

SOUTHWEST TALES
A Contemporary Collection

in memory of Tomás Rivera

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LOLA'S RETURN

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It was a small wedding, the guests consisted of the immediate family and several close friends. The ceremony was performed in the ancient, adobe church on Juarez Street. The priest had unsteady, age mottled hands, a jowl hanging from his chin and a voice that quivered as he recited the matrimonial words. It was early February 1917, the sun shone on the stained-glass windows and they burst with rainbow colors.

Lola wore her mother's old wedding gown. It was made of silk and it shimmered in the warm candlelight. Juan Fuentes, the twenty year old groom, nervously stood next to the bride to be.

Juan was a young fisherman in a Mexican seaside village. He had known Lola since they were children. They played together, gambolled in the same parks, dug for clams in the sand and finally became lovers.

Lola was now eighteen and was considered by many to be the

most beautiful girl in the village. She had fawn-colored hair, translucent brown eyes, light skin, a naturally blushed complexion and a lithe figure that attracted stares. She had waited most of her life to marry Juan. He was kind, industrious and had a handsome way of embarking on a fishing boat. By becoming Juan's wife, Lola felt she could find everlasting happiness.

A tinge of almost imperceptible sadness marred the ceremony. It was the way Lola bent her neck while listening to the priest's word. She knew that as soon as the honeymoon was over, Juan was planning to migrate to the United States. She did not want to go. She loved the fishing village. Mexico. That was where her heart was.

Soon after the rice was tossed, Lola requested that the wedding picture be taken on the white sands of the beach. A tripod was set up and a photograph was taken. She wanted a momento, something to remember the sailboats, gulls and pelicans by.

Juan had ambitions of being a fisherman, of owning his own boat, of making as many American dollars as he could. The first city they entered when they crossed the border was San Diego. Juan was inspired by the ocean and the variety of ships anchored at the docks. He was suffering from an over abundance of optimism. He thought it would be easy to find a job fishing. "I'll start off as a deck hand," he would tell Lola, "work my way up to fisherman, save my money, then buy my own boat."

In time, he found out that things were vastly different.

He could not speak English and make himself understood. He had to find someone to translate for him and even then, he felt himself worlds apart. For various reasons no one would hire him. One crinkled old sailor told him that Mexican seamen got seasick too often, another sailor blatantly said that they could not be trusted. One tall, craggy-faced captain sat him down and explained, "Many a ship is marked because of a Mexican passenger or sailor. There is a revolution going on in your country right now, governments would think you were spying or smuggling guns to Zapata and Villa. I can't afford to be shot out of the ocean because of one Mexican fisherman."

After four months of plodding the wharfs for work, Juan came to realize that he was not wanted in San Diego.

With the twenty dollars they had left, Juan and Lola decided to

take a train to the San Joaquin Valley. They had heard there was work there harvesting the fruit that grew on the land. There were even labor camps where they could have housing and the wages were sometimes even as high as fifteen cents an hour.

It was a gloomy afternoon the day they packed. Juan's dream of being a fisherman had crumbled to dust. Lola was grief-stricken as she waited for the train on the wooden bench. What kind of country was this? Where was the gold that lay on the ground like snow? Where were the opportunities, the chances to become rich? It was as savage and cruel as any place they had ever been. Maybe even more. As they boarded the train, Lola was glad she had brought a piece of Mexico with her. The wedding picture in her valise.

Lola looked out the window as the train pulled into the small San Joaquin Valley town. The summer heat was almost unbearable, sun whitened the atmosphere and polished the tree leaves with a lustrous sheen. Lola and Juan stepped off the train, the loose dust settled on their shoes like a fine film of thirst.

By evening they had found a job on a ranch in the outskirts of town. They were given a worker's bungalow reserved for married couples. In reality it was nothing but a dilapidated shack with a bedroom and kitchen. The toilets were outside and they were shared by everyone in the camp.

A spark of happiness came into their lives. Lola lit a fire in the decrepit stove and started making beans and tortillas. Juan watched her, for the first time in a long while he was smiling. This was what he was searching for, the kind of life he dreamt of; Lola in a light-colored dress with her hair tied in a bun, smelling sweet and womanly. A flame reflected off her pretty face, Juan saw a future come into focus.

