

1945

## Voyage to the Shores of Cuautla

Jan Gabrial

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Gabrial, Jan. "Voyage to the Shores of Cuautla." *New Mexico Quarterly* 15, 4 (1945). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol15/iss4/9>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## VOYAGE TO THE SHORES OF CUAUTLA

*Jan Gabrial*

TRINIDAD WALKED THROUGH the open door of the wineshop that was called "El Tigre," moving in a slow and deadly way, as though inside she were hung with the weight of each moment that had elapsed since Pablo left.

The wineshop was small and dark, and behind the long counter, which served also as a bar, were stacked row on row of the barrels of sweet wines.

Through the doorway from the back room of the shop came Bernardino, and when he saw Trinidad his solid face fitted together more closely and he moved forward and put his fists down on the bar and looked across at her without speaking.

"They are in Cuautla," she told him harshly.

Bernardino looked over his shoulder and called into the back room. "Arnulfo," he called.

Arnulfo came through the door and stood just inside it, lounging against the frame, a cigarette between his lips. He stared at his father, ignoring Trinidad.

"They are in Cuautla," Bernardino said. He turned back. "Go on," he said.

"They have been there ten days. I know the house. I can tell you where it is."

"You will come with us," Bernardino said.

She wrapped her shawl more tightly about her face. "I have work here," she said. "My Senora. . . ."

"We do not do this thing alone," said Arnulfo, speaking to her for the first time. "He is your husband, Pablo. Luz is Bernardino's wife."

"You will come with us," Bernardino said again. He wet his lips.

It could be that it was right so, Trinidad thought. She had wanted to come in here when she heard where Luz and Pablo were, to come in here and tell Bernardino and then to go away again, and let what she knew must happen be apart from her. But it could be it was the task of both of them, of her and of Bernardino, and she bowed her head, saying nothing. The bitterness and the pain and hatred welled so fiercely in her that the very skin upon her bones felt taut, stretching to cover it.

Bernardino opened a drawer in the counter and took out a gun and placed it in the pocket of his coat. He looked at Arnulfo, who was watching him.

"Now," Bernardino said, and there was a kind of triumph in the way he spoke.

Arnulfo took the cigarette from his lips with his thumb and forefinger and sailed it out past Trinidad in a curving arc, through the doorway to the street. He looked like the North American film star—what was his name?—Bogart. He was older than Luz, he was the son of Bernardino's first wife, and nothing like Bernardino, who was a rock of a man in motion.

"Together we do this thing," said Bernardino to her. "If we do it right no one knows afterwards, and then no one will ever know, because we do it together, you see, and we none of us will forget we are doing it together."

"I do not like the gun," Trinidad told him. "It is not animals you are hunting. A man carries a knife."

"A man carries what he has," said Bernardino. "I am a man of position. I have no wife, perhaps, but I have a gun. And I take this gun with me."

Some of the hatred welled up towards him. "I do not like it," she said, loud and defiant. "That you should understand at least I do not like it."

She went out into the street to wait for them. They joined her presently.

"We will take the truck," Arnulfo said. "On a bus we would be perhaps remembered. We will take the truck, loaded as it is now. There are deliveries to make. When we return we will make them. Should there be any questions later on."

She stood with him before the shop and Bernardino went around

to bring out the truck. It was a very old truck, a 1920 Dodge, with one seat in front, roofed over, and an open body piled with the barrels full of wine. She climbed in and Bernardino moved over towards her and let Arnulfo take the wheel.

"Cuautla, you say?" Arnulfo repeated.

"Cuautla," she said. "I know the house. It is on the outskirts, well on the outskirts. We had better leave the truck in town and walk from there."

The truck fumed noisily and started down the dusty streets towards the highway.

It was like the one that ran as bus between Acapulco and Pie de la Cuesta, where she had been born. When she had married Pablo, eight years before, she had ridden for the first time in such a truck, riding from the Pie, beside its broad beautiful lagoon, back to Acapulco. She had wanted to stay there, near the beat of the sea and the smells it threw up towards the town, with the sounds of singing from along the shores in the bright evenings.

That was before the children came, when she was eighteen, as full and soft as Luz, as mixed with laughter. That was when Pablo was porter at the Miramar Hotel, restless already, with plans so complex that she could not comprehend them. A bar, he told her . . . yes, a *pulqueria*, . . . in the City of Mexico they would have a *pulqueria*. . . .

He was telling that to Luz no doubt, now, at this moment, and Trinidad's face, which had relaxed with looking backwards, hardened again, and she folded her hands more relentlessly in her lap. The shawl about her head slipped but she did not bother with it.

"I did not stop at the Señora's," she said to Bernardino. "I should have told her I would be away this day. She is expecting lunch."

"She is *Americana*," said Arnulfo. "Not so strict as the others. You can think of something to tell her later on."

Beside her Bernardino stretched, and she could feel the tremendous muscles of the man beneath the heavy curtain of his flesh. Silent and purposeful he sat beside her, consecrated, as were they all, to this day for which they had lived a fortnight, this moment of fulfillment leading them towards Cuautla.

