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TRAVELS WITH GONZALO

I named it Gonzalo because I thought even a dead fetus deserved a name. I kept the name to myself, though; Jasmine and Jeremy simply referred to “it”.

I learned of Gonzalo’s existence accidentally at a Chevron Station outside of St. George, Utah one Thursday in August. It was 2:30 p.m. on the second day of a two-week road trip, and I already felt like a large part of my body had melted into the vinyl upholstery. Stepping out of the car, the desert enveloped us in its furnace. The air was utterly still, stagnant and stifling.

Jeremy pumped the gas as I stood under the concrete canopy airing out my sweaty limbs. Once he finished, he told us he was going inside the convenience store and asked whether Jasmine or I wanted anything. Jasmine said no but asked him to open the trunk. She shuffled the bags haphazardly looking for hers. Then she noticed the jar.

She gasped, dropped the open bag she was holding, and covered her mouth with her hands. Even from where I stood, I could see it: the giant head, the tiny torso and the three trailing limbs. A deformed octopus. I stepped closer; coffee-colored liquid filled the jar nearly to the top and the gummy plastic seal glimmered in the sunlight. A detached leg and foot floated freely in the fluid.

Jasmine tilted her head slightly as she contemplated the fetus, her long black hair falling across the left half of her face like a partially drawn curtain. She looked up, checking to see that Jeremy was still inside. She took the jar and hurried into the women’s restroom. She emerged a few moments later, alone.

When he returned to the car, Jeremy found Jasmine crouched low to the ground, collecting the stray balls of socks that had rolled from the fallen suitcase. He leaned past her, peered into the trunk and noticed immediately that the jar was missing.

“Where is it?” The anger edged into his voice.

“What are you talking about?” Jasmine adjusted her tight red T-shirt by pulling the cropped waistline toward her jeans shorts.

“You know very well.” His narrow face turned flush.

“Where it belongs.” Jasmine turned away from him as she opened the front door of the car. “In the trash.”

Jeremy took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “I’m not leaving without it.”

“You can’t keep it.” She waved her index finger at him, vigorously shaking her head. “That’s just wrong.”

The argument continued. Jeremy remained beside the trunk of the pale blue Honda station wagon while Jasmine moved slowly backwards, the pitch of her voice rising with each step. As Jeremy yelled, he waved his pale lanky arms in the air: an angry white windmill set against the deep blue sky.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said. “Please. *Dad.*”

That last word was hard to articulate. I hadn’t seen Jeremy in seven years, hadn’t really known him ever; the absent father I had learned not to miss. And yet for two weeks that summer I was stuck with him and his new wife.

Mom had never really talked about Jeremy. Instead she gave me books to read: drunken fathers, abusive fathers, fathers sentenced to prison. “Be grateful you don’t have one of those,” she would tell me.

Her reaction to Jeremy’s phone call that Sunday afternoon had surprised me. She had let him apologize and propose this trip – fifteen days, one for each year of my life – she had even said it sounded like a good idea. After my persistent pestering, Mom had finally admitted that after fourteen years of raising me alone, she wanted the break. “It won’t kill you to spend two weeks traveling with Jeremy,” she said. “Who knows, maybe he’s even changed.”

For my part, I was determined not to find out. Just because he was my father didn’t mean that I had to love him, or even like him. If only I could find some wall to hide behind, a barrier, an imposing impenetrable fort. That way he would never be able to hurt me again.

The afternoon sun blazed overhead, searing a yellowish white hole into the sky. The smell of hot dust mixed with gasoline fumes dripped through the air.

“We’re not leaving without it,” Jeremy shouted, oblivious to the glares of the gas station owner.

“We’re not a fucking hearse,” Jasmine grumbled. She stopped walking backwards, stopped moving entirely.

Clouds gathered on the horizon, white at the top, menacing black toward the bottom; the earth burned deep red beneath. I stared at my watch for seven thick minutes. Jeremy and Jasmine were frozen in front of the unleaded gas pump. Finally, Jasmine broke down and moved toward the restroom. Moments later, she returned with Gonzalo.

“It’s not right,” Jasmine muttered as she handed Jeremy the jar. “Why are we keeping it?”

