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Opening extract from

The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind

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The Missing Boy



THE TRAIN WHISTLE did not sound through the valley the day Ernesto Fermín's men found Luis. In fact, that morning the whole mountain was unusually quiet. The winter winds had blown in during the night and coated everything in yellow dust. Ghostly buzzards circled for prey over the canyon.

In those days, the train's weekly arrival was still a spectacle for the people of Tres Montes. It crossed the bridge before dawn on Saturday, belching white steam and blowing its whistle to frighten any goats grazing up ahead. Soon after, it would pull into the station, Marco, the handsome conductor, waving like a cinema star over the heads of the bike-taxi boys he'd known all his life. Passengers from far away stepped out to buy pastries and share news from the capital. To Sonia Ocampo, the train

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meant more than customers for her family's pastries and vegetables. It meant a glimpse at a world she thought she would never know.

She'd been running late that awful morning. Her eyes were heavy for sleep as she crossed the highway and hurried along the winding street. The vigil over a miner's sickbed had lasted all night, much longer than she had expected, but she hadn't had the heart to leave Old Guacho afraid and alone. Even now, as she ran along, she could hear his pitiful groans mixed with the yelps of stray dogs following at her heels. It was as if suffering itself were chasing her.

The rest of her family was already at the plaza, getting ready for market. She spotted her brother Rafael's truck parked against their stall as she arrived. Like everything else, it was coated in dust. Even her brother looked like a spirit.

"Did I miss the train?" she asked him.

He handed down a basket of dusty tomatoes and glanced at the empty tracks through the haze.

"Why do you care?" he replied. "Are you going to moon over Marco like the other girls?" He waved pompously over his head like the conductor.

Sonia pinched his leg. "You're jealous." She squinted to see the farthest point of the tracks and frowned. "It's strange, that's all. Marco never forgets to blow the whistle."

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"And who needs *that* racket?" Felix Ocampo said, interrupting them.

Sonia and Rafael exchanged knowing glances as their father joined them at work. Nearly deaf from a lifetime of blasting through silver mines, Felix hated having the cottony peace inside his ears shattered—especially by the train that lured young men to the cities. "A cursed engine of evil" is what he called it. Sonia had long decided that it was pointless to argue with him. Rafael was a different story.

"We do," he grumbled. "It's progress."

"What did he say?" Felix put his ear close to Sonia.

"Nothing, Papi." She shot Rafael a warning look.

But Rafael raised his voice so his father could hear every syllable. "I said, 'It's progress.' The future is out there at the end of the tracks, Papi. Here we're turning to useless dust. See?" He blew a puff of grit from his fender.

Felix glared. "Yes, yes, the *future*," he huffed. "What kind of future is it when boys leave their own families for places unknown? It's a disgrace!" He jutted his chin at Lopez, the milkman, who was hanging cheeses by himself. "Tell me, what father should be left with his hands in his pockets and lonely for his own son?"

Rafael rolled his eyes in plain sight. It would be another quarrel that would change exactly nothing.

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"Wipe the sleep from those insolent eyes," Felix snapped. "And watch your mother's *buñuelos*! The woman spent an hour frying them!"

Sonia rescued the tray of her mother's pastries from Rafael's boots as their father stormed off. Two had already been flattened—a stroke of good luck, in her view. She handed Rafael one and took a bite of the other. It was their favorite breakfast.

"Here," she told him. "This might be a sweeter start to the day."

Rafael tore off a piece. "He's wrong."

"He's Papi," she replied before a yawn overtook her. "Sorry."

Rafael studied her tired face as he chewed.

"So, how's Old Guacho?" he asked finally. "You were gone all night again."

Sonia shrugged, wiping jelly from her lips. "The same."

Guacho had mined his whole life like their father. Now his coughs rattled in his chest, and he barely opened his milky eyes. Sonia didn't like to share any of that. Why burden Rafael with dreary reports of dying miners? It would make them both feel strangely old and hopeless. It was better to see her brother laugh, to careen down the mountainside on his bike handlebars or hop river rocks when the water wasn't rushing too hard.

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"Tell me something," she said, changing the subject. "I notice you look awfully tired yourself. Were you out late again? Doing something I should know about?"

Rafael grinned as he considered his favorite topic. "A little of this and a little of that."

"Oh." Sonia licked her fingers of the last morsels. "A little of *that.* What's her name? Or have you lost track again?"

"Don't worry, *hermanita.*" He wiggled his eyebrows. "I have my ways of remembering my girlfriends."

Now it was Sonia who rolled her eyes. "Louse." His last fling—a girl named Dora—had cried over him for a week.

Rafael gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and brushed the dust from her eyelashes. He was a rascal but a charming one.

