

Anna Schachner

Remember Me As Kind

Dear Cabana Boy,

I am not using your name because frankly, I don't want to remember it, and it is lucky that I remember the name of the hotel. I might not have, had I not bought a set of cork coasters in the gift shop with the Blue Iguana printed in, of course, blue ink. Now I prefer (you should know) gin and vodka, because their clarity allows for a consistent, if not warbled, view of the iguana, its tail longer, sadly, than the effects of the alcohol. But enough of that. How lucky that you carried the silver platter that day, my frozen daiquiri atop, its frothy surface executing the dance of the soon to be gone. The fact that you did your job so well is why I write to you today.

Your country is strange and beautiful. The afternoon before I met you I walked beyond the divide of the compound (what the brochure called a resort) and found the dust that the wind off the ocean carried over those walls of stone and iron. Now *there* was Mexico. The locals stared at me, the men their eyes as wide as that stretch of beach they'll never see. My body felt different. My body felt subject to them, as if their gaze were chiseling it, making it what they wanted, even from the suspicious shade of doorways. I walked for miles, without a hat, and when I returned, my cheeks were pink, flushed first by the sun and then by all that latent lust, which could not even be negated by sadness. I passed houses with straw roofs. I passed children wearing dirty, torn clothing. I passed tourists in air-conditioned buses, studying me through windows that shimmered with the heat, no doubt wondering how I could be so alone in a country crowded with such disparity. You told me later that you had slept with exactly 16 Americans, *gringas* to be more specific, one for each floor of the hotel with two to spare. That is how many tourist buses I counted in an hour. If I raise your tally to 17 (and I do), then the numbers are no longer equal. You win. I'm one gringo group short.

I would like to return to your country. Please remember me as kind.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Cabana Boy,

In two weeks I will be married. In white. Why not? The dress is long and fitted. The groom is tall and dependable. The church is not a church but the backyard of his parents' English Tutor house where he played with G.I. Joe as a child. Once I asked him, *Am I just another action figure?* Of

course, he said no. *You have genitalia*, he said, joking. But what is humor if not despair with the corners of its mouth turned up? On the other side of the world, where upside down is right side up, a question is just a statement. If he had asked—from Australia—, *Will you marry me*, then I might have said nothing and nothing would come of it. Two Saturdays from now would mean jeans and a tank top, my tan lines as obstinate as the past. Your country imprinted on my body, claiming me against all impediments of sunscreen and border guards.

Do you remember the couple that always chose the lounge chairs to my right? They were young, twenty-five perhaps, and on their honeymoon. He had a birthmark across his stomach that I studied when he shut his eyes against your impressive sun. It was red and fringed around the edges. I would think, as his wife lay beside him, that if I just weren't so tired, so unsure of what to do in the world, I would begin a conversation, tell him how beautiful his discrepancy was. I think that beauty is never consistent. It changes. Everyday I discover things that I never found beautiful before. The snake in my gutter, its head flattened by something unforeseen, glistens, muted not by death but by some lovely acquiescence. My mother, whose flesh hangs from the undersides of her arms like two empty purses, is luminous, more so now than in decades gone by. I look at traffic, dormant people encased in metal, and see time waiting. Obedient time.

Two weeks, my friend. Come for me now. Time might wait, but those who fear it never do. They never do.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Cabana Boy,

I'm going to call you Eloy. On the bus into Acapulco, I heard a mother call her son that, and the word just settled, even unspoken, like a dumpling in my mouth. Forgive my mixing ethnicities, but the name is soft and full just like a dumpling from the Chinese take-out in the strip mall on the corner. Eloy, what's your story? Eloy, you're a charming boy. Eloy, don't be coy. There. I've made you a poem. You will be immortal long after the gin melts the ice, long after this fluttering in my stomach disappears and I've paid off the credit card bills with checks written in hesitant numbers. Vacations. Why must we pay to rest? I bought no souvenirs. The body always wins. All expenses are for repose. Food and repose. Only the surface changed. The hotel room bed. Sand. The backseat of that old car you drove, your children's smell—plastic diapers and hand-me-down sandals—trapped in the worn upholstery. Of course, it was wrong. But with the windows rolled down so that the accordion music from cars passing beyond us could enter and with your breath so warm and unfamiliar, well, I was convinced that I should have gone on vacation alone a long time ago. You told me that you were 26, but you kissed me as if you were 14, Eloy, as if you were deconstructing your life and mine and inserting an ideal in both their places.