Jeremy carefully slid the jar back into its place, sandwiched between the dark orange towels and the olive green tarp. He shut the trunk, then stepped slowly toward the driver’s seat.

“What the hell is that?” I asked. Jasmine turned her back to me and looked Jeremy in the eye.

“Come on. Somebody, talk to me.” Unmoving silence. “Why am I even here then?” I folded my arms across my chest and moved toward the convenience store pay phone.

“Katia, get back in the car,” Jeremy scowled. “We don’t have time for this.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that.”

He opened the car door and stood next to it. He gestured for me to get in. I stared back at him hard.

“I’m calling Mom next time.” At least she had agreed not to tell Jeremy that she would be in Costa Rica this week, unreachable.

“Just let it go,” Jasmine whined.

“No.” Jeremy’s voice dropped. “You can’t just dump it somewhere.”

We climbed into the car; the upholstery was still wet with my sweat. I slid my legs out across the back seat, stretched between the two strangers in the front and the illusive Gonzalo behind.

Who was this Gonzalo? My thoughts turned to the insulated jar in the trunk, his glass tomb; unwanted but unwilling to be abandoned. I imagined him smirking from beyond the grave.

After fiddling with the tape player, Jeremy started the car. Aretha Franklin crooned through the tinny speakers as we raced along the empty highway into the desert. An almost-family abducting an almost-baby.

When he came to pick me up at the airport three days ago, Jeremy couldn't stop staring. "You're so grown up," he said in halting words. His long arms dangled awkwardly and he shifted his weight from his right leg to his left, then offered me a clumsy light hug.

"What did you expect?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." He shook his head. His hair was sprinkled with gray, sprouting from his temples to frame his face; the last time I saw him it had been a dark unending brown. There were creases around his eyes, around the corners of his mouth. His pale skin looked weathered.

"Your mom tells me you're a good student," he said as we drove toward his house. "What's your favorite subject?"

"Can you just skip the probing questions?" I slumped into the front seat. "Just so you know, Mom forced me into this."

Our Honda climbed steadily out of the pale yellow desert into the red and orange mountains. The sun was behind us now, casting long shadows next to the deep gashes of purple in the rocks.

"Hey, Katia. You still alive back there?" Jeremy asked, straining to sound cheerful again. "What do you think? Take any pictures of this?"

"I try to avoid immortalizing misery."

Jeremy looked into the rearview mirror, met my eyes and held them for a long, harsh moment. Finally, he looked back at the highway. "I love this landscape. It's spectacular – all the open space, the possibilities. It soothes me."

"I prefer Vegas." I imagined its glaring neon, the clutter and chaos of its crowds. I shifted my position in the back seat, listening to the engine rattling as I stared out the window. It would be so easy to get lost here, to melt into the landscape, to become forgotten.

An hour's silence later, we camped in a crimson valley near a muddy stream lined with lonely cottonwood trees. We were the only family in the area and a stark emptiness hung in the air.

Jeremy set up the tent while Jasmine hobbled around the rocks toward the trickling brown water. I found a trail up the side of one of the canyon walls and started climbing until I could look down at our camp. From the top of a boulder, I contemplated this deep red peopleless place. Next month I would get my driver's permit. I couldn't wait – to be able to go when I wanted, to pick the route myself, to control my destiny.

The desert twilight turned violet as I walked back toward our campsite. Jasmine was sitting at the picnic table holding a piece of paper as I approached. Even from a

distance, I could hear her reading, “Native American shaman. Call mobile phone number 555-387-3838 to make an appointment.”

“You’d believe a shaman with a cell phone?” Jeremy asked.

“Why not? Why are you always so negative, so *closed*?”

“You’re not one to talk. You’re open only when it suits you.”

“That’s unfair.”

“Open implies trust.”

“I trust you.”

“You scheduled it. Against my wishes, without telling me.”

She took a deep breath. “I told you I didn’t want children.” She enunciated every syllable. “Ever.”

Jeremy looked directly at her. “It was *our* baby, together.”

“It’s over.”

“It wasn’t only yours.”

“What good reason is there to keep it?” Jasmine met his gaze, unblinking.

She exhaled loudly. “Maybe the shaman could give us some ideas. Maybe he could help us fix this.”