And towards the house—

As the truck careened over the cobbles she saw the house once more, knowing each board, each corner, and every wave of the corrugated roof, for in this house she had herself lived for three years with

Pablo and the children, when they came up from Acapulco. Two of the niños had been born there. Pablo had been attendant at the mineral pool near by, and there was a little land where they had made a garden. Chucho and Pepe and Maria had been the niños' names. And for one three-years' time she had thought only of their days together, like a consistent act of love. In the dark months that followed it had seemed to her they lived out all their lives, not just the niños, but Pablo as well, and she, there in that place, and that they had nourished it with their brief happiness.

Afterwards, after the niños' deaths, when Pablo refused to stay there any more, they had moved on at last to the City of Mexico, but the house remained. A house of death, a house of evil fortune. And now Pablo had gone back to it, with the Luz of Bernardino.

With a harsh gesture she gathered the shawl about her face.

They were on the road now. The Tepoztlan Mountains loomed ahead, clear and sharply etched, then they were in the Canyon of the Wolves. To their left, granite mountains rose bitterly, to their right sank the dark, muttering ravine; the truck steamed on, noisy and insecure.

"We must have water," Bernardino said. "We must stop in Yautepec."

He sounded eager now, and Trinidad could feel the purpose that carried him everywhere in his formidable life beating out in this truck, like a web winding about them. Blood did not flow in his veins, but pride and inflexibility.

She looked at him squarely, and the eyes he turned towards her gleamed with kindness; sweat stood on his forehead, and in the ridges around his mouth was a gathering content.

Meeting his eyes she thought that, consecrated though they might be to this act of vengeance, all else between them was wary, tense. I too would have gone away from him, she thought. Or else I would have somehow killed him first.

Arnulfo began to whistle, softly, smoothly, as though he were near a girl who was pretty and whom he wished to win over and possess. There was something appalling about the silky way in which he whistled. It was not love of Luz, but love of punishment—whereas with her, revenge was the continuation of her love.

And thinking this, she remembered the night when she had known—

It had begun three months before, at fiesta time, on an evening when she had walked in the plaza with Pablo and they had encountered Luz, alone, wide-eyed. Bernardino, she told them, was busy in the wineshop, and she was lonely.

They had stood together beneath the Ferris wheel, she and Pablo and Luz, and the wheel had sailed up into the sky, and hesitated, sailed down, and stopped.

"Come," Pablo had said, taking her hand. "Come, we will ride up there, no?"

"Oh, no," she had protested. "You go then. But I am afraid."

"I am not afraid," Luz cried, laughing, lonely. "You do not mind, Trinidad, if I go up there with Pablo? It is so lonely . . . see how near the stars. . . ."

And she had smiled, content and sure, sorry for the little Luz.

Then one night, two weeks ago, she had risen, restless, more than restless. She had put on no dress or shoes, but softly had gone down to the gatekeeper's house where Pablo slept, thinking to creep in and lie beside him and wake him with her body. She had moved so quietly that at a little distance even she could hear the voices.

They were not voices raised in conversation, they were more sounds than voices, and one of them was Pablo's, but one—she had stopped then, naked in the darkness, appalled and confused, listening and aghast, and at last had crept back to her room, crouching down in her bed as though never again would she be warm or safe.

I must not let on to Pablo that I know, she had thought desperately. I must not ever let it come out in words between us. If it will only pass.

That was what she had decided, despite the fury that battled with her judgment, but it had all been useless. For in the morning, Pablo was gone, and Luz.

It was then that the hatred had begun, she thought, feeling it steadying her once more as they rattled across the old bridge into the town of Yautepec.

They stopped for water and for gasoline.

"It has one door, this house?" asked Bernardino. "There is no back way, perhaps?"

"One door," said Trinidad.

"We will move up," said Bernardino to his son, Arnulfo, "quietly, you see. You on one side, I on the other. When they run I will shoot."

At the ominous excitement rising in his voice, Trinidad fought with an impulse to protest, and growing in her too was dread of how they might carry out their vengeance.

Dread was no new companion, but this was unlike the fear which had walked beside her for the past four years, which had taken hold in that tragic house in Cuautla. That was a fear of insecurity, even of life, which had been worst in the city of Mexico, where Pablo and she had been unable to find work, where their money had slipped away, peso by peso, till they were sleeping on the streets with the other lost, forgotten ones, and where the searing winter had brought dreams of Acapulco and its warm, blue sea.

But she had prayed to the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin had brought them to the Señora Bell who had given them jobs with her in Cuernavaca. And gradually the fear had lessened and the insecurity began to ease away.

Then Pablo spoke of leaving. To take work in a *pulquería*.

For the first time, he became to her incomprehensible.

"Here we are safe," she wailed. "Here we can make a life—niños. Oh, Pablo, here we have all we need!"

