

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

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Girl to Market

She never had a name, Just Chica. She was about five before she realized it wasn't a name, just a description. Girl. It was the year her uncle had been killed defending his farm in the mountains. Chica didn't know whether the men who shot her uncle were the men who sold the white powder, revolutionaries, or just bandits. Maybe they worked for the rich man who owned most of the land around the village and who wanted her father's small plot of land, too. It didn't matter, just like it didn't matter that she didn't have a name.

She learned early that it was best to be quiet, especially in front of the men, especially her father. That's how it was. When the men were in the village, the women rarely spoke above a whisper as they prepared the food and fed the children. Their expressions were blank, their eyes cast down. When the men were away, that was the time Chica liked best. The women were different then. Their faces relaxed, and they laughed and smiled as they talked while sitting and working together.

One night, shortly after her uncle was killed, Chica's father told her mother to bundle some clothes and food into two blankets and make slings. They gave Chica and her older brother, Eduardo, each a smaller sack. While it was still dark, they left the village. It was raining, and Chica shivered in the cold, even though her mother had given her a blanket to wrap around herself. They walked slowly and steadily down the mountain trail for two days, following the slick, muddy path. Her father would pause impatiently now and then, make a wind-up gesture with his arm, and yell at Chica. "Come on. Come on. Hurry up." She would run for a few steps, but would slow down as soon as her father turned his back. Her legs were short, and she had trouble trotting down the trail without slipping. A five-year-old's legs are not that long.

She trudged downhill, watching her feet as she walked. The mud felt good squishing up through her toes. It was clean, washed by the rain. When they would pause to rest, she would make mud pies and castles that Eduardo would stomp on and then laugh. Even so, the mud was fun, even though she was cold and hungry, so hungry her tummy hurt. When they approached small villages, her mother and father would gather her and Eduardo close to them and hurry past. At night, they stepped off the trail into the forest to sleep. Her father had said it would be safer. Safer than what, she had wondered, but did not ask. Her father did not light a fire. Chica was always cold.

They only paused to eat and to sleep. The cooked chicken her mother had prepared was gone by the end of the second day. The bread, cassava, bananas and other fruit lasted until they reached what her father called the main road. To Chica it looked like a slightly wider mud trail, but with deep ruts that she was afraid would swallow her up.

When they reached the main road, they sat down in the tall grass along the side. Chica watched as small groups of people walked past, going in both directions. Most were carrying baskets of fruit or vegetables or other supplies, or leading animals. They slogged slowly through the mud. Some

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took the trail up the mountain toward Chica's village. She looked for familiar faces, but saw no one else she knew.

Chica hugged her legs to keep warm. She was dozing when she was startled by a sound she had never heard before. A vehicle – it was a military Jeep, she learned later – bounced slowly up the road through the mud. Three men in mud-spattered uniforms and with weapons rode inside. The jeep stopped opposite them, just a few feet away. The men looked stern and anxious. One of the men stared at her father and said nothing for a long time. She saw a black holster on his hip. It looked like the kind of holster the men who killed her uncle wore. The sound of the idling engine was almost drowned out by the drumming of the rain on the vehicle's canvas top. Chica was surprised to see her father lower his head under the man's gaze and stare at his feet. His face was hidden by his slouch hat. When the man finally spoke, his tone was sharp and demanding, like the way Chica's father spoke to her mother. He wanted to know if they had seen bandits. Chica's father shook his head and, still looking down, said softly, "I have seen nothing."

"What?" the man demanded sharply, startling Chica.

Chica's father raised his head. He took off his hat and stood. "I have seen nothing, Sir," he said more loudly and stood with his head bowed, his rain-sodden hat crumpled in his hand. The man in the vehicle rested his hand on his holster and then shifted his gaze to Chica's mother, whose head was also low. After a time, the man gestured to the driver, and the Jeep slowly churned down the road. Chica's father did not raise his head until the vehicle was gone around a bend in the road. When he looked up, he saw Chica gazing at him curiously. He slapped his hat on his thigh and cursed her. She was surprised not by the cursing, but because his words sounded not so much angry as afraid. She quickly looked away. Something told her this was something she was not supposed to see.

Later that day, her father stood as another vehicle came down the road heading in the direction of the city. It was bigger than the Jeep and had six wheels, two in the front and four in the back. It was open in the back. Perhaps a dozen men and women were standing and holding onto the wooden slats on the sides, trying to keep their balance. The truck stopped. Several people jumped out with bundles and headed up the trail. Chica's father approached the driver and spoke to him briefly. Her father shook his head, and the man scowled and looked away. Then the driver sighed and nodded to the back. Quickly, Chica's father handed her up into the back of the truck and then helped her mother and Eduardo get in before also climbing up.

