

Valencia, Land of Oranges

By Rachel Bernstein

I let Mary off on the brick side of the street and then turned the corner to park the car. In the downtown part they didn't like too much traffic. There was only one traffic light there anyway. I parked in a lot across from the Tex-Mex house on the very brink of downtown. That house had been there every year we came back. They told me that before it was built it was just a craggy hill that looked over the New River. The place looked like it belonged in Arizona or Florida, somewhere that would take a white stucco house with shards of blue tile and pottery planted along its trim. Everywhere else had wrap-around porches and broken-in screen doors. Mary complained about that house every time we passed it.

I crossed the street and headed for the ice cream store. As I passed the gas station on my left, I heard a shout from behind. Mary's two cousins—pump attendants—asked me when we got into town. I told them we got in about five minutes ago, and they asked if we were going to the cabin that night. I said yes and that we'd probably see them at dinner.

They started singing "Valencia, Land of Oranges." They thought it was a joke we shared as in-laws. I didn't care that I didn't laugh along. Feeling embarrassed for them and their ninety-eight cent gas, and I went into the ice cream store. The place was air-conditioned, but the smell of coffee didn't mix well with the humidity left over from the outside. I spotted Mary at the register, paying for a soda. The girl at the register was pretty, with a full face and a bob of blonde hair. But as she handed Mary the change, I noticed a wedding band. I looked up at her face again. She was too young to be married. But she was too old to be working at the cash register.

Mary and I sat down at one of the high tables adjacent to the wall. Mary still looked pink from the trip, a little pinker than a woman due in two months should be. Mary looked up at me and I looked behind her, at the girl at the register. The girl wiped her hands on her apron. She was too small to be married. She was probably married long enough to be pregnant already. Pregnant women and this heat didn't go well together. I noticed she was about as pink and nervous as Mary was, who still couldn't get situated right on her seat.

I had a hard time staying put too. People kept walking through the door and letting in the humid air that was sticking my legs to the stool. I sat on my hands for a while until the sweat started sliding on top of my hands as I shifted my legs. I kept looking at the girl at the register. An older couple was deciding what ice cream flavor they wanted. The girl had bent her head into the freezer and was listing all the flavors for them. She waved the scooper in the direction of the strawberry tub; the wife shook her head and asked if they had anything sugar-free. The girl pressed her lips flat and shook her head.

"Sal, turn around," Mary said and stared at the door.

Across the street was Bo, wearing the same pair of tweed pants I had seen on him about a year ago. Through the window, we watched him cross the street. He walked like he had parts cemented together. I wondered how long it would take until I got that way, but Bo was old, and it was creepy to see him still walking in the same pair of pants he'd had on every year we'd seen him. I got to the door to help him in. He walked right past me without even looking.

“Little Miss Mary,” he said to my wife. Half the time he didn't even know she had gotten married. Never mind that she was perspiring with child. He walked over to her and she took his hand. She helped him up on the stool. I ordered a coffee and a soda for Bo from the girl who was wiping her hands on her apron again. I dropped a two dollar tip in the cup by the register.

“I just saw your uncle up at the cabin,” Bo said to Mary. “Is your father planning on going up there tonight?”

I pulled up a stool to the small table, but there wasn't enough room for three. I kept my distance between them. Mary didn't notice. She was watching him feel in his pockets for something. The tweed pants he wore were too tight for him to reach into without abrading his hand. She slid her cup over to the wall so it wouldn't get in Bo's way. He pulled out a dollar coin.

“You see this?” he said.

Mary nodded and he coiled her fingers around it. I looked at her, expecting her to cringe or give me some escape signal. But she always played along with whatever Bo did.

“Did your father ever tell you about this dollar?”

She shook her head. I looked around and back up at the girl at the register. I heard the old man in the backroom say something to her. I thought he called her name; it might've been Stacey. She went into the backroom to help him carry something, and the register was left all alone. I felt I had to watch it until she came back, pink again and wiping the hair from her face. I turned back to Bo.

“Your father and his brothers took the racecar up to Saddle Mount, you know that road where it bends around what's now that church? So while they took it up there, I laid down the quarter—the dollar—at the steepest part of the curve...”

Stacey made another pot of coffee. The door kept opening and closing as a couple and two small children came in. Their younger son kept walking in and out of the door. The father told him to come inside and shut the door. I couldn't stand the hot air coming in with the smell of coffee. I wanted to ask Stacey if she had any aspirin, but she was busy with the family picking out ice cream.

“They hit the dollar and it turned the whole damn car over onto the bank. You know how steep that hill is? Rolled right on over the asparagus patch they’d been trying to grow for five years, and it didn’t leave a single stalk standing. Now the schoolteacher come out and said...”