They stared at each other. Even from ten feet away I could hear Jeremy’s wristwatch. “Don’t spoil this trip for me,” he said after twenty-two ticks. “I think I owe something to the one child I do have.”

Jasmine stepped away from the table. She lit a cigarette and started walking.

Jeremy moved toward the car. “Hey Katia – dinner!” he yelled to the canyon walls, not noticing where I was standing.

“I’m right here.”

“Good.” He handed me two plates and forks and explained that Jasmine was going to lie down in the tent, that she wasn’t hungry. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her move toward the riverbed, her long black hair trailing behind her.

I was quite used to eating alone. Mom worked irregular hours and during the week, I was often on my own. I used my meal times to read the back pages of the newspaper, finding articles about how crocodiles in Florida were being used as a natural garbage disposal system and how thousands of British schoolchildren jumping at the same time had managed to cause a measurable tremor. Last month I read about a famous South American psychic whose celebrated powers failed her when she tried to use them on her own family. This continually puzzled her until one day her dead grandmother whispered to her in her dreams: some secrets should remain buried.

“Could you see anything interesting from up there?” Jeremy asked as he served the macaroni and cheese.

“Not much really different,” I said. “Just a view.”

“Did you take any photos?”

“Why did we come here?”

“Because I want to be a part of your life again.” He pushed the plate toward me. “I took some time off this summer for that.”

“But why on a trip? Why with Jasmine?”

“She’s my wife.” His words were slow. “I want you to know our family, too. I think it’s important. For all of us.”

“She couldn’t care less about me – she won’t look at me most of the time. And you didn’t even recognize me when I got off the flight.”

He closed his eyes. “I’m trying. Cut me a little slack.”

“What’s the point? We’re practically strangers who just happen to be related. It’s not like we’re suddenly going to be some ideal family or anything.”

“You used to be curious about me.” His voice was quiet. “You used to write me letters, remember?”

I put my fork down and stared squarely at him. “That was a long time ago.”

“I want to be your Dad again.” He didn’t blink. “This trip is for you. For us. Can we try again, now?”

“But what about the thing in the trunk?” I held his gaze. “You know, the dead fetus. Jasmine’s abortion.”

Jeremy looked down at his plate, staring deep into his macaroni. He carefully skewered one lone cheesy tube with his fork.

“What the hell is going on?” My voice echoed into the canyon.

Jeremy’s head hung over his food. A slight breeze broke the hot air and the cottonwoods rustled, as if joining our conversation.

“Where are we taking it?” I whispered as much to the trees as to Jeremy.

He put down his fork and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Stars were beginning to speckle the sky and the lopsided moon hung bright overhead. Jeremy looked distractedly around the canyon then stood and walked toward the riverbed.

When he was out of sight, I went to the car and opened the trunk. The folds of a solitary orange beach towel surrounded the jar, and Gonzalo lay horizontal in his impromptu cradle. In the white beam from my flashlight, the body didn’t look as menacingly purple as it had in the afternoon sun. I leaned further into the trunk. The detached foot floated next to the head, the big toe almost rubbing the bump of the nose. I wondered whether he could smell that brown fluid.

I lifted the jar and took three soft steps away from the car. Then I turned and put Gonzalo back: no. That would bring me too close to them.

As I shut the trunk, I glanced toward the river; Jeremy’s flashlight glowed faintly in the distance. In the sound space between the chattering leaves, the murmurs of their argument continued.

When I awoke in the chilly dawn, I was alone in the tent. I got up and saw Jeremy and Jasmine huddled together, staring at a map spread out on the picnic table. Jeremy heard my footsteps and waved for me to come join them.

“He said he was outside of Durango.” Jasmine smoothed the map’s fold.

Jeremy turned toward me. “Would you really mind if we changed the trip a bit?”

“What do you mean?”

“Jasmine wants to go to a place outside Four Corners. That would take us south and into Colorado. We could go to Mesa Verde after that, but it would mean we wouldn’t have enough time to make it to Mt. Rushmore.”

“Mt Rushmore isn’t really all that,” Jasmine added hurriedly. “It’s just a bunch of dead presidents carved into a hill.”

“But I kinda wanted to see it.” I didn’t want to have to change anything for her.

“It’s a really long drive,” she said.

I glared at Jeremy. “I thought you gave Mom a detailed itinerary.”