A day later they were in the fields, harvesting the plums. The work was hot and dirty, the sun relentlessly beat down on their brows. They had never done this kind of work before. They struggled with the huge wooden ladders, dragging them from tree to tree. The humid heat inside the tangled limbs sapped them of their energy and strength. Gnats and wasps constantly buzzed around their heads, dust from the leaves flew into their eyes—Lola's hands were scratched by the broken branches and Juan was bitten by a spider on the back of the neck.

For a month they continued the strenuous work. Getting up at five in the morning and leaving the fields at six in the evening. Six days a week they worked. One day Lola was standing on the last rung of the

ladder, reaching for a solitary plum, when she toppled and fell to the ground, hip first. She let out a painful wail. Grabbing at her stomach she began to cry. Juan held her hand as she writhed on the ground, she held her belly as though she were about to die. At last, after she was calmed down by her husband's soothing words, she said, "What if I killed him?"

She had not told Juan that she was pregnant.

Lola spent the night in excruciating pain. She lay next to Juan weeping into the early morning hours. Juan did everything he could for her; he put cold towels on her forehead to reduce the fever. When the foreman came by with the truck to pick them up for work, Juan explained that his wife was terribly sick and needed a doctor. "We haven't any doctors available here," the burly man exclaimed. "Besides, the field has to be finished by the end of the month. We need your wife to work."

"But she is seec." Juan replied in his broken English.

"I don't give a god damn! Either she comes to work or you two can move out of here!"

By the time Juan ran back into the house Lola was standing up putting on her work clothes. "You don't have to go," Juan said.

Tying the red bandana over her head, she replied, "I'll be alright, Juan. Don't worry."

Lola worked through the rest of the summer. By the end of September she was far into her sixth month of pregnancy. After the plums had been harvested, the olives needed to be picked. Ignoring Juan's protests, she continued to work side by side with her husband.

One night, in the middle of December, Lola started having labor pains. They were stronger than most women's and she had to bite down on a leather belt to keep from screaming. Juan called a neighborhood woman to help him with the birth. They stayed with Lola through the night. Juan sat in the kitchen, drinking a beer, listening to Lola's whimpers and moans. At last, after what seemed like days of agony, an old woman walked out of the bedroom and announced the news to Juan. "You have a son." She said.

"A son?" Juan repeated, almost crying.

"But he has been born deformed and Lola will not be able to have another child."

This time, Juan did cry.

Juanito was born a Mongolian idiot and the fingers of both his

hands were pasted together like duck's feet. As a three year old boy he would slobber on his clothes and lick the food off the floor. Lola loved him more than she had loved anything in her entire life. She would take him to the "fields" with her and breast feed him under the quiet shadows of the walnut trees. Sometimes she would carry him to the reed scattered irrigation ditch and show him the croaking frogs as she tickled his nose with a dandelion. He would emit a gurgling laugh and clumsily clap his gnarled hands with joy. The older he grew the more apparent it became that he would live his life in pathetic retardation.

When Juanito turned seven his father began using him as a symbol of his failing life. Whenever Juan's friends would come to the house, he would point to his cretin son playing on the porch and say, "You see what this country has done for me. Given me an idiot for a son."

"Then why don't you go back to Mexico?" Some men would ask.

Sadly, Juan could only answer, "There would be more shame waiting for me there."

Lola began to worry when Juan started calling Juanito vile names. She could not understand how a father could hate his own child. At the dinner table she could see his eyes light up with hatred whenever he was to look at Juanito. The bitterness Juan felt was not meant to be directed toward the innocent boy, but at himself. After ten years things did not work out the way he had planned them. He had wanted more from life, he had hoped for a strong, normal son, instead they lived in poverty, his wife had been made barren, his ambition of owning a fishing boat had all but vanished. Even Lola was silently suffering within herself. She missed her friends and family, and she still had the strong urge to go back to Mexico.

For two years the Fuentes family lived in relative contentment. The children in the neighborhood had gotten used to Juanito as a kind of "village idiot". There were days when the kids would come visit and play with him as though he was as normal as anyone else. Even Juan started to pay more attention to him. Several times he took him to the river to fish for trout. On another occasion he accompanied him to the neighborhood baseball game. If there was jeering or snickering it was being done by the people that knew nothing of Juanito's gentleness.

In the summer of 1930, Lola was visited by a woman who worked for the 'Rehabilitation Services'. She was a tall, gaunt young girl suited in a dark dress down to her ankles, accentuating her shapeless body.