Did I tell you that I was 34, the last few years having crept up on me like those rampant hotel maids, changing sheets even after the nights you never tap, tapped, tapped on the door? I am working my way to middle age, a seagull invisible against the crest of a wave.

So now I am thinking about passion. Not the fruit, not the knock-off perfume, not anything to do with Easter, including those cream-filled chocolate bunnies that always seem to hippity-hop into my grocery cart. Something different. Passion must be the opposite of sadness. That's it, isn't it? No, it's more like the opposite of uncertainty. When we were together neither one of us had to explain the heaviness suddenly lifted, the surrender of arms, legs, worry. The worry arrives later.

I left a reminder of me in your car. Under the seat where the carpet has worn away, your slender fingers will find a key to my house. If you ever need it, there's a key to my house. If one of your children, or your wife finds it, tell them that it is a key to your heart. Always rely on clichés when in jeopardy; they are so trite as to be innocent. And, houses can be entered and exited, but I'm not so sure about hearts.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Eloy,

Every woman I have ever known who has followed the pointed toes of her white shoes down an aisle has sacrificed the reception for propriety, but not this bride. The photographer chased me while I ate everything I could. There were shrimp stuffed with crab meat so fresh it pinched the inside of my mouth and sassy cheese sandwiches wrapped in mint leaves, and (in honor of your country) tiny tortillas filled with spinach and onions that made my hips move of their own accord. The cake, oh, Eloy, the cake was tiered the way that life is, every level more complex but never as sweet as the one before it. I ate three pieces, one in the appropriate ceremony, another between dances, and a third in the ladies room, reclined on the fainting couch with champagne bubbles tickling my nostrils and two of the guests from the groom's side staring while they slicked their ringed hands in lotion, not having to worry the least about an incoming missile bouquet.

I should tell you that this was not my first wedding, my first marriage, but not my first wedding. Groom Number One did not show, and I, just like in grade school, always there when the roll was called. I wore so much white that I might have been a cotton ball plucked from a bag of other cotton balls (not a bad metaphor for any bride). My father walked me back down the aisle, still unclaimed. My train puffed behind me until I reached around and ripped it off, all the guests finally letting their eyes settle on me as I absorbed all their pity. Pity, Eloy, feels like sweat, a thin layer of discomfort. I gave away that dress, historical and tattered, when I realized that pity smells like sweat, too: like good intent covered by filth.

It's good that Groom Number Two showed up. I do not want any more pity. And he lets me choose his ties. Neck, that is, not family.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Eloy,

I think that I will name your wife Alesia. Alesia who married you expecting love. Alesia who pushed three insistent children through her body. Alesia who knows nothing of me and 16+ other women who know much about you who is just a little too unconcerned about Alesia. Sometimes I dream of her at night and she is small but expelling human beings—boom, boom, boom, boom—little explosions of fireworks whose colors ascend, filling the skies with tiny little selves. Tiny little people interspersed in the clouds, bumping against their softness, reconfiguring their forms so that some person below, cocks a head, points heavenward, and says, “Does that look like a fatherless family on their way to church to you?” I don't dream about you, only your family. On their way to church, a place that finally bypassed the empirical world to be in the clouds.

One by one, just like I did, do all those temporary women push you from their dreams? Betrayed. Abandoned. Eloy, do you feel left out, always having to find someone new? Is that it?

For my vacation choices, I blame only myself. And the global economy. If the flesh is weak, so is the dollar in Europe.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Eloy,

That fluttering in my stomach, what I mistook for regret, is not lament after all. It is a baby, or what will be a baby, though it must look like only a determined tadpole now. I knew before I knew, when my body grew soft. I am not good at numbers, but I have considered the possibilities. There are exactly two explanations, three if you ever let your fallen teenage cousin Lucy explain her “weight problem” to you when you were four: They are:

- 1) My now husband (the day of our wedding at the church an hour early to help greet the elderly women always over-anxious about new beginnings and/or missed opportunities) commanded one of his sperm (ahead of schedule like those women) haughty conquistador that it was, to thrust a flag into my uterus. Thus, the baby will look like him, pale and humble, with ears in the near-shape of a pear. The baby will be his, rightfully. Truthfully. My life will not become a *telenovella*, where drama is always enhanced by minor notes played in quick succession. You would think that

tragedy and trouble were slow, but no, they are chased by quick fingers across a keyboard.