He took a half step back from the table, away from both Jasmine and me, and sighed. “Look, Jasmine would really like to change the plans a bit. It’s for the baby.”

“I thought it was dead.”

Jeremy raised both eyebrows menacingly high and Jasmine cringed. I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Okay. But I thought this was supposed to be my trip. Isn’t that what you said last night?”

“You can understand, I hope.” Jasmine put her hand on my shoulder. “You’re a big girl.” I turned my back to them.

“Whatever.” I mumbled and walked away.

“I’ll make it up to you,” Jeremy called after me. As if he had never said that before.

So we drove south on Friday, rather than east as Jeremy had originally planned. Jasmine was determined to find the shaman based on a slip of paper that she had found in the campground restroom that she interpreted as a “definitive sign.”

We followed the empty highway as it wound through odd shaped rock formations up onto mesas with views into infinity. Around each bend, the landscape turned a different color: red then orange then coral pink then red again. The solitary yellow lines of the highway stretched forward and merged into the enveloping blue sky. I remembered reading about Amelia Earhart flying off deep into a sky like this; her plane was never found.

We stopped on top of a mesa for a snack and view. “Maybe we should leave it here,” Jasmine said. “It’s a peaceful place for it to rest.”

“Some tourist would find it and throw it in the garbage,” Jeremy said.

Jasmine pouted, pulled a cigarette out of her purse, and turned away.

“Give me some credit,” Jeremy said. “I said I’d see the guy. I said I’d listen to what he had to say.”

Jasmine grunted, “After you followed me to the clinic, hounded the staff and finally bribed the doctor to give it to you, it’s really the least you could do.”

The tan shaman worked out of a deluxe mobile home just outside the Navajo reservation. His trailer was double-wide and it stood alone, a good quarter mile from the established trailer park we had passed. A bushy mustache hid his upper lip and his craggily gray hair hung in a loosely tied ponytail. Most striking were his eyes: vibrant turquoise blue.

He said his name was Neruda, after the Nobel-prize winning poet whom his father had had the honor of meeting once. He added quickly that his paternal grandmother was from Norway as he gestured toward his eyes.

“I look forward to working with you.” He extended his hand to all of us. I noticed he kept a tank of tropical fish along one wall of the trailer, and I wondered whether fish could feel out of place.

Neruda pointed to some futon couches and asked us to sit. Over the loud whirring of the air conditioner, he explained that he wanted to talk with each of us individually, that the others should wait here.

“Very good.” Jasmine smiled first at Neruda then at Jeremy.

“I’m not really a part of this whole thing.” I shifted on the futon; under my shorts I could feel the coarseness of the fabric. “I’m just visiting for a couple of weeks.”

“Good. I’ll talk with you first.” Neruda gestured for me to follow him into the next room. I remained seated on the couch.

“Go on,” Jasmine nudged me with her foot.

“No offense,” I said. “But no thanks.”

Jasmine looked pleadingly at Jeremy, at me, at Neruda.

“Katia, please,” Jeremy said. “We’re here together.” I bristled. Next they would be asking me to baby-sit Gonzalo. I looked beyond Neruda to the fish tank where a trapezoidal polka dot fish spun around on spiral fins. Whiskers sprung out from both sides of its wrinkled triangular face.

“Funky fish,” I said.

Neruda turned and smiled. “Oh Bartholomew the blow fish. He’s a spotted puffer, actually. One of my favorites.”

“A blow fish, like the poison kind?” I asked.

“Stop stalling.” Jasmine clenched her teeth as she nudged Jeremy.

Jeremy sighed. “Katia, please.” He sounded deflated. “The sooner you go talk to him, the sooner we’ll be out of here.”

“It won’t take long,” Neruda said to me. The floor of the trailer shook as I followed the blue-eyed Indian down the hallway.

Once we sat down in his office, Neruda asked me to tell him my full name, when I was born, and with whom I currently lived.

“So you see, I’m not really a part of the whole dead baby problem,” I said.

He replied, “That’s where you’re mistaken.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “What’s your deal?”

“I help people through trauma. I help them collect the bits and pieces of their souls they’ve lost.”

I unfolded my arms, held them out and pretended to study them. “Well, I feel pretty healthy and intact. Can I go now?”

