Iglesia del Senor del Perdon

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Gliding up and down in freedom my hand mimics the smooth and at times sudden movements of a kite. There is a feeling of timelessness that goes through my body with each and every breath of wind that slides through my open fingers. As I look out the window we pass an old man dressed in native phantom white pants and a long sleeve shirt on the side of the road. A bright red scarf-like garment wrapped around his waist serves as a belt. He takes small steps, his upper body bent forward, and pulls gently on the rienda dragging his loyal burro up the hill behind him. They both seem exhausted. Our car’s engine roars louder as we drive up the incline and I wonder in silence if they will make it up the hill. The old man’s eyes are fixed on the fading fog line painted on the road; it guides him to where he is going. The burro follows his master’s guaracher ten feet ahead of him. The old man’s straw hat is blown off by the wave of air we leave behind as we drive pass them. Neither of them looks up.

As we’re about to reach the top of the hill, I know we will reach Cojumatan within minutes. Traditionally my father makes a scheduled stop at El Camino al Cielo viewpoint. He stops the car in the middle of the road and looks back at me, his eyes smiling. I was seven when I first saw his eyes smile. It was at this same spot I learned to read the secret. My father took me there like his father had done when he was my age. As I looked out the window I noticed not much had changed. The road’s shoulder had slowly been conquered by wild grass. The fog line had almost disappeared completely. The Guaymehil trees, covered with guamas fruit, were as green as ever. It has been seven years since I last tasted the dry-sour taste. The simple thought of it makes my mouth water and I swallow the memories. The stone fences separating the road and the agricultural fields showed some of the damage different seasons had caused them over the years, but they still stood strong. All around me were memories, pictures that were engraved in the stones of my mind. The rest of the road leading to the top of the hill still disappears into the burning sky. El Camino al Cielo.

Half way up the hill my father stops and shifts the gear to neutral. Nothing happens for a second. He looks back at me again. We know what is about to happen but still we wait for it as if it is something new for us, like unwrapping a Christmas present. The car stands still; it does not roll back. The car begins to slowly roll uphill towards the sky without the aid of the accelerator. My father’s hands let go of the wheel and he brings his knees up to his chest to show us that he is not pressing the gas. The first time I ever experienced this it frightened me. I was old enough to know the basic functioning of a car and had a general knowledge of physics. I had ridden bikes up and down hills. I knew if I stopped pedaling I would roll back. The car did not roll back; it kept going up, slowly inching its way to the sky, defying logic and physics. Un Milagro, my mother whispers. I feel the pull within me.

I asked my father why they called it El Camino al Cielo and why the car rolls up hill instead of down. Es un secreto, recuerdas. I did remember. For many years, Cojumatlenes have thought of this spot as holy. At the top the secret unfolds in front of us. Chapala, the state’s largest lake, is a piece of heaven. Its crystalline water expands as far as the eye can see. The larger-than-life Sierra Mountains on the other side of the lake appear miniscule, like small bumps at the vanishing point. The rays of light from the sun and the water blend into an unusual brightness. There is something dreamy about it, something heavenly. Its shores are covered with Girasoles and tied canoes. From the top of the hill, I can see the fishermen coming back from a day’s work, holding tight to the paddles as they inch closer to shore. They too seem to have been away from home for a long time. Our family prefers to drive rather than fly here for Las Fiestas de Mayo, our town’s largest religious festival to praise El Senor Del Perdon, for different reasons, and El Camino al Cielo and Chapala are two of them.

As the road coils and turns its way down the hill closer to the lake, the wind becomes cooler. I try to see how long I can keep my arm out the window but after a couple bugs fly into it I bring it in. I roll the window up and turn my attention to the lake and its crystalline reflection. I stare straight into it but the reflection is so bright it makes my eyes squint and I close them.
I try to search for the last image I had of Cojumatlan.

As my father continues driving, I keep my eyes closed. I know exactly what the way ahead of us is like. In darkness, I feel the car dancing with the road and I follow their rhythm with my body. I see the road making its way down to the bottom of the hill like a serpent winding itself through the Guumuchil trees and wild weeds. On the left side of the road the lake faithfully accompanies the road before divorcing it at the Curva de Inzquintla. Once we make that final turn on the road a straightaway leads us right into town. I can smell and taste the corn, onion, and garbanzo fields stretching all the way to the town limits on the right side of the road. They are smells that fill my Abuela’s kitchen. On the left side, alfalfa, tomato, and potato fields are left behind as we drive by.

I can picture everything in my head clearly. I wonder if things had changed or stayed the same. When we were driving atop of the hill I noticed some changes. The lake had changed. It seemed smaller, emptier, not as close to Cojumatlan as it used to be. Its shore revealed land it never had shown before. Its identity was transformed. Small trees that were once submerged in the lake’s flourishing years were now visible. I wonder if Cojumatlan had changed. I had.