He grew argumentative, then he grew sullen, and finally apathetic.

"The *pulquería*," he insisted doggedly. "*The pulquería. . .*"

And from the constant battle he had withdrawn at last. With Luz, who was young and who had not yet tasted fear.

They passed the hacienda of San Carlos with its old aqueduct, and drew into an arid stretch from which the vision of the volcano, Popocatepetl, gleamed on the far horizon.

A doubt was gnawing at the edges of Trinidad's mind: she had wanted security for herself, but what meaning did it have if it was not for man and wife, if it was not for both of them?

They passed two villages and now at last they were approaching Cuautla, and an equal tension possessed them all.

As they drew up beside the railroad station, Trinidad saw on their right the plaza, vivid with jacaranda and mamey.

"How far?" said Bernardino, turning to her.

"Maybe two kilometres," she said. "Maybe a little over. Maybe three kilometres."

"We will park here then," Bernardino said.

When they climbed down from the truck, she hesitated. "I will tell you where it is," she said to Bernardino. "I will tell you how to

get there. I will wait here for your return. I have thought, Bernardino; I do not wish to go."

"Tell us then," Bernardino said, not looking at Arnulfo.

"You go west," Trinidad said. "It is outside of San José, near the mineral springs. You cross the old bridge at the Cuautla River and the road ascends. When you can see Popocatepetl you then turn right." She spoke almost dreamily. "The first house, quite apart. There is a plaque of the virgin above the door. . . ." She stopped.

Bernardino turned to Arnulfo. Arnulfo nodded. "I will know it," he said.

"Here, then," said Bernardino. She sat upon a nearby bench and her strength flowed out of her as she looked at them. "Here," she said faintly.

"Good," said Arnulfo, and they started off.

She sat as if carved from stone; there was a ringing in her head and something was wrong too with her breath. She put one hand to her throat and the fingertips felt icy and wet and she swallowed against them. Here in the plaza, on this very bench, she had so often sat with Pablo and the niños.

"*They drank milk, do you see?*" the doctor had said to her. "*It was the milk, do you understand, it was the milk that caused the illness.*" But she had not understood. Milk was good for the niños. Everyone knew that milk was good for the niños.

Hands fell upon her shoulders and she jumped. She looked up. Bernardino and Arnulfo stood beside her.

"You must come with us," Bernardino said. "It is what was decided."

"We do not do this thing alone," Arnulfo said. "You must come with us too."

The confusion settled into a desperate wish for flight. They were smiling at her strangely and she knew that she was trapped by them, but she said, speaking very slowly, "I will wait here. I will sit here."

"You will come with us," said Bernardino, and his fingers tightened upon her shoulder.

"You understand," said Arnulfo, looking at her tensely.

She rose. She moved down the street beside them as if by instinct only, and out to the west they walked together towards the town of San José.

Along this route Pablo and Luz had moved.



If they would give her the knife, not the gun but the knife, she would go forward alone and erase what had taken place. But this was not to be her act—she was an instrument like the gun, a weapon. . . .

Ahead of them the bridge stretched over the Cuautla River. In wary silence they crossed together and reached the road which ascended through lemon and banana trees, and then on the horizon rose the peaks of the volcanoes, startling and white and sharp.

Trinidad's mouth was dry as the dust on which she walked, and there were bands within her head which were destroying thought and will; she made a desperate effort to break them, to regain control, and then her feet slowed and she stopped where she was. For ahead of her rose the house!

Bernardino jarred her shoulder and she came alive, sucking her breath in with a gasping cry, and started forward, and began to scream, running and screaming, shrieking and running, "Pablo, Pablo, take care—Bernardino and Arnulfo—Pablo, take care, take care."

Her voice rang out high and vibrant and into it she put all of their lives, the nights on the Acapulco beaches, the days they had played with the niños here, the nights in the City of Mexico when they had suffered together. "Pablo," she shrieked, "Pablo, watch for yourself!"

She fell. Bernardino, leaping past her, had struck her violently, but it was Arnulfo who paused to draw from his belt the slender knife and thrust it brutally; his face distorted with fury, into her side. She fell forward and lay there, her eyes open and fixed upon the house, with no strength now to move.

The two men, dimmer in her sight, threw the door back and plunged in and she tried to scream again but something was wrong with her voice. She dug her nails into the earth in an agony of watching.

. . . the garden was so overgrown . . . it should have been kept up. . . .

The men came ploughing out, baffled and violent. They circled the house and went for a way into the fields, still searching.

Then they came back and stood near her and she could make out a little of their conversation.

Pablo had gone. She closed her eyes and lay more heavily. Pablo and Luz had gone. Restless as ever, Pablo had moved on.

When she opened her eyes again, Arnulfo and Bernardino were gone from sight. She tried to move but she was far too tired. She

gazed instead at the house. But the house wasn't important any longer because in some way that she couldn't bother now to understand, she could feel peace.

Her fingers, clutching the earth that had been their garden, relaxed a little, and she laid her face against it.