“No one is completely whole. We are all spiritually interwoven.”

I stood up and opened the door to his office. “Look, I don’t particularly believe in any of this crap. Thanks for your concern, but I’ll just go stare at your poison fish now.”

“Avoidance is not the answer.” His voice was sharp but quiet. “You think that wall of detachment protects you, but it doesn’t. It’s just a lonely trap. Eventually you’re going to have to stop being afraid and let some real emotion in.”

I shut the door. Stop being afraid. What did he know?

Who was this Neruda anyway? Just a kook playing on the power of suggestion. Like Rasputin dispensing horrible advice to hemophiliac czars. People want to believe someone else so much that they forget to listen to their own rational mind.

Neruda re-emerged and calmly asked for Jeremy. The trailer rattled as the two of them walked away. I studied Bartholomew spinning on his spiral fins and ignored Jasmine's disapproving grunts behind me.

After Bartholomew's second lap around the aquarium, Jasmine pulled a cigarette from her purse, stood and walked out of the trailer. I longed for my book and the escape it promised, but it was locked in the car and Jeremy had the keys. Alone now, I lay across the couch, closed my eyes and listened to the rhythm of my pulse.

"Have you seen Jasmine?" I opened my eyes and saw Jeremy and Neruda standing over me.

"She's outside smoking," I said.

"No she's not." Jeremy said. I noticed the trailer door was slightly ajar. "Did she say anything about where she was going?"

I shook my head. "She doesn't really like to talk to me." Jeremy's forehead creased and his eyebrows climbed closer to each other. I got up from the futon and walked to the door.

"Hey, where's the car?" I asked.

Jeremy and Neruda rushed to the window and saw the empty desert outside. Jeremy fumbled in the pocket where he kept his keys and pulled out only his wallet.

"Shit," he said. "I should have known." The noise of the air conditioner had drowned out the sound of the car.

Neruda lent us his motorcycle, a 15-year-old Harley. I sat in the back wearing Neruda's too-big helmet and gripping Jeremy's waist.

"Hold on tight." He hit full throttle and we turned onto a small bumpy highway that led to a distant orange and green plateau.

"Where are we going now?" I shouted.

The hot dust assaulted our faces and climbed into our nostrils. The noise of the motorcycle and the whip of the wind were the only things separating the two of us now. I shuddered; nothing else was left.

We drove for seven hours: up to the top of the plateau, down into a valley, back up into shady mountains that smelled of pine. We stopped every time we saw people to ask about our blue Honda, about Jasmine; no one we met had any information. By late afternoon, my arms ached from holding onto Jeremy for so long.

We were the only customers that twilight at the Shell station on the two-lane highway. My cheeks burned with the day's sun and my throat was scratch dry.

"This is pointless," I said. "We're not going to find her. Let's just go home."

"We need to keep looking." Jeremy finally removed his sunglasses in the almost-dark. "I can't give up on them yet."

"Why?" My voice quivered with the question. "It's pretty much hopeless – she could be anywhere by now. We've been driving in large circles for hours and haven't seen her. Not to mention we don't even have a car anymore."

"We've got to keep looking." His eyes were red and teary.

"How do you know the fetus was really yours anyway?"

Jeremy turned away for a moment and rubbed his eyes. He looked down the highway, into the darkness in the distance from where we had come. Then he turned to me. “You’re right, Katia. This trip *is* a failure. Maybe we should call your mother and arrange to send you home.”

I cleared my throat loudly. “Actually you can’t call her.” My own voice sounded strange in my ears. “You see, the thing is she’s somewhere in the rainforest in Costa Rica. But she’ll be back Wednesday. And I could definitely go home by myself.”

“I won’t let you do that.”

“Why not? I’ll be perfectly fine.”

Jeremy bit his lip and mumbled. “You shouldn’t have to be by yourself.”

“I’ve gotten used to it.”

“I’m sorry you had to.” His voice quivered. “Please believe that.”

I glanced at the highway, at the motorcycle, at Jeremy. There were five dark spots on each side of his pale yellow T-shirt: smudges from my dusty fingers. I looked up at his shriveled face. “Just so we’re clear on this – I’m never traveling anywhere with you ever again.”