"Why don't you go home and get some sleep before Mami and Papi find something for you do to?" he told her. "I'll unload the rest."

She shook her head. "Thanks, but no. I think I'll wait for the engine of evil."

Rafael flashed a conspiring grin as he slipped the tray of *buñuelos* on his shoulders. "Suit yourself."

Soon he was moving through the crowd like a waiter in a fine hotel. He looked nothing like a miner, Sonia

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thought. Not like his father or grandfather or any other Ocampo man before that. It was as if he'd been born into the wrong life entirely.

"¿Buñuelo, guapas?" he called to a few girls, enticing them with his smile and the scent of anise.

A twinge of envy bit at her ribs as he disappeared around the corner. What would it be like to be as carefree as Rafael, to worry about nothing more important than whom to kiss next? Sadly, she would probably never know. She was already sixteen and had never so much as held hands with a boy—all thanks to her destiny.

Sonia pulled her shawl closer and closed her tired eyes, trying not to feel too sorry for herself. The shawl felt like a heavy armor on her shoulders and made her ache for her bed. Hundreds of metal charms were pinned to the threadbare cloth with scarcely the space of a fingernail between them. Mouths to cure a gossip. A heart to find true love. Feet to ensure a safe journey. A fist for strength. So many petitions had been made of her over the years that Sonia had lost count.

She dozed in the gritty breeze, trying to imagine even a simple walk without this weight, but of course that was like imagining a walk without her skin. She'd worn this shawl from the first moment she'd opened her eyes, and today she roamed like a living altar in the mountains. Every step she

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took jangled with the wishes and hopes of the people who feared what the world had in store for humble ones like them. She was their best hope.

"Bring us back safely, Sonia!" the miners called to her from their trucks each morning.

"This union will bear many healthy children, thanks to you," happy parents cried as Sonia trailed down the aisle behind brides on their wedding day.

"Walk him to the arms of God," Old Guacho's wife had said only yesterday.

"Sonia!"

The voice jarred her awake and nearly toppled her from the flatbed where she'd drifted to sleep.

"Señora Clara?" Sonia said, when she turned and saw who it was.

The woman was wrapped tightly in her own shawl, only her eyes showing. She pressed a charm into Sonia's hand and kissed her fingers reverently.

Sonia looked twice. Gold: a bright yellow piece in the crude shape of a boy. The metal, she noticed, was still warm to the touch.

Dread crawled up her spine as she took in Señora Clara's anguished expression. There was only one way someone so poor could get metal like this. The widow would have a new bloody space in the back of her mouth, a

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gold-filled molar or bicuspid now missing . . . something not too troublesome to chew without.

Sonia climbed down from the truck, wincing. The sun had heated her charms into branding irons. She pulled the widow into the shade. "What's wrong?"

"He's vanished—like *that.*" Señora Clara snapped her trembling fingers. By now the rest of the Ocampos had gathered with the other merchants to listen. Felix sat in a folding chair with his arms crossed proudly; his wife, Blanca, was at his side. Tía Neli sat on an overturned crate and filed her nails as she listened.

"I've asked everywhere, but there is no trace of Luis," Señora Clara continued. "It's been five days since I've seen him."

"Well, is he out chasing skirts?" Tía Neli arched her penciled brow knowingly. "That wouldn't be a first around here."

Blanca Ocampo blushed and poured more tea for Señora Clara. "*Por Dios,* Neli . . . such an idea."

"What?" Tía Neli retorted. "Luis is a young man like any other! Ask Rafael if you don't believe me! He'd know better than anyone." Across the stall, Rafael pretended to stack more peppers, but even from here, Sonia could see his ears were red.

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"Let the woman talk, Sister," Felix ordered. He and Tía Neli shared the same dark eyes and sharp tongues, but in everything else they were utter opposites. Not even their mother, Abuela, who visited from the grave in dreams from time to time, had a good explanation for the dueling twins she had left behind. "Five fingers from a single hand, no two the same."

Señora Clara's chin quivered as she spoke of Luis. Her only son had been born with a lame leg, the right foot limp as a dead fish. Of all the young miners, only Rafael didn't mind climbing down the shafts with him—or, on occasion, inside a willing girl's bedroom window.

"If only such a thing were true," she told Tía Neli. "But I've made every hussy in this town swear on the souls of her dead. None has seen him. I . . . I don't know where he could be."

Sonia blinked. From the corner of her eye, she could see Rafael grow still, his jaw clenched.

But you do know, she thought. *We all know.* But as usual, no one had the valor to make a mother face the truth.