- 2) My life will become a *telenovella*. That one night when you recommended the market in Acapulco with its maze of stalls, drawing an invisible diagram against the sheets, forging my speculative way through tiers of fruit, scented candles, and crockery, you were actually tracing the route of one vagabond sperm as it slid sideways (that one impulsive night we did not use a condom) and spent all its allowance on eggs. Thus, the baby will look like you: brown, lithe. Animated. This will be a problem. Bigger than math. Smaller than sickness.
- 3) Stoned storks. Lost, misguided, discombobulated, unintelligent, not lucid, incoherent, half-crazed, erratic, confused, stoned storks. Never trust any delivery, a baby included, to a beaked entity with red eyes, the wingspan of a small aircraft, and a dealer downtown.

Time will tell on me, Eloy, the way that jealous siblings do. I have a feeling.

Your friend,
Angela

P.S. What would you tell Alesia?

Dear Eloy,

There is much money to be made off a woman's expanding stomach. There are ointments and creams and pear-shaped shirts and pillows that vibrate like an unsteady heart. I am an industry, Eloy, an industry. Today I bought a pair of pants with an expandable waist and a kangaroo pocket made of spandex and right there on the label it said, "*Hecho en Mexico.*" Some woman, perhaps pregnant herself, rose very early to take a coughing bus to a maquiladora, her nimble fingers working the machine so that I could grow fat in style under the accommodating watch of a piece of elastic. If only people were as forgiving as elastic.

Did I tell you that my husband, assured of full credit, is thrilled? He is looking forward to the day when he can't fit his arms around me. (I am, too.) He says that like responsible hearts, water levels in the spring, and balloons, stomachs, too, should swell. He wants hot-air balloons in the nursery. Lots of hot-air balloons floating along the walls and into the ceiling on which he wants to paint clouds. I wonder if that woman in the factory ever thinks about clouds. Now that I am no longer working, designing yards for rich people who believe that Nature is obedient, I have time to think about clouds. I used to resent them and now I ponder them. Nebulous. Think how it applies.

I will come back to your country one day, child in tow. We will look at the sky and dream of ourselves. Our zippers will glean in the sun.

Your fat friend,
Angela

Dear Eloy,

Of course, I really do remember your name. It is Raul, with all those other names after it, each one ending in *ez* so that it sounded as if a trapped fly was living inside your mouth each time you said it: your mother's family name and your father's and another with more vowels than a Wheel of Fortune champion. But I prefer Eloy. Just Eloy. Besides, it was your ancestors, not mine, who believed that a name is an act of creation.

The baby is a boy. I changed my mind during the ultrasound and asked the doctor to tell me. Did God mean for us to ever be able to see through skin? I don't know. I do know that my husband smiled as he watched, nodding his head to the rhythm of the baby's heartbeat. He will not even term the conception an accident. He says that accidents only happen on highways: everything else has a reason. I say everything else has a secret, but I don't say it to him.

Twenty weeks, Eloy. His fetus head rests against my left two bottom ribs. His penis is half-formed, curled like an aspiring question mark. I am afraid of the question it will become.

Your friend,
Angela

P.S. The baby's skin looked darker than it should in the sonogram but so did all my organs, my bones, and his one half-formed eye that wasn't winking.

Dear Eloy,

I have had a sudden thought. Not a dream, but a thought. All those temporary women have also birthed your children. One day we will all converge on Mexico, like a Woodstock play date. Those of us with babies will nurse them until they are milk drunk, their eyes rolled back in ecstasy, the very condition that spawned them. Then we will compare the imprint of your beauty. We will look for wide lips, eyebrows resembling furry insects. Strong cheekbones. We won't trade sexual trivia. We are mothers now. We will reside in motherhood, our very own exclusive resort. We will sweep our eyes across 19 children (two sets of twins included) and marvel at your virility. Meanwhile our stretch marks, our nipples that are now, appropriately, the diameter of a wine glass and turned up like noses at a country club, brand us for what we are.

