything away, and when I came back out, she was still there. Beautiful Lola. She was wearing her green school uniform and her black hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail. I rarely looked up from my textbooks long enough to register anyone, but I had always noticed Lola at least, all through our school years. How could I not? She was the sort of person everyone noticed, because she was beautiful, yes, but also because of some unmistakable aura that she possessed—confidence, grace.

I glanced at her again in the doorway.

"Is it lonely?" she asked.

There was only one other couple in the restaurant, and they were engrossed in their own conversation. I knew she was speaking to me.

I had on my stained apron, and I was holding a damp dish towel in my two hands. "A little bit," I said.

"I think that would be the worst thing. Being alone."

For a moment I wondered whether she was trying to make me feel worse.

"I can't even imagine it, really," Lola went on, and the look on her face told me that, far from any mean-spiritedness, she was sincere. "Do you know that Calderón play? The one that says that all of life is a dream?"

"No."

“We read it a few weeks ago in school. It says that the life we’re living is not reality, that reality is in the eternal. I keep thinking about that. I don’t know why. I can’t tell if it makes sense, but the idea of it stuck to me like a cobweb, you know? I can’t seem to untangle myself from it.”

When I had been in school with her, Lola rarely spoke in class. Maybe because of that, or maybe because she was also beautiful, I had never assumed she was smart or that she thought about things in any deep way. That wasn’t fair, of course, but I was pleased then to learn that I had been wrong.

“Anyway,” she said. “I’m sorry. About your parents.”

I nodded, and she stood there for several more seconds before she turned around and left.

That night, in the schoolbooks I still had at home, I found the Calderón play and read the whole thing.

The next time I saw Lola, she was with a few girlfriends, but she again stayed behind after they left, this time seated at the table by herself. I gathered every fistful of courage I had and walked over to her and said, “The king only convinced his son that it was a dream. But it wasn’t. Everything that happened to him was real.”

Lola looked up at me with such a strange expression that I feared I had said something wrong. Then she narrowed her eyes. “Is that better, though?”

“What?”

“Would you rather live in reality or in a dream?”

I don’t remember how I answered, but after that Lola started wandering into the restaurant alone, taking a seat at a table by herself, smiling when she caught my eye. The first time, not knowing what to make of it, I approached her and asked what she wanted to order. “I’m not here to be served,” she said. “I just thought we could talk.” From then on if I didn’t have tables to tend, I would sit across from her and listen to her tell me about the other plays and stories and poems she was reading in school. Still, I was so unused to attention, especially from someone like her, that it made me suspicious, and I wondered if she was using me to get a better grade. But it became clear soon enough that she knew the material as well as, if not better than, me. Lola often asked for my opinion, and at home after work I read my literature schoolbook cover to cover just so that when I saw her again I would have something to say, happy and amazed that she

wanted to hear me say anything at all. Once, she asked me if I had read Neruda's sonnets, and when I said yes, she wanted to know what I thought of them. I said they were obvious, and she said, "Sure, but just because something is plain, does that mean it's not beautiful, too?"

All through that year this went on. After secondary school when Lola went off to university in the city, I assumed I would never see her again. I told myself it was nothing to be upset about, life went on, but at the time I felt that I had lost something. She was the only person I talked to at length, the only person who cared to talk to me. We were friends. At night sometimes, as I lay in the dark, humid air with only the crickets as company, I let myself wonder if we could have been more. But it was stupid, I decided. She had wanted to talk to someone about literature, and I was there. A girl like Lola, beautiful and confident, would never truly be interested in a timid, awkward boy like me. Besides, it didn't matter. She had left for university, moved ahead with her life, while I had stayed behind.

How could I have known that nearly twenty years later Don Antonio would contact me about doing work for him at his summer house? How was I to know that Lola would have been married to him by then? And how was I to understand her reappearance in my life as anything other than fate?

I took the liberty of unpacking my things and putting them in the maid's room. In the five years that I had been coming here, it was where I always stayed. It was a space just off the kitchen, separate from the other bedrooms, cramped and windowless. Still, it was really only a place to sleep, and after gently shooing a few centipedes, I set my clothes in the baskets beneath the bed.

