

*Natalie L.M. Petesch*

## **A Man Called Manuel**

The smell of the sea always alerted her: by then Catalina knew they were close enough to stop. With a great groan Basilio would turn the car into a truck stop or small cafe and announce that they would eat first. He would have the tires checked, the gas tank filled, then join the children in the booth. Massive and silent, he would divide up the five hamburgers and french fries and order a bottle of Coke. He himself did not eat then, but would sit and watch. Shortly after, he would begin to tense up, the tattooed birds on his biceps would seem to stir. "Drink up," he would order, glaring at his watch as if somewhere behind its luminous glow lurked his lifelong enemy.

He seemed always angry with the other kids, though not with Catalina. She was his favorite, partly because she was pretty, but more importantly because he and his wife, Rosa, who usually worked with the crew, had seen right from the beginning how Catalina moved, quick as the wind, soundless and smooth, no gesture wasted.

The day they'd discovered her, Catalina had been sweeping her parents' shack, moving quietly but efficiently around the room as she swept out dust, dry leaves, a few fallen crickets . . . Once, according to the way her parents then described it to Rosa and Basilio, an armadillo had burrowed his way under the house, and Catalina had at once struck him a quick blow with her broom handle, stunning him.

"Afraid of nothing, she is. And fast," her father observed to Basilio, who had turned to exchange glances with Rosa. Rosa nodded approvingly.

"So . . . you move real quick?" Basilio questioned her. Catalina had merely nodded shyly, but also with pride. She knew she could outrun all the kids in their family, even Mateo who she sometimes imagined as having run all the way to the border, never stopping till he reached Chicago where, they said, he made money, a lot of money. She had always been this way, from her earliest memories, when crickets and chameleons had scampered away from her running feet long before she could speak and call out their names. She had simply taken the company of all these living things for granted, like that of Jorge and Ema and Leonor and Ciro and Mateo, as simply part of their household, of her life.

"How many kids you have?" Basilio had asked. Then, since Rosa had made a chuckling sound in her throat: "No, *naturalmente*, not you, I mean — *tu madre*." Then everyone had smiled.

"We are, altogether, seven," Catalina had replied, glancing at her father for permission to answer these strangers who had driven down to their village. "But Mateo has gone to *el Norte*. To Chicago," she added as if this explained everything.

Basilio had at once allowed her parents an advance of fifty dollars on Catalina's work, assuring them that she would earn much more working in the Rio Grande Valley; and that once every month or so Catalina would return to visit, with more than enough money for them all. Her parents had nodded stoically at this, understanding what must be said: and at once Catalina had been introduced to the others in Basilio's crew who had been peering at her from the car — to Manuel, Felicia, Magdalena and Isabel.

Since that day, however, the crew had not returned to the village. At first Catalina had been homesick, thinking often of how her toes had traced footprints like fossils in the soft dust; of how on her last afternoon in the village, while she had stood at the well, a chameleon, its throat engorged, had leaped across the stone wall. Quick as a flash she had caught it, cupping it in both hands; but at the sight of its swollen, throbbing throat, she had let it go. Since then, again and again, she saw or dreamed she saw the gold, greening flash of its tail as it had disappeared into the dark of the well.

The Coke bottle had gone from hand to hand. Isabel now passed it to Manuel. "How far we now?" asked Manuel, scarcely glancing at the near-empty bottle.

Basilio gripped his hands together; it was a sign, as the children knew, that his patience was not to be tried today. Perhaps, Catalina thought, it was because he had the kids all to himself. He and Rosa had quarrelled, and Rosa had stayed in bed: as soon as it was light, the crew had set out for the border.

Catalina knew that he would not reply to Manuel's question; he never liked to tell them how far away they were from any other place. Sometimes the children grew restless in the car, and would begin to count the miles to the next town, then the miles to the border. Sometimes when Basilio and the crew stopped to eat, they would continue their arguments in the gas station or cafe. Basilio didn't like that. Catalina was surprised at Manuel's not having learned yet not to ask such questions.

"About an hour yet," Basilio said, looking not at Manuel, but at a spot in the wooden booth just above Manuel's head. "You finish that damned drink yet?" Manuel turned the bottle upside down to show there was

nothing left. At once they all rose. As she was the eldest, Catalina quickly herded the three other girls into the toilets. Manuel followed Basilio and, through the pasteboard partition which separated the rest rooms, Catalina could hear them urinating. Catalina could tell which was Manuel and which was Basilio just by the sound. She knew she should not allow herself to be distracted by such things. She should, instead, be instructing the girls, as Rosa would have done, how they must work . . .

But she paused, cocking her head to listen as she heard Manuel complain softly: "I need me a watch too. I need to know the time, *en punto*."

Silence . . . Basilio was doubtless too surprised by this request to be angry or sarcastic with Manuel who was demanding something he must feel he had a right to, like a man.