I went to the bathroom and ran the cold water for a while. There was a picture of Virginia Beach hanging over the toilet. I didn’t remember a bank near Saddle Mount. Then again, I’d only taken Mary there once, two years ago when we were here. When I came back out, Stacey was fixing the paper towel rack. It looked like it was tacked up with stick-on hooks. I watched the back of her head and the way her hair draped down her back as she fixed the hooks. Bo and Mary were the only ones left in the café.

“Come on, Mary,” I said. “It’s already five-thirty. I don’t want to have to go up that driveway in the dark.”

Bo noticed me for the first time all afternoon. His face hung slack as he looked up at me. He turned back to my wife. “How long are you staying in town?”

“Probably a week. I’ll try to see if I can get Sal to let us stay longer,” Mary pulled on my side. Bo kept looking at her and put the dollar coin back into his pocket, scratching up his hand again. I got up and thanked Bo, told him we’d probably see him at the cabin tonight, and he nodded at Mary. I helped her off the stool and he sat there as we left.

“It’s still bright out. We didn’t have to leave him just yet,” she said.

Same old Mary. I told her we could go get dinner. Sure, she said. I asked her if she knew if her aunt would be there this year.

“I guess we’ll see. But if she comes, you know she’ll be bringing everyone. I talked to Jim before we got here, he said he heard she might be.”

“Funny how they never even talk to each other, but sure as anything the minute she shows up, they’ll let her take up the whole cabin.”

Mary shrugged. We drove to the restaurant and took a booth in the very back. She put her feet in my lap. She waggled her toes dangerously. I looked up at her. She saw I didn’t like it and let her grin slip.

“You’ve been fussy since we got in. You better not act like this up at the cabin.”

“I know,” I said. “It was nice of them to give us free gas.”

She didn’t like my attempt.

“Has it kicked at all since we got here?”

She smiled. “It did. Right when I got out of the car and looked over the New River, it did. Maybe we should move down here, Sal.”

I thought of the Tex-Mex house—maybe we could move in there. I clapped the top of her foot and pulled her sandal off. Our food came and I let go.

Mary’s uncle built a cabin into the side of a mountain about twenty years ago. It was one thing that the road leading to it didn’t have a name, but the main road it connected to didn’t have one either. I grew up in Sacramento and never had any desire to see this part of the country. The idea of a cabin on a mountain just didn’t strike me as something that was still done anymore. But Mary wanted to see her father’s family once a year, the same way she had when she was a child, and I encouraged her to go.

We rallied up to the cabin and I unpacked everything while Mary sat on the porch with her uncles and her father, who had left about an hour after us but still got there first. I stepped out onto the porch when I was finished.

“It sure took you,” Mary’s father said under his hat. The rest of men gave me a small passing look and returned to their conversation. Mary went inside to help her aunt with dinner. One of Mary’s cousins from the gas station, the one named Jim, got up when he saw me. He started humming “Valencia, Land of Oranges” as he strode over. He stretched out his hand. I looked at it for a moment before I shook it. He didn’t smell right.

“Sal, you’d never been past that barn where we set up the new lookout, have you?” Jim said. I told him I hadn’t. He turned and looked toward where it was supposed to be. Jim leaned back with his hands on his lower back, like he was leaning on his weight on his heels. He closed his eyes and flared his nostrils. Jim had never been never right. Mary said he’d been battling alcoholism since before he married his first wife. Or at least I think that was Jim. It might’ve been the other cousin.

“Jim, sit down. You look like an idiot,” one of the uncles said.

“It’s gonna rain. You can smell it,” Jim said.

“Well, I could’ve told you that one. Just look at the damn clouds,” the uncle said. All the men laughed.

“You want to go to the lookout?” Jim said, turning to me again.

I said sure. He said we’d go once Rick showed up. I’d forgotten who Rick was until he came later that evening with his wife, and then I remembered that Rick was the other man I’d seen at the station today. They didn’t look much alike, but it turned out Rick and Jim were twins. I prayed that Mary would never have twins. On the off chance she did, I hoped they wouldn’t be like Rick and Jim. I could see how Mary looked like them. She had their wide smile, where their smile extended past their gums and you saw black space into the back of their throats, as though their jaws were just too small for their faces.

They didn't want to drive up there—they said the path wasn't cleared enough yet that the truck would get stuck if it was going to rain tonight. Jim's two little girls wanted to come with us, so Jim's girlfriend took each of their hands and started up the trail. I offered Jim that I'd drive them up there if it was going to rain. I told him my Jeep could take the mud.

“Is that what they do where you're from? They drive everywhere. I think that's the problem where you're from, no one walks with their own God-given two feet,” Jim said.