So we will turn our attention from the children to each other. Our eyes will move slowly, one *gringa* face at a time, searching. There is no use for jealousy. Now we are not gauging beauty, whose forehead is smoother because she has learned to worry less. Who best covers gray hair, as hard to find in Mexico as a baby detached from a pair of arms and seated in a stroller. No, the play date is ending. We bend for diaper bags, sippy cups with tiny teeth marks. Our SUV's and minivans wait, Disney movies on pause. (Who will love the little mermaid, a crossbreed if there ever was one?) Everything is on pause. Our goodbyes slow us. Promises to write. Tips about time-out. We all prolong the question. Who will leave Mexico, the ironic land of mothers? Or who will honor the law of the father? Whose child, against his mother's knowledge, packed his love of corn, his revved-up r's, and his curiosity in a suitcase without a nametag?

I'm just asking.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Eloy,

Sometimes the future travels slowly. Sometimes it grows inch by careful inch until it is under your nose and there in front of you. Part of you and also part of something that nothing in the present will let you imagine. I would see you sometimes staring out beyond the waves as you waited for tourists to sign for their drinks. Is that why you chose the job near the ocean? Where the water meets the shore is exactly the same: a border that doesn't care about divisions of countries or increments of days. A line that only divides the colors of cartographers.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Eloy.

I love him most when the baby kicks. He is formed now, toes and all, and he uses them to remind me that he will emerge whole and perfect and strong. No paranoid fears of webbed feet or asymmetrical ears or poor standardized test scores. No. There will be none of that.

What I fear is the mystery—like dead air on the radio—that avoids explanation. Who decides love? Where does it come from—from beyond what conspicuous wall of stone or skin? Eloy, I must tell you that sometimes I forget to love him. He baffles me. If he's not kicking, instead a sleeping marsupial inside me, I am thinking how he will change, growing older against all my efforts to keep him young, claiming the world when so many have already done so. I remember one woman in Mexico, standing at a bus stop, both arms dangling free of children or groceries. I watched

as the bus came and she stood. Another bus, black exhaust coiling behind it, and she stood. Perhaps she is still there, waiting for death because its unscheduled appearance will be the one thing to surprise her. Why do I feel like I have already lost him, like his birth will be the beginning of a thousand little deaths that, one by one, surprise me?

Crosses wrapped in plastic flowers along the highways and grinning skeletons behind the wheels of toy buses don't fool me. Death isn't any prettier, any easier, in Mexico than here. It's just not as secret.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Eloy,

We should all remember the Alamo. I forget why we should remember it, but it's got something to do with stacked odds. Let's all remember stacked odds.

Your friend,
Angela

Dear Alesia,

It hurt like you must remember. It hurt so much that I was convinced I was never going to be released from the pain. That I would live inside that pain like a low-rent house, in a subdivision called Excruciating Heights, with a landlord named Torture, and neighbors with SUFFER written in all caps on their mailboxes and huge blimps advertising things like "Vodka on the Rocks" and "Successful Buddhism" and "Codeine" and "That Epidural You Refused" floating overhead, so out of reach. And then he was here. Instantly. Below his spiky black hair emerged a brown forehead and a brown belly and brown toes. You know the color. The whole world receded and it was just all that brown that somehow came from me. My husband wants to take full credit. *I have that grandfather who was a quarter Indian*, he said, lowering his blonde head to kiss the baby.

I don't buy it, but secrets don't keep themselves.

One day I will return him to Mexico. See in him what you will. You might recognize a ridge of cheekbone, a quickness in his eyes. But the rest of him will be mine not to recognize. By the time we come to your country, he will be old enough to walk just barely in front of me, finding a steady rhythm through the crowds of people on the sidewalk, admiring the sizzle of tortillas on makeshift grills, the sway of hips of girls who won't quite meet his gaze, greeting your country as if he had known it all along. He might never leave, and if he doesn't, I'll admire him from the distance that has to be. You should do the same.

And please think of him as kind.

Sincerely,
Angela