I went outside and began collecting lemons for Lola's lemonade, fashioning my shirt into a pouch in which to hold them, and then I brought them inside and began the task of squeezing them one by one, twisting a fork into the flesh until I had extracted enough juice for half a pitcher. Lola and I never had long conversations anymore, not the way we used to, but she had made a point once to tell me that she liked her lemonade tart, so when I prepared it now, I left the sugar out as she wished.

In the refrigerator there was butter, eggs, brown bread, orange cheese, and a bowl covered with aluminum foil. I lifted one corner of the foil and was glad to see ham, a great chunk of it still on the bone.

When I brought the ham and lemonade to Lola, she smiled.

“You are always so good to me,” she said.

I set the plate on the bedside table next to a lamp. Lola took the lemonade. She sat up a bit and raised the glass to her lips, but she was still at an odd angle and the lemonade spilled out the sides of the glass and ran down her chin. She sputtered and sat up farther, wiping her face with the sheet.

“What a mess!” she said, laughing at first, and then her laughter turned to tears. She wiped those with the sheet, too. “Everything is a mess.”

I had never seen her cry before, but she did not try to hide it, and I wondered whether she wanted me to ask her what was wrong. I bit my tongue instead.

Eventually Lola stopped crying and held out the glass. She said, “I’ll take the ham now.”

I handed her the plate and watched as she chewed silently, pulling apart bits of ham with her slender fingers. We were both older than we had once been—my own hair was graying, and one look in a mirror revealed creases at the corners of my tired brown eyes—but Lola was still beautiful in so many ways.

“Is there anything else?” I asked. As always when I was in her presence, I was both eager to go and eager to stay.

She didn’t answer at first. She kept eating the ham, which was pink and cold and mealy. She left bits of fat on the plate. Then, without looking up, she said, “He’s leaving me.”

I didn’t move.

“Did you hear me?” she said, gazing up at me now.

“Yes.”

“Well, don’t you have anything to say?”

But I didn’t. Or I didn’t know *what* to say. In a way I wished that she had never told me. It was none of my business. And yet, I felt something surge through me that I can only describe as hope, a greedy sort of hope, that it might really be true.

“I see,” Lola said. “You don’t care.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You’re sorry? He’s having an affair, and you’re sorry? That’s what it is, you know. Another woman. How common. Apparently it was a great inconvenience to him that I found out.”

I hated to see her in pain, but my mind was reeling.

She bowed her head and picked at the ham. “Did he tell you how long he’s planning on keeping me here?”

“What?”

“How long he’s keeping me in exile?”

“No.”

“What does he think? He can just toss me out like the trash? I could go back if I wanted to.”

But the city was four hours away by car, and she didn’t have one. Neither of us did.

“I was supposed to meet him for lunch. A harmless lunch! Every Friday we have lunch at Balear. But it wasn’t the usual driver. It was that boy, and he drove me right out of the city. I tried to ask him where we were going, where in God’s name he was taking me, I threatened to call the police, but when I pulled out my phone, Antonio had shut my cell service off. I screamed for a while and hit the boy with my purse, but nothing I did made him say anything to me. Antonio paid him well, I suppose.”

I tried not to smile as I imagined Lola swatting the boy. I was still trying to process everything she was saying. I was trying to keep myself composed.

Lola held the plate up, and I took it, and she sighed and sank back into the pillows. I had an urge to comfort her somehow, to tell her that if it was true, he was a fool, but there was only one way I knew to take care of people. “Is there anything else I can get for you?” I asked.

“No,” Lola said. She pulled the sheet up around her, even though the air in the house was as warm as a bath.

I did want to know what had happened, but it was not my place to ask. Once, yes, Lola and I had been friends, but it was different now. She and Don Antonio were married, and my duty, as had been made abundantly clear, was to serve them, that’s all.

Three summers ago, I had been inside the house cutting up chunks of pineapple when Don Antonio walked in, carrying Lola in his arms. They were newlyweds then. It was the first time I had seen Lola since she had gone away to university, and I was so shocked that I almost lost my grip on the knife and cut off the tip of my thumb. Lola screamed when she saw me. Startled, Don Antonio nearly dropped her. Lola squirmed out of his arms and ran toward me and pulled me into an embrace. Over her shoulder, I could see Don Antonio scowl.

“What is this?” he asked.

Still holding my arm, Lola smiled and turned. “This is Alberto,” she said.

“I know *who* it is. But what”—he gestured toward both of us—“is this?”

“Alberto and I have known each other since primary school.”