She sat Lola down and gave her a thorough explanation, "Juanito must start attending school. It isn't fair for him to spend his life uneducated. What will he do once you and your husband are gone? We have these new methods that work wonders on people like Juanito."

Lola could not comprehend everything told to her, but she could sense they wanted to take Juanito away. "But he is happy here." Lola tried explaining.

"It's a state law, ma'am." The girl said, pursing her red lips. "Your son is sick. He can't be allowed to run about the streets without any kind of training."

Lola turned her face away in sorrow, "I don't like to break laws," she said.

Four years later, when Juanito was sixteen, Miss Wallace, the teacher at the school, phoned Lola. "Mrs. Fuentes," she said, "This is a big day for your son, Juanito."

"What do you mean?" Lola asked.

"Instead of taking the bus, he is going to walk home."

"No, no! Don't let him do that!" Her heart fluttered with anxiety. "He's afraid. He will hurt himself!"

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Fuentes." Said the confident teacher. "This will be the best thing for him. He needs to be independent. He has to do things on his own."

"His father will be home in an hour. He will go pick him up," Lola said desperately.

"No." Miss Wallace sternly raised her voice. "This is for his own good. Now good-bye."

Lola hung up and paced the floor. This was not right. It was not fair for someone to dictate to her child; this was another of the white man's schemes to destroy the Mexican.

Lola ran up and down the house nervously pulling at her hair. She could imagine her helpless, confused son meandering through the streets. What if he got hit by a car? She would never forgive Miss Wallace or that damn school! And the dogs, how about the dogs? There were many wild and dangerous beasts roaming around free!

Thirty minutes went by, then an hour. Lola stood at the window every second. She was praying to God that nothing happened to Juanito. Maybe Juan would drive in and go out looking for him, he should be home any time now. Lola got restless and went out to the front gate. She looked down the street for any sign of Juanito. Sud-

denly a car, ornamented in chrome and shining accessories, turned the corner at a high speed. She strained her eyes and could see that all the passengers were white and youthful. They were driving directly at her; Lola stepped off the curb and got back into her yard. The car slowed down, then stopped in front of the gate. The back door opened and one of the boys spoke in a shrill voice, "We thought this crazy spic needed a ride." And from the back of the car, rolled Juanito, battered and bloodied; with his eyes closed and his face covered with dirt. The car sped away as the body hit the ground. Lola screamed as though she meant to wake up the world.

The doctor diagnosed the cause of Juanito's death as massive internal bleeding. He had been beaten all over the body with clubs and fists. There were several knife wounds on his forearms and one just below his pectoral muscle. Most of the barrio attended the wake. He looked almost angelic in his velvet lined casket, his face showed no signs of being beaten and on his thin, boyish lips was a subtle mischievous smile; almost like the smile spread on his face when he played among a crowd of romping, happy children.

The police scoured the city for Juanito's assailants. It took them over a month to round up four suspects. Lola was called in to the police station to identify the four teenagers. The moment she saw them she let out a scream, "Yes! Those are the ones who killed my Juanito!" It took almost three more months to organize a trial, the defense lawyers kept appealing the case, asking for more time to contact witnesses. The prosecution did almost nothing. The only thing they did to build up their case, was ask Lola to describe what she saw in detail. She told them the same story over five times.

In the courtroom Lola was asked to testify, she sat on the witness chair in tears, pointing at the defendants. "Those are the boys I saw in the car. They pulled up to the front gate and threw Juanito's body out of the backseat. They were laughing and insulting Juanito's nationality." She sobbed, for it was a pain to look into their faces, "Someday they will burn in hell!"

One of the defense lawyers approached her with a question, "Isn't it true Mrs. Fuentes that you are required to wear eyeglasses at all times?"

"Yes." She replied, vaguely aware of her answer.

"Were you wearing them the time you said you saw these four

boys in the car?", the lawyer asked dramatically pointing at the defendants.

"I can't remember." She answered.

"Well, we can Mrs. Fuentes. In our investigations we discovered that you had broken your glasses the day before and they were in the optometrist's office being repaired. And we further questioned your optometrist and discovered that you cannot see ten feet in front of your face without them. In light of this, Mrs. Fuentes, can you explain how you can positively identify these boys when you were not wearing your glasses?"

