

Crucifix on the Road to Gnadenheim: A Short Story

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Elinor discovers the crucifix in the *supermercado* while she is looking for soap powder.

It stands on the shelf of souvenirs for tourists, towering—perhaps 25 to 30 centimeters high—over a dusty assortment of decorative wooden bowls and coasters, tooled leather bookmarks and wallets, key chains, and plaques with bottle trees or oxen painted onto them. These objects, piled haphazardly, look shabby and abandoned, like secondhand merchandise. The *palosanto* crucifix, however, gleams. Its green and bronze lines shimmer, freshly carved, freshly polished.

So powerful is the impression of its newness, in fact, that Elinor jerks her head toward the aisle, half-expecting to catch a glimpse of someone with a whittling tool darting away. She sees no one, and shakes her head, confused. She turns her attention back to the crucifix.

The hung Christ shudders; he curves into the wood. He is dying right in front of her. He slumps as gravity demands: his arms distend, his dark head and legs cave downwards, sideways. Then he hangs still, weighted with blood and flesh which has given up.

The paler lines of the wood's grain, sand-colored, happen upon the folds of the cloth over his loins. It makes them ripple a little, as if a chilly wind has begun to blow. On his head the plait of thorns, cut of some contrasting wood, appears to have lifted slightly. It seems as light and painless as straw.

But the body may still be warm.

Elinor looks around her. The girls at the checkout tills are busy with customers. Her mother-in-law is at the butcher shop. "I'll meet you at the truck," she said. Elinor hears the distant whine of a motorcycle and the faint, steady hum of the building's air conditioner, but she is alone and unobserved.

She wraps her left hand around the dead man's chest and lifts him down. With her right hand, she cradles the cross. She brings the prone body carefully to her nose. She inhales.

The strong fragrance of *palosanto* rushes into her nostrils.

It rushes in, that sweet brown smell, to comfort her. It makes her think of a mound of ashes bubbling with heat, branches bending low enough to sweep the ground, the shadows of the washhouse at dusk. Elinor closes her eyes. She was dreaming a lovely dream once, wasn't she? If she could only remember it, she would know why she was happy.

Then Elinor's hands begin to tremble. Her eyes fly open and with a movement as reckless as the others were tender, she thrusts the crucifix back to its place. She rushes away from it down the aisle to find the soap and glares fiercely at all the boxes and bottles until she recollects which brand she uses.

Oh, she groans, why did I notice, why did I stop, why did I touch it? Is this the way of divine assistance? Or is it the fine art of the devil?

But after she has purchased her jar of yogurt, her cheese and brown sugar and laundry powder, she is unable to stop herself from circling around to the crucifix once more. This time she picks it up with the disinterested mannerisms of a casual shopper. She needs to know the price.

The crucifix is expensive. It would be far too much.

Elinor hurries away a second time, ashamed.

She stops the truck in front of her mother-in-law's house. She carries in the other woman's groceries. When she steps into the kitchen, she feels its coolness. It seems completely detached from the midday heat.

Peter's mother hurries into her bedroom to change clothes. "Have you seen how full the lemon tree is?" she calls from around the corner. "Peter loves lemon juice. Especially when it's fresh."

Peter's mother emerges in a clean, faded home dress of light brown cotton. She is a plump, energetic woman with soft grey hair. "We should work in the garden this afternoon," she says, tying an apron around her waist.

Elinor smiles her acquiescence, because that's what she did in the beginning, when she wanted so badly to learn. She has not been able to stop answering this way, even though each smile is using up her life, as breathing uses air. She wishes she could lie down on the table in her mother-in-law's kitchen, on the calm blue oilcloth with the white sailboats floating across it in prim, even rows. But she smiles and nods, and Peter's mother says, "We'll see you later then."

Elinor drives the truck several hundred feet further, parks beside the old house where she and Peter live. When they married, they built a house for his mother in a corner of the *hof*, close to the street. The mother's house is small, but in the manner of the newer homes, has a wide verandah and modern conveniences—an indoor toilet, a gas stove, glass windows, kitchen cupboards. Elinor's house strives to keep up-to-date through her constant scrubbing, but it is a battle which cannot be won; hers is a house mutinous with ancient construction and fundamental inefficiencies.

Elinor puts the provisions away. She writes down, in Peter's accounting book, the sum she spent. Peter is at their pastureland and will not be home for dinner, so she undresses without eating and lies down on her bed for siesta. The shutters are closed; the room is dark and hot and airless. She doesn't have strength, though, to get up and turn on the oscillating fan.

The desperation is with her again: the familiar and painful desperation. How to describe it, even to herself, this sense that she is disappearing, that she is drying and cracking? It isn't the weather, not a lack of physical health, but some other seepage she cannot plug.

She came from the other side of Paraguay to marry Peter, to live with him here on the farm, in the farming village of Gnadenheim. She came across the river, leaving father and mother, brothers, sisters, friends. She was converted for him. She unpacked herself for him as a box. She yielded herself as a garden does to the plow, to seed and sun and rain.

She did not know what it would cost her to be a stranger. She did not know how difficult and dangerous it would be. She had boldly seized the words of Ruth for her own—*Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people, my people. Your God...*

But these words no longer travel through her mind in sentences. They are hard, separate entities now—*where*, and *you*, and *I*, and *go*, and *lodge*—not fluid as before, not linked to pull her from peril.