That Manuel was a man, Catalina knew. All the children slept in the same bed; and although she and Manuel were separated from each other by the others, only a few weeks ago he had waited till they were all asleep; then, coming around to her side of the bed, he had kneeled and whispered: "*Soy un hombre. Y tu?*" She had not been frightened, of course. She knew him too well, and besides she had understood his question perfectly well, only she had been afraid they would awaken Rosa and Basilio in the other room. Still, she could easily have sneaked out and gone with Manuel to the front porch or even beyond, into the star-filled darkness where none but the crickets and moaning tree frogs would have heard: but she was not ready yet. She had work to do with Basilio and Rosa, and besides, how would she run quick-as-the-wind if she became, first, engorged like the chameleon with love, then heavy with child like *la madre*? Her instinct was to deny Manuel, to keep things as they were . . .

"Hah, a watch you want now . . . What else you think you need? You need a girl pretty soon too maybe? Maybe you think one of my crew? . . ."

Catalina's heart turned over with fear. How would Manuel reply? It was a challenge, no doubt of it . . . There was silence, she heard Basilio clear his throat and spit into the bowl. Then Manuel explained: "I just want to help . . . I need to see the time. Sometimes I don't see the clock so good. Because Rosa said —"

"Never you min' what Rosa said. I'm the boss here."

"O.K. O.K." Catalina could imagine Manuel's soft, defeated air, his dark eyes . . . She bent over Isabel. "You *got* to learn to tie your shoes, Isabel. Else you'll trip one day, and that'll be bad luck for you."

She was thinking it was true, Manuel did not see so good. He'd had a cough with fever, his body had broken out in a rash, they'd put him for a while by himself, away from the other kids. And soon afterwards Catalina had seen him steal a lady's glasses which lay on the counter of a

big department store. Catalina had seen him from the balcony as she'd glanced down, she had signalled not to do it; such random acts were forbidden. But though he had glanced all around him, and looked straight at her, he had not recognized her. She understood now, that he was like old people, going a little more blind every day.

"And don't forget," she instructed the girls, "you must move fast, fast as the wind. Like me . . ." Quickly Catalina slipped past the other girls who, recognizing the game, tried laughingly to catch her. But Catalina sped past them out onto the sundazzled highway.

As they all climbed back into the car they rearranged themselves as they had been instructed. When Rosa was with them, it was easy: a cluster of small kids in the back — the girls wearing new shoes and their prettiest dresses — looking like any other family on their way to a day's shopping in the big city where the shopkeepers gathered up their coins like bread. But without Rosa they looked a little lost, as if there were too many of them. So Basilio moved Catalina to the front seat and told her to sit up straight, it maybe would make her look a little older. Manuel was to sit in the back "with the other kids." There was a hard but reassuring core of authority in Basilio's voice as he made these arrangements.

"Maybe they won't ask us nothin' anyways. They know we got to spend money." Adding what was for Basilio a rare burst of humor: "We got to do our Christmas shoppin' early, that's all." But when Isabel began to giggle, he hit her — though not hard — and told her to shut up and be ready.

The sun was high in the sky when they crossed over. The young man at the border had waved them on, scarcely bothering to check their trunk. Perhaps Basilio, not wishing any trouble today, had slipped him a *mordida*, or maybe he too worked for Basilio and Rosa, just like herself and the others. But more than likely (the clearness of her own mind astonished her today, maybe she was quickly becoming a woman after all, it was said to do things for your head) maybe the man was just hungry and not thinking right about his work, maybe like them he had had a hamburger and french fries for breakfast long hours ago that morning.

Because (of course) it had been much longer than Basilio had said to Manuel. At least three, four hours, she guessed. But she would not question Basilio: he had said often enough that all they needed to know was that at the right moment they were to drop what they were doing and join him at the car.

She wondered whether they'd have another stop, or whether Basilio would want to push on, to get to the city. It was beginning to seem too short a day: where exactly had they lost time? Perhaps they had taken longer than she had realized, talking in the restrooms . . . or perhaps



because of his quarrel with Rosa last night, Basilio had had a late start. Rosa had sulked and said she wouldn't go with him to the city, that he could go without her — though, of course, she'd added, goading him, without her he'd return with nothing worthwhile: he had no taste, no judgment, she'd said. Basilio had hit her for that, a resounding crack, like a tree limb snapping in the wind . . . Catalina glanced nervously over her shoulder at Manuel, who either could not see her anxious look, or was pretending not to see. For the first time an uneasiness constricted her throat. Not really fear; no, she was not afraid — she was only excited: she would surprise them all today.

As they turned into the city plaza, she saw by the clock in the tower of the County Building that it was 1:25.

"O.K. Check the time." He pointed vaguely toward the clock in the tower. His words were breathy in a way Catalina had not heard before. "O.K.?" This time it was a question, but he did not wait for a reply. "At two o'clock — you be back here. *En punto!*" he said, and waved them away.