Like every boy in Tres Montes, Luis nursed secret fantasies of a life outside the mines. That's what young men talked about—besides girls—as they rode along the serpentine path to the mines. Each year a few lucky ones got working papers for jobs far away, out in the open air—golden boys who sent money back home. But for most,

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there were no papers. If hunger and imagination nudged them enough, they left quietly on their own to find their way to the capital and beyond, risking robbers who stalked travelers in the valley.

"What do you think is beyond that mountain?" Sonia had asked Luis as they picnicked on the cliffs once. She could still see the last plume of smoke as they'd watched the train disappear for the capital.

"The whole exciting world," he had replied, already enchanted. "What else?"

But how would Luis make a trek through the valley? Steep hills always made him topple despite his special shoe; climbing left him wheezing. Without Rafael as a companion, who would carry his pack? Who would help him over the boulders the way she sometimes did?

"Help me, Sonia." Luis's deep voice suddenly became Señora Clara's, who now knelt at Sonia's feet. She looked so small and pitiful. Her eyes were gentle but frightened in a way that made Sonia's chest ache.

"Please, Señora Clara," she whispered. "Stand up." It always filled her with shame when elders begged her for help.

But Señora Clara only bowed her head lower.

"You'll pray to bring him back to me?"

Every neighbor turned. Alicia, whose husband had

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finally become faithful. Georgina, whose skin had been cured of oozing sores with Sonia's herbs and prayer. Even Luz, saved from the clutches of a fever in her crib.

"Save my boy's life," Señora Clara whispered. "You are my only hope."

Sonia's mouth went dry. The bones of her shoulders bowed lower still as she reached for the widow's hand. Señora Clara's fingers were long and thin like her son's, but her hands were as icy as those of a corpse.

Felix sprang to his feet. His voice boomed. "Of course she will save him! Take that worry off your heart, *señora.* Sonia has God's ear."

For the rest of the morning, Sonia prayed at the church ruins, where a circle of stones beneath the prickly weeds still marked the spot where she had lain as a newborn. Of all the things she had ever asked for, Luis's safety seemed the most urgent. Guacho, dying in his bed, was an old man. His whiskers had grown white with time; he'd lived out his days longer than most miners. But Luis was young; he was at the beginning of his days.

So as proof of Luis's goodness, she carefully listed for God every kindness he had shown. She begged pity for his worried mother. She asked for good strangers to help him find his way.

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When she was through, she walked wearily back to Rafael, sitting in his truck. He took a long drag of his cigarette and glanced around the market. Then he took her shawl and balled it like a rag in a corner.

"Lie down, Sonia," he whispered. "You need sleep."

She lay back, staring for a long while at the spotless sky overhead. Finally, she turned to him. "Where is Luis?" she whispered. "He left to find work, didn't he?"

Rafael would not meet her gaze. Instead, he tossed away his cigarette butt and crept to her side.

"Sleep." Stretched out alongside her, he hummed the tune Blanca used as their lullaby. It was an old miners' song, one to lift men's spirits over the endless blackness of their days.

It was useless this time. As the afternoon wore on, the air grew hotter, and thick dust swirled in intolerable eddies. The cows would not give a drop of milk. And even the wild parrots that usually roosted happily in the bushes pecked at one another so viciously that Rafael finally shot a pistol in the air to send them off.

But what Sonia noticed most of all was that the train did not arrive.

Across the market, Tía Neli put down her magazine. Sonia watched as her aunt marched to the police station at the end of the plaza and rapped loudly on the shutters.

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"And when do you plan to do something, Ernesto Fermín?" she demanded at the window. "Being the police captain is more than showing off your medals and that silly gun, you know!"

Capitán Fermín sighed. "What exactly do you expect me to do, Neli?"

"First of all, let me in."

Sonia rolled over as her aunt stepped inside.

Shortly afterward, four of the department's best men set out on horseback, kicking up clouds as they thundered off.

It wasn't long after that.

Sonia was sipping her mother's chamomile tea when Capitán Fermín arrived with the news. He climbed up to the auction platform and removed his worn hat. Beside him stood Marco. The conductor's tie was loose, and his eyes were rimmed in red.

"Friends," the police chief began. "Today I have a sad obligation."

The villagers abandoned their conversations and crowded in like sheep to brace themselves. A covered cart was beside the mounted men in the road.

Capitán Fermín did not dare look at Señora Clara, who was already tearing at her hair and wailing. Nor did he even

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try to stop Sonia from walking unsteadily to the cart when she spotted the worn sole of a familiar thick-heeled shoe.

She pulled back the canvas. Black flies buzzed at Luis's eyes, half opened and fixed on her in accusation. Thieves had turned his hip pockets out. His thick hair was matted with blood where their bullets had blasted through his skull.

"I thought it was a dead animal on the tracks," Marco told the stunned crowd.

He had managed to stop his fine train just in time.

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