Don Antonio looked at us with obvious displeasure. For my part, I still couldn’t believe she was there.

Don Antonio flared his nostrils and said, “What’s past is past.”

“But—” Lola began.

“Ya,” he said, cutting her off. When he went on he looked directly at me. “Alberto is here because I have hired him to do a job, nothing more.”

It was a statement of fact, but he meant it as a warning, and it had its intended effect. Lola stepped away from me and went back to his side. She looked embarrassed, but she didn’t say anything else. Thus, the arrangement was clear: whatever relationship Lola and I might have had in the past was not to be mentioned again.

The house was filthy—that’s what happened when it went unused for long stretches of time—and while Lola lay in her room I busied myself with cleaning it, partly because it needed to be done and partly as a way to keep my mind occupied so that I didn’t waste time wondering whether it was true, whether Don Antonio really was leaving her. To believe it opened up too big of a space in me, a space that I had taken great care to close off. Any entrance to it, even the possibility of an entrance, was something that I was better off not considering. And yet, I couldn’t resist. What if? What if? Did it mean I might get my chance? Instantly, I saw us sitting together at the end

of the day, her feet up on my lap, my hands resting lightly on her waist, and in my vision she was laughing about something I had said. In my vision she was happy, happier than she had ever been with him. Lola and Don Antonio had met at a party. I had gleaned that at some point. I didn't know the details, whether it had been a chance encounter or a meeting arranged by a mutual friend, but I imagined that Lola had sparkled and that Don Antonio had been suave. He was an impressive figure—powerful, wealthy, acquainted with politicians in the city—and if those things on their own had not been enough, I suspected that the moment he mentioned he owned a house in the town where Lola was from, she had felt connected to him. It was a tenuous connection from what I had seen. Aside from that first moment when Don Antonio carried Lola over the threshold, they never acted in the manner of people deeply in love. They often disagreed about how to spend the days. Lola preferred to go to the ocean, and most mornings she walked down the long hillside path carved out of the brush. She liked to swim and to sit on the rocks afterward, letting her hair dry to a crisp in the sun. Sometimes she didn't come back until evening, and when she did, Don Antonio, who spent the days at the kitchen table reading and poring over business documents, looked at her with an expression that betrayed both irritation and dismissiveness, as though her pleasure would have been annoying if he could have brought himself to care about it at all. Of course, I was aware that my view was limited. I was with them for only a few weeks out of every year, and in circumstances outside of their usual life, but I had paid close attention—I was nothing if not attentive—and as much as I respected Don Antonio, I always thought Lola deserved better than him.

I found rags beneath the sink and used them to wipe every surface in the house. I opened the windows to let in fresh air. Cobwebs were stitched into the corners of some, and in the center of one of those cobwebs sat a fat brown spider. “Could it be true?” I asked it. “And what if it is?” It was a beautiful spider, with a pearl-colored back and black stripes on its legs. For as long as I watched, it didn't move as I hoped it would, and finally I walked away, though I left that window closed so as not to disturb it.

It wasn't until the next morning that I saw her again. I scrambled eggs for breakfast and brought them to her room. When I knocked on the door, Lola told me to come in. She was still in the same clothes she had been in the day before, her shirt rumpled, her face bare. She sat up when she saw me and held out her hands for the plate.

"What would I do without you?" she said.

I kept my smile to myself, and after she set the plate down, I asked, "Is there anything else?"

She waved her hand in the air.

"Doña?"

"Oh, Alberto," she moaned. "What am I going to do?"

"Did you sleep?"

"For a little while. And then I woke up to find that this wasn't a dream after all. I was hoping it was."

I said, "All of life is a dream."

"Is it?"

"Calderón thought so."

Dimly, Lola smiled. "I haven't thought about that in such a long time. What was that poor prince's name?"

"Segismundo."

"That's right. He was imprisoned in a castle tower, wasn't he? Something like the situation I find myself in. Trapped. I can't remember, though, what happened to him. Was he freed in the end?"

"Eventually, yes."

Lola looked off to the window. "Yes, well."

All morning I had counted the minutes until I could see her again. The light through the window glossed her black hair.

Lola turned toward me again. "Tell me, Alberto, do you think it's that he doesn't find me attractive anymore?"

"No!" I blurted. "It can't—"

"I'm forty-one now, you know."

I took a deep breath and told myself to calm down. I attempted to speak in an even tone. "We're all getting older, Doña."

