

ALREADY GONE

To disappear meant to die. In those days, in that place, almost everyone knew. Ester was six when she learned. Her parents had been disappeared, a new way of using the word. Disappearing was no longer something you chose to do and was rather done to you, done to Ester's young father and mother as they stepped off the San Carlos campus at the end of September 1981. Six o'clock: that hour when the streets of Guatemala City empty out fast and the sun skids down the sky like it's greased. Adrián Becker and Paola Velásquez crossed 31 Calle toward a student pub, holding their notebooks, their books. Walking with some of their friends.

Then came a black Chevy van. There was often a van, in such stories. Four men in ski masks leapt from the van while it slowed, or maybe five men—the friends watching in horror never agreed on the number. Before Adrián and Paola reached the far curb, the men intercepted them both. Paola shouted her name, identifying herself as she'd been trained to do, while the men slammed the van

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doors on her. Adrián, kicking so hard one rope-soled huarache sailed into the street, was heard to yell, “¡Viva la revolución!” But this detail might have been added by one of his friends: a sympathizer, too, with the cause.

After the van screeched away and all bystanders dived into what doorways they could, the books Ester’s parents had dropped lay untouched, their pencils flung in an arc across puddles of leaked motor oil. For several minutes, no one dared step outside to salvage the books, or Adrián’s shoe, or Paola’s pencil case, striped blue and white, which had rolled into a drain.

Adrián and Paola. Graduate students in sociology, active in their student union. Both twenty-six, married young. Ester was their only child. They lived in a two-room apartment in a downtown neighborhood unvisited by their kin, since Paola’s family had fled Guatemala some years before, while Adrián’s family felt it was a scandal, living so low when there was no need. Nonetheless, they’d been happy there—Paola, Adrián, Ester.

Now Adrián and Paola were gone. Like a trapdoor had opened and shut, said one of their university friends as everyone gathered in shock at Great-Aunt Silvia’s house. Ester was already there—she stayed with her great-aunt during her parents’ classes—but the rest of her father’s clan drove three hours from their sugar plantation, with several armed bodyguards. Her parents’ friends, meanwhile, arrived on foot or by bus, knowing the house from when Adrián lodged there during his first year of studies. After tonight, they would never re-enter Silvia’s house. Because of what they’d just witnessed, they were quemados—burned. Most, very soon, would go into exile or hiding.

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Great-Aunt Silvia lived in Zona 2 of the city, a genteel colonia a bit past its prime. Inside her parlor—heavy drapes at the windows, Persian rugs on tile floors—people took turns holding Ester. The University of San Carlos students clutched Ester like she was the last sturdy root sticking out from a mountain before a mudslide carried them down. Ester's aunts had much softer laps; their necks smelled of perfume and were slick with hot tears, and intermittently Ester cried, too—cried out of fear, and because she missed her parents, who by then should have eaten Tuesday-night tamales with her and sung her to sleep with a ballad by Victor Jara.

Only Great-Aunt Silvia did not hold Ester. Only she did not cry. She bustled about, calling her maid, Amparo, to bring out more coffee, more rum. The only sign that she wasn't herself showed in a run down the back of her stockings and two curls, dyed silvery blond, which came loose from her updo and wobbled against her stout nape.

"Well, the police will file their report," said Great-Uncle Vicente, Silvia's brother, from the best brocade chair. Decades of running his sugarcane farm made him feel the master of most small domains. "All we can do is wait till the kidnappers ask for a ransom."

The San Carlos students murmured at this. "Man, they're not gonna do that," said a guy in wire-rimmed glasses. "That's not how it works. Don't you know?"

Great-Aunt Silvia said stiffly, "Crime's gotten out of control."

"This isn't about common crime," said another grad student, a chain-smoking girl. "It was a death squad that took them. It's the government kidnapping people."

"Lord, what has this country come to?" Great-Aunt Luisa,

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Vicente's wife, patted her eyes where her mascara was blurred. Compared to Silvia, who had long made her home in the city, Luisa was dreamy and vague—the result, possibly, of spending her life on the remote tropical coast.

"They're gone, man," said a third student. "Adrián and Paola are gone. When the government takes you, that's it."

"What a barbaric idea!" Crossing the room with her cafetiere, Silvia stopped so abruptly that Amparo, close behind with a trayful of cups, nearly collided with her. "That's the way traitors talk."

"All these *politics* are so unpleasant," Great-Aunt Luisa complained.

"Politics always are," Great-Aunt Silvia said. Not then or ever would she discuss the disappearance of Adrián, whom she'd raised like a son, nor of Paola—by this measure, her daughter-in-law. It was as if Ester's parents, having such horror befall them, brought shame on the whole family.

When Ester slid from the lap of one of her aunts, nobody noticed her go. Nobody saw her crawl, belly-down, beneath the old china cabinet, a mahogany piece that anchored one end of the parlor. In the close triangular space where the cabinet cut off the room's corner, the air Ester breathed ricocheted into her face, and it grew increasingly hard to believe there was light on the opposite side. As the voices of others faded away, she pressed her cheek to the back of the cabinet. Was this how it felt, being gone?

"It's best we don't ask," Great-Aunt Silvia would say, those other occasions when Ester's parents had left—for days, sometimes for