Soundlessly as water into sand they flowed into the store. The three girls, Felicia, Magdalena, and Isabel, moved down one of the aisles together, then separated almost at once: they were headed for Coats & Sweaters. From the corner of her eye Catalina could see how well Isabel was following instructions: how languidly she pushed the dresses along a rack while her eyes roved with intense simulated boredom around the store. Magdalena went at once into the dressing room: only moments later Felicia followed her with an armful of dresses and two or three coats. Soon Isabel gave up guarding her corner of the store and — her arms also loaded with dresses — followed the other two into the dressing rooms. Catalina knew they would emerge one at a time, swollen like small pregnant animals. They would walk quickly but calmly to the front of the store, keeping always within sight of the big wall clock while they watched for the exact moment when Basilio would be starting his car. If necessary, they would make a run for it, straight from the dressing rooms, but Basilio always preferred a graceful exit: he didn't like, he said, to have to go driving like crazy through the city.

Quickly Catalina sized up the store. They'd been here twice before, it was not like an expensive jewelry shop. Here one had to choose more carefully, but she knew where the best things were kept. And no one bothered to look at her, an ordinary girl with straight black hair and brown legs, moving effortlessly through the store. The last time she had worked with Magdalena; this time she was on her own. She knew she was supposed to try for leather jackets, but she wanted to surprise them. She walked once at a reasonable pace all around the store — past suits, coats,

boots, shoes, drapes, curtains, carpets, pillows, lamps, knitted baby clothes; past furniture of every kind — cribs, coffee tables, lamps, desks, beds; past electrical cooking equipment of every sort: to make ice cream with, to bake cakes with, to grind and extract and pound with, for broiling, baking, barbecuing . . .

Ignoring all this with what she believed to be an air of terrific idleness, Catalina strolled to the glass counter where they kept some jewelry and a few watches — under glass, to be sure, but the case was not locked. The jewelry was not worth much, she knew, though some of it looked so much like real gold and real silver that for a moment Catalina paused and stared childishly at the rings and necklaces. But no, she was not going to be fooled. Only in the locked showcases of real jewelry stores (where, Rosa said, they would have been spotted in a minute by store detectives) did they keep any gold or silver worth being melted down . . . *Not worth the risk* had always been Rosa's warning. But Catalina now stood leaning against the glass case; she could feel suddenly how her own breath came and went, as if she had nearly ten minutes yet before Basilio would begin to race his motor: she would make another turn around the store, get a drink of water, and return.

This time she passed Manuel as they circled a fenced-in area, above which someone had nailed a sign: *Toy-joys on wheels*. The fence was broken through, the aisle was a clutter of tricycles, scooters, wagons, wheel barrows, skateboards. Propped up along the fence as though standing beside a real playground was a red bicycle. Catalina saw how Manuel glanced at the bicycle with longing, though it was far too small a bike for him, and the cheap paint was already scratched. Still, she thought as she saw how Manuel looked at it, how nice it would be to have one, to balance on the bar in front while Manuel drove her around and around the plaza. As he passed her, his eyes moved from the bicycle to her face, and it was as if the longing she had felt in his body had leaped to his eyes and the dark, dimming gaze now grew suddenly bright with love; so that her own heart spilled out toward him, like seed shaken in the wind.

She wished she could seize the bicycle for him; but of course they could never do that . . . though she found herself imagining that, like a cowboy of old, Manuel could leap onto the bicycle, lift her in his arms, and instead of racing to Basilio's car, they would speed away together, hidden away forever in the great *Estados Unidos* . . . But even while she dreamed this dream in a quick little explosion, Manuel passed her as though he had not recognized her, and she knew they could never do this. They would only be caught, disgraced, and sent back across the border. And once caught — finger-printed, identified — they could no longer

work; in the future, the store detectives would recognize them at once, and Basilio might abandon them to the police — or even, as he sometimes threatened — to the highways. He could not run his business, he often said, with faces everybody knew.

So not the bicycle of course. But she would offer some gift to those sad eyes which had lit up with love like fireflies floating through the dark. When she had made her final turn around the store, she stopped at the display case under whose glass lay several watches. One of these she at once chose for Manuel — a watch whose glowing digits pulsed the seconds faster than she would have believed time could go . . . The time, she saw, was 1:55 *en punto*. Almost simultaneously, moving so fast she could barely see her own arm, Catalina reached out her hand for the watches. She was certain she had been both quick and deft; yet somehow the impact of her arm had unbalanced the showcase: as she turned to go, it tilted and came crashing down behind her.