Lola was bewildered as she gazed across the courtroom. She glanced toward Juan and saw the blank look of fear on his face. Her voice quivered as she spoke, "I just know."

It did not take long for the charges to be dropped on the four boys. There was a lack of evidence. No one saw them do anything. And if there was someone, they would never come forward.

Lola and Juan mourned the results of the trial. They had not been avenged. At home, in a torrent of tears, Lola wailed, "Is this justice?"

As the years passed the loss of Juanito left the Fuentes' with a scar of emptiness that never healed. Lola seemed to have grown old overnight. Her hair turned gray, the face that was once burnished by youth now was seamed and eroded by sorrow. She grew listless. She kept to herself, she rarely conversed with the neighbors like she used to and her laughter that echoed through the house was heard no more.

Juan was the one damaged the most. He suffered his misery inwardly, quietly letting it eat away at his spirit. He took to drinking and staying out late at night; a day never went by that he did not consume two or three pints of whiskey. Lola made a feeble attempt to help him, but she had her own pain to grapple with. He would stumble home in a drunken stupor, cursing at the top of his voice, "What have I done to my life? What happened to me, Juanito!"

Lola could sympathize with his laments. If they had only stayed at home. But instead of saying anything she would lie next to him on the bed and try to sleep under the stench of his liquor doused body.

One night as Lola lay in her bed sleeping, there was some pounding at the door. She got up, put on her housecoat and answered it. Standing outside the threshold was an old man nervously twisting a soiled hat in his hands. "Mrs. Fuentes." He said in a somber voice. "I

have some bad news for you. I don't know how to say it without causing you pain, but your husband died of a heart attack tonight."

The old man was surprised by Lola's calm. "Where did it happen?" She asked.

"Down at the cantina. He was drinking . . ."

Putting up her hand to hush him, she said, "I know, it was bound to happen someday. He drank too much." Pausing she added, "Where is he now?"


"In the morgue," answered the wrinkled man.

"Let me get dressed and I'll go with you."

As Lola put on her clothes she made a light rustling sound. The dim lightbulbs palely illuminated the dingy walls in her bedroom. She did not feel like weeping or sobbing. She felt nothing. She was disturbed that she could be so numb at a time like this. She forcibly tried to cry, but all her emotions seemed to have been drained, completely disintegrated. With grace she went with the old man to the morgue, the first step into the midnight air made her realize that she had been left alone at fifty.

Lola slowly began to grow her garden. In her empty hours she would till the soil and plant a new seed. As the shrubbery and flowers grew tall around her house, a sense of well being entered her. She felt secure, hidden from the world that had hurt her so much. As the years passed she seeded trees that darkened her roof with shade. She implanted ivy that entwined in her fence and kept her obscured from prying eyes. Along her southern wall tall sunflowers swayed and dipped in the breeze. On the northern end of her house huge bamboo shoots grew, creaking in the high winds. In the front yard a grove of pomegranate trees flourished, infested constantly by an army of flitting hummingbirds. In time, after decades of vigorous gardening, Lola had surrounded herself by a kind of vegetable sanctuary.

She was being seen by neighbors less and less. She had no reason to go shopping; she made her own clothes, grew her own food, the chickens that scratched in her yard provided her with eggs and poultry. She wore plain cotton dresses and kept her long hair enwrapped in a black rebozo. The only sound she made, the only proof of her existence was the cracking of dry leaves as she walked through her monastic maze.



In the silence of her home she wept and yearned for Mexico. She wrote letters to her fishing village, addressing them to forgotten friends. She waited months upon months for an answer, but nothing came. She had visions as she worked in her garden. She saw the great fishing yachts sketched against the blue sky. She heard the gulls shrieking and saw the silhouette of a pelican pass over the sun. As she watered her sagging roses she felt the ocean fill her nostrils with its salty scent. She heard the splashing of waves, the pounding of horses, the sweet voice of her mother. Meanwhile, the earth outside was permeated with bitterness and cruelty. People were cheating, hurting each other. America was raving mad. She felt pity for the changing world.

In moments of deep aloneness Lola would take out her wedding picture and touch it to her cheek. The mystery of Mexico would come back to her as though seeping through her flesh. She heard music, laughter, and felt a surge of happiness that could not be denied. At the age of seventy-seven she died quietly in her bed of tuberculosis. But she defeated them all, before she passed away, she returned to her beloved country by pressing the old photograph to her heart.