We drive very slowly around the Curva. Aside for its bad reputation as the death curve, it has an enchanting disclosure for Cojumatlenses coming back home. This curve is very famous with our town’s people because many of them have died there in car accidents. The roads in Mexico are very narrow and dangerous to drive on. Seldom are they taken care of and repaired. The curve is adorned with memorials displaying crosses and flowers left by family members for their loved ones who died here. The flowers seem to grow there naturally. There are a lot more than last time. As the road makes its way through the parade of flowers, the hill along the right side hides Cojumatlan from us like a stage curtain. This is the image that constantly pops up in front of me when I think of home. This is the image I think about along the five-thousand miles we must drive. This is what I wait for. This is the reason we choose to drive. At this point I no longer imagine. I open my eyes and seize it all.

As we exit the curve, I can see the agricultural fields to both sides of the straightaway. My eyes, however, are immediately drawn to the end of the straightaway. At the vanishing point our Iglesia Del Senor Del Perdon towers above all houses, trees and buildings. Everything else seems miniscule. The Iglesia is worthy of cathedral status. It is the center of our town, what holds it together. It stands proudly facing incoming visitors. Cojumatlenses brag about it and people from neighboring towns come to worship in it.

In a way the Iglesia seems foreign, out of place. Its architecture contradicts the homes and buildings surrounding it. Everything from its foundation to its backbone is made out of stone. The road that leads to our home passes by the church. Ever since we moved away and whenever we go back, the first thing we do is stop and visit the Iglesia and give thanks to El Senor Del Perdon for bringing us home safely. This time it was not going to be any different. As I walk into the Iglesia’s courtyard, I see that it is surrounded by a new five-foot high stone fence with another seven feet of metal fence on top of it. This surprised me. The Iglesia is fenced in, separated from the town, but its doors always remain open. Inside the courtyard are gardens with statues of different Santos. In the center of the courtyard is a fountain with a statue of four different Santos holding cantaros in their hands and water flowing from them. They are the Saints of Chapala that keep the lake flourishing for the town’s fishermen. I make my way past the fountain to the Iglesia’s door, which sits open like a giant mouth. It is not going to eat you, I say to myself. As a child I was always afraid of the Iglesia. I stood in front of the giant’s head and its mouth. I stood a couple of feet from the door and looked up. I had to bend a little backwards to see the top of the two towers and they still seemed as if they were falling down. I have since discovered it has something to do with the angle of vision and the way blood rushes up to your head when you lean back. As I stand there, I look up once again and still it appears to fall. I still tremble in front of it.

The exterior of the Iglesia is as beautiful as the inside. My great-grandfather died building its twin towers in the front of the church. Its dome tower, directly behind its older twin, was finished by his son, my grandfather. When we lived here, my
father was part of the crew who performed the annual maintenance. My ancestors’ devotion to their faith was as strong as the stones of the Iglesia. The Iglesia is a physical act that illustrates their faith. It has been part of our lives for many generations. The same hands that helped build and repair it had also built and repaired our homes. I wonder what I will be remembered for.

Inside the twin towers are four different giant bells. When misa is announced it can be heard as far as the next town ten miles away. Its golden bells are a pleasure to see when the sun rises and sets. There is something heavenly about them; they have the reflection of Chapala. In the middle of the towers sits a giant clock visible to all nearby. Above the clock is a statue of touchdown Jesus, his arms up in the air open for everyone. Behind the statue of Jesus rests the dome tower. Its uniqueness is unrivaled. It is made of small tiles of marble. The last time I saw it, the tiles were yellow. This time the dome was the color of Jesus’ blood.

As I walk inside the Iglesia I immediately breathe in the smell of incense. Benches extend as long as half a football field. The Iglesia’s walls are high and are adorned by statues of different santos and santas about every ten steps. Silk of different colors, depending on the day, embellish its high arches. Catholic artistry hangs from its walls. In the front of the Iglesia, right under the dome tower, I look up and see the portraits of the apostles Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark painted in its ceiling. At the very end, above everything else, large pillars reaching to the top of the Iglesia hold a human-size crucifix of El Senor Del Perdon, its eyes half closed looking down at us. The large window in which it is encased seems to protect it from the sins we’re about to confess. His body is different from bodies I have seen in pictures in America. His body is the color of my skin, a rich chocolate brown, and blood flows from cuts on his feet, hands, knees, and side. On top of his long curly brown hair is a crown not made of thorns or spines, but a golden crown befitting a king. I wonder if He knows I don’t have many friends that speak my language. I wonder if He knows I don’t go to church anymore. I wonder if He knows I don’t work the fields but study at university. I wonder if He knows I have questioned Him. I wondered if He knows of the time my teacher asked if any of us were Catholic and I did not raise my hand. I wonder if He knows I don’t pray.

I kneel below Him. His stare is warm and nothing about the appearance of his body makes me feel horrified. He has not changed. I feel a sense of transformation, a feeling that can only be described by the tears that flow from my eyes. I do not say much. I kneel and pray the prayer for the absent sons, Los Hijos Ausentes again. Padre Nuestro, que estas en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre. Venga a nosotros tu reino. Hagase tu voluntad aquí en la tierra como en el cielo. Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día, perdona nuestras ofensas como también nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden. No nos dejes caer en tentacion y libramos de todo mal. Amen. I know this is the reason we come back. This is what keeps me full. This is what keeps me from rolling downhill. Nuestra Casa.