"What a tragedy!"

I smiled. "I think that's how it's supposed to work."

Lola laughed, a high-pitched, insincere laugh. "Not for women. Haven't you heard? Women are supposed to stay young forever. Not that I

was young when he met me. But still, what if no man ever finds me attractive again? I know I shouldn't care. It's so shallow to care. But I tell you, it's lovely when someone wants to fuck you."

My face burst into flame, a sparkling heat that spread all down my chest and into my groin.

Lola sighed and pushed the plate to the side. She had not touched the eggs. "What about you? I don't even know. Did you ever marry?"

"No," I managed to say.

"You've been alone all this time?"

I had acquaintances, people I knew from town, people who knew me. At the restaurant there were regulars, and the staff, too. There had been women I had found attractive, of course, even half formed relationships with a few, but nothing that lasted, no real companionship, which I knew is what Lola meant.

"I'm very happy by myself."

"I don't believe that."

"I'm used to it," I said, which felt closer to the truth.

"I don't believe that, either."

I squared my shoulders. I needed to leave. I needed to gather myself. "Is there anything else I can get you?" I asked.

"Alberto," she said.

"Yes, Doña?"

"Are you always so well behaved?"

I didn't know how to answer. I had to look away, focusing my eyes on the floor tile instead.

"You don't have to be, you know. He's not here, watching us."

Her voice was soft, a hum vibrating on the surface of the air. I felt her looking at me. I had the sensation that my chest was caving in, collapsing beneath some exquisite weight. I knew she was waiting for my response, but I stood perfectly still, keeping my gaze on the floor.

At last, mercifully, Lola said, "There's nothing else, then. Thank you for breakfast."

The days passed one after the other. There was no phone in the house—that was one of the pleasures of it—and I caught Lola a few times staring out the

window that overlooked the long driveway as though she were waiting for Don Antonio to arrive, perhaps to declare that he had changed his mind or at least to offer some sort of apology for the things he had done. In my own way, I suppose, I was waiting, too. One day someone would come for her or some word would arrive. It couldn't be that she and I would go on like this forever, could it? Still, I felt myself, in some small, terrible way, hoping for it. Together we had fallen into a sort of routine. I delivered meals to Lola's room, and if she did not answer when I knocked, I left the plates outside the door so that she could eat at her leisure. In the late morning, she showered, and then she came out from her room and lay in a hammock for a time, her hands folded on her stomach, her feet crossed at the ankles. From across the garden I permitted myself to watch her—the way she pushed her hair off her forehead, how sheer her white blouse appeared in the sunlight—until she stirred, and I walked away, silently admonishing myself to do my job. To do that and nothing else. She wandered back to her room for the lunch hour, and in the early afternoon, she went for a walk on the grounds, preferring to go barefoot rather than wear the high heels she had arrived in. I cleaned while she walked. I rinsed the shower stall and folded her towel, smoothing the nap of it with my hand. In her room I brushed the crumbs out of her sheets and turned the pillows. The scent of her lingered, that peppery scent of jasmine. I placed my hands flat upon the sheet where she had lain and closed my eyes for a minute, inhaling her, trying to hold on to that scent, even though it was impossible, of course. It's impossible to hold on to anything really. Everything slips away in due time. Still, the rhythm of those days—the rising in the morning, the meals, the nearness of another person, even the silence, all of it in a house that we had to ourselves—it was the approximation of a life, the sort of life of which I had dreamed, and to be enacting that life with Lola, of all people, made me unspeakably happy.

“I'm going for a swim,” she announced one morning, coming into the kitchen. We had been at the house for six days by then. “Do you want to come?”

I was standing at the sink, and I turned to her, surprised. “No,” I said quickly. Then, “I'm sorry. No, thank you.”

She stared at me, and I had the sense that she was waiting to see whether I might change my mind. When I didn't, she said, "I'll be back before dinner."

I waited for her all day, busying myself with chores. I swept the chicken coop and finally hung the clothesline that had fallen. I checked the water level in the tank and pulled weeds along the driveway. Don Antonio had a rocking chair on the patio, and while usually I would have cleaned it and beat the dirt out of the seat cushion, out of fidelity to Lola, I left it untouched. I knew she would never notice the gesture, but still it seemed important.