Nor can she make Peter comprehend her despair. People are amazed how well you fit in, he replies affably, how hard you work; and isn't everyone very nice, trying their best? One should not mind what people think, he says, and when Elinor assures him this is not the problem, he looks victorious, as if that's exactly what he wanted her to get the knack of. One day he reveals he's been grateful she's quiet: two talkative women on one *hof* would be too much for any man, he says, but he offers this sheepishly, like a basket of grapefruit stolen from a neighbor's tree.

All Elinor has to offer is herself, whenever he wants her. She thinks that if they had a child she would feel better, but this hasn't happened yet. She clings to Peter long after he falls asleep, tearfully stroking his rough, sun-reddened face.

In spite of everything, Elinor is alert to omens of rescue. The crucifix asserts itself in her mind, unrelentingly, as such a sign. She begins to calculate, secretly, how many eggs she will have to sell, how many weeks it will take. She investigates the house and barn for a hiding place.

On the next week's trip into town, Elinor wanders to the tourist shelf, to strengthen the hopes she is weaving together. The crucifix is gone.

The souvenirs are as disheveled and untended as before, all of them bleating *Recuerdo del Paraguay* from gold-ink lettering under a fine layer of dust. Souvenirs of Paraguay, indeed. But the crucifix is not there.

Elinor has been outwitted. Had she dared to imagine it would wait for her? That it would repeat *INRI*—Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews—with its quiet assurance and strength to other customers until she was ready to take it home? Just because there are not many tourists visiting the Chaco, just because Mennonites do not use crucifixes, just because the Catholic Indians are very poor?

How foolish she was, how naive, to suppose it (so beautiful!) would not be snatched away. To suppose it was safe. Intended for her!

She slouches away from the gaping shelf, disappointment dropping into her stomach like a stone.

The following week, Elinor notices that one of the telephone posts along the road to Gnadenheim resembles, from a distance, a crucifix.

Peter is driving—he needed to pick up some tractor parts—and he and his mother are discussing the crops. The peanuts are stronger than the castor-oil plants, he says; he might have proportioned the land a little differently, instead of half and half, but still, they're all looking good enough so far and he's satisfied. He's certainly not sorry he dropped cotton. The crucial factor, of course, is rain. If the fields don't get rain, a thorough rain, within a week for sure, the damage will be severe.

Elinor spots the crucifix just past the bend in the road—the place a mile or so from the village where Peter says the horses start to gallop home in earnest. (The expression comes from his late father, from the days of wagons and buggies.) This crucifix is rather approximate; but once Elinor has seen it, it is irrefutable. The unlikely shape is possible because the Chaco does not have trees tall and straight enough to serve as posts for the telephone lines. The best of the yellow *quebracho* trunks, crooked as they are, must be used—two of them fastened together with a metal girth to form one pole.

In the bottom trunk Elinor sees the heavy, downwardly-curved shape of the crucified legs; in the upper, the torso. The cross beam with its bracing suggests the strung arms. A huge bird's nest woven over the top forms the head and crown of thorns.

For the first time in many months Elinor comes close to laughing. For a moment, she catches the irony, that she has been reduced to sustenance from such crude and patched-together gestures, that in this community she is allowed only icons of nature, those formed of coincidences, of the necessities of survival in desolate places and the whims of a colony of birds.

By the time the truck stops, her amusement has vanished; the crucifix she was given on the road has solidified. She clings to it. Coming into the kitchen, she is startled by a man's voice. A preacher is calling. "Bring all of your sins and your burdens! Bring them all to the foot of the cross!"

Peter left the radio on again.

Everyone is waiting for rain. Everyone watches the sky, and the life is disappearing from Elinor's body. She cannot convince Peter she is afraid. She is sure she has spoken plainly more than once, but her statements, it seems, are particular to her alone; why else do they not alarm him?

Elinor has wrestled with her new life a long time, but now she is mortally weary; she wishes to surrender. She feels her efforts slacken, preparing to yield.

No rain has fallen, the crops are suffering, Peter is angry. Elinor's mother-in-law is ill with a flu. She hands Elinor her grocery list and says, "I know I'd recover if the weather would turn."

Elinor sets out for town, alone in the old red truck. It is a bright, nearly white day, and very hot. A car passes her, churning up dust, but Elinor drives into the billows of fine grey sand without slowing. The crucifix is still there, looming before her, the body sagging to its end, the head and crown undisturbed. She keeps her eyes fixed on it. She pushes harder on the gas pedal, reminds herself that *quebracho* is nearly indestructible.

At the point where she will lose the crucifix, where it will vanish as an image of consolation, become, again, post and nest, she veers sharply. With all her strength she presses on the accelerator and aims for the place where the Christ-legs cross, where the nails hold him fast.

The truck hits the post; metal and wood meet with a crack, an anguished cry. Elinor's head strikes the windshield and then the falling upper post. In a second it is finished. Her body falls back onto the seat, her head comes to rest over her right arm. Blood gathers in a pool on the red vinyl seat; it finds its way around the mess of glass and drips onto the floor.