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Ciro Alegria

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THE WANDERER

Ciro Alegria

Translated by Sarah Corwin

A GRAY, THIN woman followed the trail under the shade of the poplars to the house on the hill. The last rays of the Chilean sun sketched the golden hued poplars against a sky of deep indigo. The vivid landscape was a scene of almost riotous beauty, its wild abandon somewhat subdued by the presence of the towering mountains. The mighty mountains of Chile . . . with their promise of adventure and far off places, yet relentlessly crushing the restless spirit of man.

The woman looked long at the house, with its neat white-washed walls and bright red thatched roof. Then she turned aside, put down the bundle she carried on her back, and sat under a tall, spreading quillay. . . . She leaned back, relaxed. . . .

Thus it was that Domi saw her. The child, hugging tight her rag doll, was frightened and abruptly ran off. She found her mother in the small square of a vegetable garden, picking ripe onions. The pungent odor of the fragrant leaves hung heavy in the air.

"Mother!" cried the little girl, "there's a strange woman here."

Monica, her mother, straightened and lifted an earth-smudged face over the stone fence.

"Never mind. She's probably only resting," she said . . . and resumed her task.

Suddenly, the wind came, bringing with it dust and nightfall. . . . Darkness rose from the valley, blacking out trees and hills. . . . Spot-lighted in the soft half-light of the afterglow, the house on the hill looked warm and inviting.

Monica left the garden and entered her kitchen through the tiny back porch. It was time to prepare her husband's supper. In passing, she glanced in the direction of the quillay. The stranger was still there.

Little Domi hung close to her mother while she busied herself with the fire, until the flames leaped up to lick the big, fat, red earthen pot. Soon the bean stew bubbled merrily.

Outside in the pitch darkness, the poplars whispered softly and the quillay stooped slightly as if to protect the stranger from the night.

Later, Monica went out to see if the woman was still there. Under the tree a high sweet voice answered her greeting.

"You may come in, if you like," said the mistress of the house. "It's warm inside."

The shivering figure rose and followed her in silence. In the light inside the house, the woman appeared quite human as she faced Monica and Domi. She seemed to want to say something, but couldn't, and sat staring at the fire as if seeking words there. Then, impulsively, the stranger picked up a log and added it to the crackling fire. The friendly gesture seemed to bring the three of them together, and for a moment the invisible barrier was broken. Only for a moment, however, for Monica and her daughter soon retreated into an attitude of cold reserve.

There was something frightening about the stranger. Something Monica couldn't understand. Yet, she seemed a woman like any other. . . . A woman of the people—a woman who was cold and hungry and who perhaps had suffered much. True, her gray eyes were too bright, her face too thin, too pale. The dusty clothes and the big bundle she carried told of a long journey. Her mouth was sad . . . yet calm. Perhaps there lay the key to the mystery. In those lips so firmly closed on words and memories.

Monica finally broke the silence. "Where do you come from?"

The guest answered simply, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, as if to minimize the importance of her journey. "From beyond the hills. . . ."

Little Domi tightened her thin arms around her doll as her mother added still another log to the fire. A *tiuque*, the fierce bird of prey of the mountains, screeched in the distance, and then an uncomfortable silence fell over them . . . a silence pregnant with unfounded misgiving and suspicion.

The trot of a horse broke the silence, and soon horse and rider came into view. It was Tomás, returning from the fields. He spoke a dry greeting and unsaddled his mount. Then, after patting the animal's neck affectionately, approached the women.

Monica looked searchingly into her husband's face, trying to dis-

cover in his expression some sign of recognition for the stranger. The greeting they exchanged told nothing, although perhaps it was too casual. He sat on a low bench and Monica served the meal. While they ate, the spoons made an unpleasant sound as they scraped the chipped plates. The strange woman ate with eyes lowered, and Tomás gulped down his food eagerly while his wife and daughter watched them and waited.

Finally, the man talked of the day's work . . . how the black bull had run away to the ravine. . . . He would have to go and look for the beast tomorrow.

Tomás was not a prosperous *huaso*. His poncho was faded, its once gay colors dulled by wind, rain, and dust. His hat and boots were shabby and worn. How he envied Don Eliodoro, the gentleman *huaso*, the ranch owner's son, with his many bright colored *ponchos*, high buttoned *boleros*, polished boots and handsome hats. When Don Eliodoro's spurs lost their bell-like tinkle, he could take them to the town's blacksmith who would magically restore their music. And they sang again like birds! But when his own lost their music in the red mud of the fields, they did not sing again. Yet, he did not complain of his lot . . . he had seen worse days.

His was a long story, full of hardship and adventure. He had seen many lands. He had mined in the north and worked in the plains of the Pampas. He had sailed south to the regions of the Pole, there to hunt seal and otter in the dangerous waters of the Antarctic. Back in his own country, he had washed ore and then drifted inland to the valleys. There he had followed the harvests from season to season, hiring out his good strong arms for three *pesos* a day, living on stale bread and bad wine. Finally he had become a *huaso*, a cow-hand, on Don Eliodoro's ranch, where he was given a house and a horse.

After a while, he had married Monica and she bore him a daughter. And now here he was . . . he knew not till when.

The stranger and the *huaso* looked at each other. Although meeting for the first time, each recognized the other from some faintly remembered past, within the image, perhaps, of a town half forgotten . . . the recollection of expressions met one knows not where.

The man's piercing eyes and weather-beaten face stamped him as one who has toiled under the sun of many lands. The woman bore unmistakably the sign of the wanderer. Her fatigue was dark and endless.