“And where is it that you're from?” Rick asked and started to sing the song again. Now the tune was turning in my head. I didn't even know what the words were past the chorus, “land of oranges...”

I nodded and cut him off. “Well, really, Valencia is in Spain,” I said.

“And aren't you from somewhere like that, Sal?” Rick said, jerking his head at me as he said my name. The lookout came into view as we walked up the hill. It was more like a two-story tree house.

“Sacramento, actually. My parents were born in Puerto Rico.”

“Yeah, well,” Jim started, “they're not from here, that's for damn sure. I think you better watch it if you're plugging our cousin. I don't want that baby looking like you.”

Jim's wife looked up at him. “Jim,” she said. She and the children turned around. They left me there with the twins.

Jim and Rick went into the lookout. I stayed out for a minute. The hill-cap was patchy from the cows Mary's uncle kept, even in the dark I could see their prints. I wondered where they went in the mountain. I thought of cows as wandering only on fields. How did they stay on the mountain? I remembered there was a creekbed that ran around the place, we had to cross it to get up there. Rick whistled and I went inside the lookout. It wasn't so bad, there were floor mats and an old loveseat in the corner. I wondered if Jim ever took his girlfriend up here. I wondered if the girl from the ice cream place—Stacey—lived in a place like this. Not the lookout, but in a cabin on a mountain on a road that was connected to another road that still didn't have a name even after twenty years.

“I'll tell you what,” Rick said when I got in. “You could spend all night out here.”

“That's what I got the mini fridge there for,” Jim said. He motioned for me to open it. Beer lined inside the door and on a small shelf there was a tray with tin foil covering it.

“It's beef and ramps if you want it,” Jim said. I said that was all right and closed the door. I was hungry but didn't want to die. We still had to share a cabin with everyone tonight. I remembered how big the moths and mosquitoes were from last year. I hadn't slept, I just watched them hit the neon green light over the porch outside. The mosquitoes were twice the

size of Bo's coin dollar. We usually slept in the loft and last year the fan was broken. This year I'd wanted to get a hotel room on account of Mary being seven months pregnant. I had no problem admitting I liked air conditioning. But she wouldn't do it, she said they'd be offended if we didn't stay at the cabin. I doubted that.

"So tell me, Sal," Jim said. "Are you and Mary going to have any more kids?"

"We plan on it," I said. I shifted my shoulders under the window flap we were all looking out of.

"You don't listen, do you?" Jim said. He got out from underneath the flap and pitched his beer can against the fridge. I felt scum on my skin. I was afraid to say anything right off. He yanked me from the flap by the elbow. "Tell me something again. Do you think it's right what you're doing?"

"Lay off," Rick said.

"And you know," Jim said. "It's not even about where you're from. It's not that. You've gotten this attitude since the minute you stepped in here. Just leave my cousin alone. I bet you I could call the INS man and get you out of here real fast." He paced around and flicked a mud dauber off his hand. I watched it fly around until I lost track of it when it got to a dark corner of the room. I started to say something in retaliation, but I couldn't remember his name for a minute. Then it came back to me.

"I don't have any intention of leaving Mary anytime soon," I said to Jim. "But I won't lie. I get nothing out of being here."

"Should've gone to that Ramada Inn," he said.

"I'm glad we can agree on something," I said.

He punched me hard across the side of my head. I hit the corner where the dauber had flown and I felt a loose nail jarring out of the wall. I heard him shuffle closer to me to hit me again, he did, then came back for a third time, but Rick came in and locked Jim's arms behind his back. They scuffled and said things I couldn't make out. It was still where I was for a moment, the air didn't move. I heard a truck pulling into the driveway down at the cabin. The women's voices carried over to the hill and I could guess that Mary's aunt had arrived. I climbed out of the lookout and ran down through the thick timothy hill. I lost track of the path and started running into everything. When I got close to the cabin, I slowed down. On the porch everyone was sitting around citronella torches and talking. I sat in one of the chairs. Mary came around after a few minutes and put her feet in my lap.

"Where'd Rick and Jim go to?" she said. Her skin looked too white in the dark, almost yellow, and I couldn't see her eyes. I looked up at the green porch light above us; there was a gray moth beating against it. There were a few mosquitoes too.

“I think there was a snake up there,” I said. “I had my flashlight on me and the batteries were coming loose, so I unscrewed the cap and the batteries fell out. I think they might’ve crushed the snake accidentally. I didn’t even know it was there. I was probably even stepping on it.”

“Was it a black snake?” she said.

“I don’t know. I didn’t even know it was there.”

I could tell even in the dark Mary was smiling wide like her cousins. I got up and started to go inside.

“You ever notice how that happens?” she said. “Something that dangerous right there and you don’t even figure.”