The truck made a growling sound and slowly began to move, slipping through the mud. It was still raining, and Chica was cold. She was also tired. However, she wanted to watch, so she peered through the wooden slats as the truck moved slowly past people on the road. Every few minutes, the truck would come to a sliding stop, the rear wheels spinning in the mud. Chica noticed that if the driver raced the engine the truck would sometimes slide to the side. When it became stuck in the mud, the men in the back, including her father, would laugh and jump down. The

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truck would rock gently back and forth, and the men would push when it rocked forward. When it gained traction, they would slog race through the mud and jump in the back. The last ones would hold out an arm for help. Mud-covered, they would laugh when the last man got aboard. They repeated this many times, jumping down and pushing, leaning their arms and shoulders against the side or back of the truck, pushing until it started to move again under its own power, and then jumping in. Sometimes, when the truck slipped sideways, the men would have to jump quickly away from the large, nearly bald rear tires.

Back in the truck, the men would then sit facing each other, heads lowered under hats pulled low against the rain. The women and children sat off to the side. One woman had a wire basket with three chickens inside. She also had a small pig with a rope slipped around its neck.

Now and then the men would elbow each other and look at two girls, teenagers, sitting by themselves, with their heads down, avoiding the men's glances. When they did look up, they would stare with unfocused eyes out beyond the truck or talk quietly to each other. Chica wondered why the men, including her father, kept looking at them with funny expressions on their faces. When they did, the men's wives would glare at the girls and sneer, but say nothing. Chica stared at the girls, too, but she was mostly fascinated by the large hoop earrings and bangle bracelets that dangled on their lower arms. One of the girls, with a plain face and a large nose, noticed Chica looking at her. She jangled her bracelets, and she and Chica smiled at each other. The girl took one off her arm and held it out to Chica. She was about to reach for it when she heard her father bark angrily. "No!" The girl withdrew her hand and looked down. Confused, Chica looked at her father, but his withering gaze forced her to lower her eyes.

While the truck jostled down the road, several men took out leather pouches and passed around leaves. The men put them in their mouths. Some chewed them methodically; others placed them inside their cheeks. One man nodded toward Chica and her mother and brother and held out the bag to Chica's father. He looked back and shrugged, but then took out several leaves and passed them back to his family. No one offered any leaves to the two girls with the bangles.

Chica watched her mother, who put several leaves in her mouth and pushed them in her cheek. Then she gave a leaf to Chica and one to Eduardo. The men watched as Chica put the leaf in her mouth and started to chew. The bitter taste made her shudder slightly, and the men laughed. Chica kept her eyes down as she chewed. Gradually, the bitter taste went away, and she began to feel warm and less tired.

Chica liked the feel and sound of the truck as it slowly jostled along the mud road. Without looking up, she could tell when it became stuck and the men jumped out to push, calling to each other and laughing. Even the rain did not bother her as she rested her head on her knees.

Though the sun had not shone since leaving their mountain village, Chica could tell that it was growing dark. The rain was coming down

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hard. Chica could feel the truck lurch and slip along the road and then come again to a stop. She heard the men jump out with an umph and, laughing loudly, begin to shove while the driver revved the engine and rocked the truck, slamming the gears rhythmically into first gear and then into reverse. Back and forth. Back and forth. As it began to move, the truck lurched to the side, and she heard a sound that made her sit up. There was a crunch and a scream. It was her father's voice. It wasn't his angry voice, but a sound like the pigs used to make when her father and uncle were about to slit their throats. It was something between the sound of terror and the sound of agony.

Chica kept her eyes shut tight. She could feel her mother jump up and call. Her voice was unsteady. It was drowned out by the panicked shouts of the other men yelling at the driver first to stop, and then to back up.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" Then, "No! No! Back up! Back up!" and finally, "All right! All right! Stop! Stop!"

The driver turned off the engine and got out of the truck. Chica heard the tinny sound of the door slam hard and the driver curse.

Then no one spoke. Except for the sound of the rain and muffled sobs from Chica's mother, everything was quiet. It was now dark, nighttime. The men and the women and the children, got out of the truck. Chica stayed where she was, huddled in a corner. The two girls with bangles also did not move or show any reaction of any kind.

Chica raised her head and listened to the silence, shielded by the drumming of the rain. She heard/felt a metal tool being removed from below the floor of the truck, followed by a rhythmic, two-step sound and splat of mud.

Schoop. Splat. Schoop. Splat. The sound went on for a long time. It reminded Chica of the time Americans had come and laid drainage pipes in the village, opening and then filling a trench.

For a while, the only ones in the back of the truck were Chica, the pig, the chickens in the cage, and the girls with the bracelets and earrings. The girl with the big nose slipped off her bracelet and, without a word or a smile, tossed it to Chica, who grabbed it quickly and slid it all the way up her arm and covered it with the blanket.

Huddling beside the pig for warmth, Chica heard the sound of the metal tool clanging as it was being thrown roughly back under the floorboards of the truck. The others climbed back in. No one spoke, even when the truck became stuck again. In silence, the men jumped out, pushed, and climbed back in. Though she could not see in the dark, Chica knew her father was not in the truck.

As she dozed off, Chica wondered how far they had to go to get wherever they were going.