By late afternoon, when Lola hadn't yet reappeared, the thought crossed my mind that she had made an escape, that somehow she had figured out a way back to the city and that if she had, I would be held responsible. I didn't want to think about Don Antonio's disappointment, not to mention his wrath. I had heard the way he spoke to business associates who had crossed him, that heated iron ore of anger. I didn't want to be the one branded.

So it was with some relief that just after dusk I heard a rustling along the path, footsteps. I was crouched outside the house, holding a pair of scissors, preparing to kill a scorpion by snipping it in half. I looked over my shoulder. I saw Lola emerging out of the overgrowth, naked, carrying her clothes in her arms. Instead of stopping to cover herself as I thought she would, she walked toward me.

Immediately, I turned my gaze back to the ground. The scorpion slithered under the house.

"Alberto," I heard her say.

She stood right next to me, her bare feet within my view—a kind of torture. My heart started to pound.

"Berto," she said softly. It was the first time she had called me that since our school days.

From my crouched position, I said, "Yes?"

"Stand up."

As I did, I saw every inch of her. I was barely breathing by the time I straightened all the way up and looked in her eyes. Her hair was wet and pushed back off her face. I could smell salt water lifting off her skin.

"Please," she said.

I couldn't speak.

Lola reached down and took my hand. The scissors I was holding clattered to the ground, but she didn't flinch. She pulled my hand toward her and placed it low on her stomach. Her skin was warm and damp.

I thought I might faint.

"It's okay," she said.

Then she leaned forward and kissed me, a dizzying kiss, and—I couldn't help myself—I kissed her back. I pulled her close, as close as I could. I slid one hand around her back and pressed the other against the nape of her neck, beneath her wet hair. I had dreamed of a moment like this so many times. I was shaking with want. She leaned into me, and together we stumbled back. When we collided with the side of the house, Lola opened her eyes and gave an impish smile and said, "If only he knew."

All at once, I understood. It wasn't me that she wanted. What she wanted was to get even with him, and she was using me to do it. Maybe she didn't think of it that way. Maybe she was just lonely and wounded, and I was there, as always, to fulfill her needs. That was my job, after all—to be used however she and Don Antonio saw fit. But either way, I understood.

I twisted away and took a step to the side.

"What's wrong?" Lola asked.

But I still couldn't speak. I had never been good at talking to anybody but her, but there were still so many things I could not say. Besides, I didn't have words for all that I felt just then, the tangle of desire and hurt and humiliation and dismay.

Lola looked at me and tightened her lips. "I see. You don't want me. Apparently nobody does."

She seemed suddenly angry with me. She wrapped her clothes crudely around her torso and walked into the house.

I didn't see Lola again for the rest of the night. For dinner I had prepared plátanos en tentación and white rice, but I couldn't bring myself to take it to her room and knock on her door, and she didn't come out.

She didn't come out for breakfast the next morning, either, and even though I brewed coffee and sliced rings of papaya that I fanned on a plate, both went untouched. Once, I heard the flush of the toilet and the sound of

water running through the faucet, but those things, along with her closed bedroom door, were the only evidence that she was still there.

I had hardly slept. I didn't know what to think, what to feel, what to do. All morning I paced through the house, listening to the birds and the distant waves, wanting equally to see her and avoid her. I walked by her door and walked away again. I went out to the patio, to the spot where we had kissed, and kicked at the ground. And then just before noon, one week to the day since Lola and I had been together in that house, I heard a truck pull up the drive. I went to the window and looked. It was the same blue pickup truck that had brought both of us here, and the young boy driving it appeared just as bored as he had the week prior. A minute later, I saw Lola walking out toward the truck in the same wrinkled blouse and slim dark jeans she had been wearing all week, carrying her shoes in one hand and her purse under her arm. I didn't know it then, but it was the last time in my life I would ever see her. She looked tired and sad as she climbed into the truck. Watching her go, I was seized by regret. What did it matter the reason? Was I really so principled or was I just stupid? I'd had the chance to be with her at last—at last!—and I had tossed it away.

The truck backed up and started to turn. “Lola!” I yelled from behind the glass. But she didn't hear me. And anyway, it was too late.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Michael Lionstar

Cristina Henríquez is the author of *The Book of Unknown Americans*, which was a *New York Times* and *Washington Post* notable book, one of Amazon's ten best books of the year, and chosen as a year's best by Oprah.com. It was also longlisted for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.



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