Still, she was not yet afraid: rather, she at once geared her body for that agile speed in which she trusted. Pivoting slightly, she poised in mid-air like a dancer for a few seconds, then fled down the aisle toward the street entrance. She ran straight through the store, her feet skimming the floor; she ran past the clothing, the furniture, the household appliances, the toys and the bicycles, thinking to herself that she was not running, or even flying, but flowing — swept along in an invisible flood of love for Manuel, whose eyes she was already seeing light up with a new kind of vision, a vision of her love for him, as she offered him this gift — a gift that would allow him always to know the right hour to come running back to them . . . to her.

But at her back had gathered a small crowd of people who were angry, very angry, in a way Catalina had never seen. They cried out that they knew her, they had seen her before. Why were they so angry? Catalina wondered; the watches were not theirs, yet they were furious all the same. Now they flowed into the street; they ran after her, lining the curb, where they watched and scolded and yelled at her. Perhaps they would pursue her all the way to the car where Basilio waited . . . Not daring to look back for the others, for Madgalena, Felicia and Isabel, Catalina could only run, run as she had never run in her life, till she reached Basilio and the car. She at once hurled herself, breathless, into the back seat. Her chest ached with the awful certainty that everything had gone wrong. Tears of remorse filled her eyes as she saw that the people were surrounding — not Felicia, Magdalena, and Isabel, who had paused in their flight to look for Manuel — but Manuel. The people were cursing him, crying out with rage and contempt that he too was a *lobato*, a wolf-cub. They seized him and beat him with their handbags, their packages . . . At last a policeman

came and grabbed Manuel by the collar, holding him far away from his own body, as though Manuel stank. Then he shook Manuel like a small wet cat.

Basilio yelled at the girls: "Goddam — get in the car!"

Catalina began to whimper.

"Shut up!" he hissed, turning his head only long enough to show her his clenched fist.

The three girls, panting with terror and relief, threw themselves into the car: they were safe. Basilio gunned the motor.

"Wait!" screamed Catalina. "Manuel is caught!"

"Son of a bitch," said Basilio, and took off like the howling wind through the city.

In the back seat Catalina sobbed, "Manuelito. Manuelito," while the children patted her hand and tried to comfort her. "They gonna let him go," they murmured together like professional mourners. "They gonna let him go — "

"Hell, what happened with *you*?" Basilio interrupted with fury.

Catalina could only hold up the watches in explanation, realizing at the same moment that in her haste and confusion she had not even had time to hide the watches. "For Manuelito," she explained. "For his eyes — "

"Fuck his eyes!" exploded Basilio, glaring at the watches, "You stupid!"

Catalina began to sob hysterically. *Lobato, the people had called him. Lobato. Then the people knew who they were, Basilio and the crew, knew why they had come there: and knowing that, the angry people might never let Manuel go . . .*

With a screech of tires Basilio suddenly turned off the highway, heading, as Catalina knew, for a bypass of the border check: it was used only for emergencies, as it was too easy to be cornered there — Basilio has used it only once before. Shaken with remorse, Catalina knew that it was her fault Basilio was now forced to use this bad road to get back, running the gauntlet with the crew. If they got back safe, it'd be a miracle, Basilio told them in a cold, furious voice.

Then abruptly he turned the car again, this time onto a dirt road. It was barely more than a shallow pit, a gully, though it could be used as an access road to the highway.

"Get out," he ordered Catalina.

Catalina stared, her stomach churning with fear.

"Get out. We don't want you. We can't use you . . . "

Catalina could not believe it, though she had been warned many times by Rosa. She had broken their law, she had endangered the safety of the



crew: she had made herself, Manuel, and perhaps the others recognizable — to the stores, to the people, to the police.

"Get out," he repeated, raising his fist.

Catalina stopped sobbing and began to whimper softly; but she opened the door as she had been ordered to, and stood obediently in the road: *it was a test, a punishment; he did not mean it . . . he could not mean it . . .*

Basilio reached over and wrenched the watches from her hand. "Cheap junk. . . Probably don't even run . . ." Then with a lunge and a roar of the engine Basilio headed straight south with the crew.

For a moment Catalina stood in the road, stunned. Then in a flood of terror at this abandonment, she flung herself down, crying out and sobbing into the dust. It seemed to her she lay a long while sobbing, that she had lost sight of time altogether; yet when she raised her head from the dust she realized that she had for some moments become aware of a change in the sky, like a filtering down of the dark. Soon total darkness would come to the deserted road . . . Still, she rested a while, listening to the cry of birds, the throb of cicadas, the hum of the city in the distance. After a few steps she stooped to remove her shoes; and gathering confidence from the familiar dust at her feet, she began to run. At first she ran awkwardly, then more confidently down the dusty road, till picking up speed and courage, she was soon running as fast as her legs could carry her toward the humming city: already her throat swelled with love and fear and the question she could hear herself asking — of the people, of the shopkeepers, of the police: *if they knew, if they could tell her, please, where is a man called Manuel?*