The *huaso* spoke, not knowing that the question had been asked before. "Where do you come from?"

The stranger replied, "From beyond the hills. . . ."

"Beyond the hills. . . ." The *huaso* had heard the expression countless times before. He himself had used it often. To the wanderer it is the open road left behind or the one about to be taken.

Then, in answer to Monica's questioning, the stranger said her name was Josefina Nuñez. The name did not lighten the mystery. She was still a stranger, an unknown . . . a mere particle in the closely knit anonymity of the people.

Finally, however, she spoke, seeming to have grown more at ease suddenly, wanting to be friendly. There was a dim sadness in her voice. "I knew a man once," she said. "He worked not far from here. The closest mining town, in fact. . . ." Her voice faded to a new silence.

"And what is his name?" Monica asked, thinking to encourage the stranger. "Perhaps we've met him once."

"He has no name."

"No name? But everybody. . . ."

"He's dead. Killed in a drunken brawl. His belly was slashed wide open. But he kept on fighting until he dropped."

"Oh!"

They waited, but the stranger said no more. Her eyes had paled in slight bitterness.

Gradually, a drowsiness fell upon the little group. The fire sputtered weakly. It was time for bed. The stranger undid her pack and made herself comfortable in the harness room. Husband and wife occupied the room next to it. Hours passed, however, and neither could sleep.

Abruptly, Monica's voice was heard in the darkness. "Have you ever seen her anywhere before?"

"No," he answered.

Yet her heart told her that he was not speaking the truth, and she felt in that moment as though she'd lost something precious. In despair and fear she pulled her man to her and loved him passionately, desperately. But afterwards she felt more cold and lonely than ever, and in her sleepless vigil she was comforted by the thought that the stranger would leave before dawn, and with the coming of daylight everything would be as it had been before.

But day came and the stranger was still there. Tomás had gone out to the ravine at dawn to look for the lost beast . . . and never was a black bull lassoed more expertly.

In the early afternoon, Tomás rode back, proudly leading the bull by a rope tied around its horns. He dismounted, leashed the beast to a tree-trunk, and unsaddled his horse. Then he sat down on his familiar bench.

The stranger was busy mending some tattered bit of clothing. Monica, too, had stayed in all day. She had intended to go into town the following morning to sell her fat onions, but now, with the day's picking neglected, she would not have enough to make the trip worth while. If only Domi could do more than play with her rag doll. If at least she could be trusted to keep her eyes open. But no, Tomás was the one for that . . . he did not take his eyes off the stranger, except to gaze at the road, the horizon, the distant sky.

Monica took up her mending too, and soon it was night again.

The following day Monica said to her husband, "Aren't you going to take the bull to the ranch today?"

The *huaso* replied, "Who works on Sundays?"

She insisted, "Please go. . . . Don Eliodoro will expect you."

He replied firmly, "Nobody works on Sundays."

Somehow, the stranger stayed on, without an explanation, with hardly a word, distant, aloof. Tomás paced up and down the small room now and feverishly desired the stranger. The woman was not beautiful, yet she was not without charm. Her straight, thin body softened tenderly at the small high breasts, the sweet long curve of the slender hips. Tomás dreamed of recapturing the reckless adventure of his yesterdays with this dark, somber woman.

Monica, he knew, had roots here. She was part of this plot of earth, part of this house on a hill. Even now she wanted more children. She would multiply herself endlessly, like her onions.

Tomás tried to think of a plan to get rid of Monica. Perhaps if he beat her, hurt her terribly, she would leave him willingly. But he decided to wait until he'd spoken to the stranger.

At last it was night again. At dinner, Monica's attitude was frankly hostile. She sensed her husband's feelings about the stranger.

"Where are you heading for?" Tomás asked the woman.

She answered, "To Nipocura."

"Is that a town?"

"Almost a town."

"Is it far?"

"Yes, very. . . ."

Where could Nipocura be? The name sounded like any other of Araucanian origin scattered through the length and breadth of the country. On the other hand, it was quite possible that no such place existed. Tomás knew by his own experience that the traveller without a definite place to go, in order to avoid suspicion, often names a distant or nonexistent spot as his destination.

Perhaps the woman needed a man, a companion to protect and love her. No doubt the man killed in the fight in the mining town had been her husband. Then, naturally, she would have wanted to start in search of a new life, new hopes.

And late that night, when Monica embraced her husband, feverishly, closing her eyes on her fears, pressing close to the body she loved, the *huaso* submitted with a curse on his lips. If he had only gone to the ranch to deliver the black bull! If he had at least gotten drunk with the other *huasos* on a bucket of red wine!

The dawn rose black for Tomás. He got up later than his wife, and after looking around for the stranger, asked fearfully, "Has she gone?"

"She has gone," replied Monica, and then joyfully: "She *has* gone, she *has!*"

Tomás was seized by a sudden desire to hurt Monica, as if she were to blame. Then he longed madly to ride after the stranger. But where would he go? What route had she taken? He looked at the net of endless trails winding in and out of hills and valleys, from north to south, from mountain to seashore.

Nipocura! . . . If he only knew which way it lay. . . . Useless to attempt to follow her now. Perhaps the town did not exist, and if it did, the woman would not stop there. Who knows, indeed, the ways of the wanderer?

A cry of disappointment escaped the *huaso* Tomás. And then, as he looked on the mighty mountains of Chile, with their promise of adventure and far off places, he felt that the stranger, somehow, was his own soul, free to take its endless way.