A tear rolled down his left cheek along his sunburned nose down to his lips. I imagined the taste of dust and salt, and I realized it was the same as the one in my mouth. I took a deep breath. “Can we at least rent a car? The back of the Harley’s really hot and uncomfortable.”

“Whatever you want.” His voice was steady again, flat and defeated.

That night we checked into a Motel 6 in a five-block long town with a 7-Eleven, a Burger King franchise, and “Spin Cycle Strikes,” a combination laundromat-bowling alley. We used the motel phone to leave Neruda a message telling him that we planned to rent a car the next morning and asking where he wanted us to leave the motorcycle.

My legs sweated on the plastic purple booth at the Burger King; we were the only customers there at 10:30 p.m. I sipped a strawberry milkshake while Jeremy contemplated his remaining french fries. His face was pale, drained of energy. He hadn’t spoken to me directly since the incident at the Shell station.

“Jasmine did plan it well,” I said to break the uncomfortable stillness.

Jeremy looked up from his tray and raised his eyebrows. I continued, “I mean, she managed to steal the car, abduct Gonzalo and stick us with quacko Neruda all with one turn in the ignition.”

“Who’s Gonzalo?”

“The dead fetus,” I shrugged. “I thought he needed a name.”

Color came back to Jeremy’s cheeks. “But why ‘Gonzalo’?”

“I just liked it, I guess.” I watched his face as he listened to me, only me, here in the booth with him. “‘Gonzalo’ sounds mysterious, like a shadowy millionaire from one of those Mexican soap operas.”

Jeremy suppressed a smirk. He admitted that for many years he watched Spanish soap operas late into the night. The women were so beautiful he didn’t care that he couldn’t understand a word. “Mainly, I loved the way they say rrrr.” His “rrrr” sounded like a cat meowing through a mouth full of peanut butter, and for the first time in a week I felt myself almost smiling; it was strange and awkward, so unfamiliar.

A gush of hot air from outside made me turn my head toward the door. A tan man with a mustache and long gray ponytail entered: Neruda. I looked into the parking lot and saw our blue station wagon outside.

“The wonders of caller ID,” he explained.

“How’d you get our car?” I asked.

“Jasmine brought it back to me.”

Jeremy leaned forward, “Where is she?”

“I can’t tell you,” Neruda said.

I asked, “What about that stuff about us all being connected?”

“I promised her privacy.”

“Did she pay you off?”

Neruda ignored me. He handed Jeremy the keys to the Honda and told us that Jasmine had gone far away, that she needed a fresh start, that we shouldn’t look to find her. He gave Jeremy a note she had written. Jeremy stared at the paper briefly, crumpled it into a ball and threw it onto the floor. Then he stood and walked into the parking lot. I finished my milkshake and waited until Neruda approached the food counter before I picked it up and read the words: *I can’t be part of your family anymore.*

The strange circles and cycles of life: Jeremy had left a note, too, when he walked out on us so many years ago. And the words were almost identical.

I shoved the paper into my pocket and walked into the parking lot. Clouds turned the night sky deep black, covering the landscape like a lid. A lightening bolt flashed on the western horizon and for an instant a giant swath of the sky was brilliantly bright.

Jeremy stood next to the trunk, holding the empty glass jar in his hands. I went to him and hugged him without grudge.

“Gonzalo’s gone,” he said.

I nodded.

The car keys jingled in Jeremy’s hand. “Let’s go,” he said. “Tomorrow maybe we can start driving to Texas. I wouldn’t mind seeing your mother again.”

I turned to him. “I don’t mind the ride home with you. But, honestly, I can’t guarantee that Mom’s going to be all that excited to see you.”

Jeremy’s shoulders drooped as he sighed loudly and stared at the ground. He’s pathetic and he deserves this, I reminded myself. But as hard as I tried, I couldn’t believe that anymore.

I traced a lopsided circle with my foot on the dusty pavement. I hugged my arms around myself, breathing in deeply, trying to find that familiar numbness again. But as I exhaled, I realized that feeling had already settled into my stomach, sad and afraid. But also warm.

I opened the car door. “Maybe we could go to Mount Rushmore some other time?”

Jeremy stared at the steering wheel. He nodded. Then he took a deep breath and walked to the back of the car. I watched as he gingerly placed the empty jar in the trunk and slammed it shut.