

GERARDO DREAMS OF CHILLIES

Gerardo watched the smoke from his cigarette tumble upwards as beside him Alejandro drove the truck, intent on eating up the remaining two hundred and fifty kilometres to Puebla. For a thousand pesos you'd think that Alejandro might say something once in a while. But he could handle a truck well enough, that much was clear, and they'd left on time despite the chaos of the Central de Abasto and the snarling Mexico City traffic. Gerardo took a pull on his cigarette, put his feet up on the dash and held his breath. Then he exhaled out his nostrils and stared out the window at the purple darkness galloping by in the opposite direction. He dreamed as he smoked. He dreamed of chillies.

He dreamed of the unforgiving heat of the long rat's tale chilli (used to decorate funeral wreaths because of the way it would hold its vivid red colour) and of its little cousin, the mouse shit chilli, whose heat was all the more surprising because of its size. He dreamed of the aubergine tinge of the round cascabel, called the rattle chilli because when dried the seeds would loosen and so trucks carrying cascabels for the market would pass sounding like giant maracas. He dreamed of the rainbow colourings of maturing habaneros, of the sweet smell of the pasilla, of the softly purpled puya. But most of all he dreamed of the king of chillies, the jalapeno, the reason he was hurtling towards the outskirts of Puebla.

Gerardo knew chillies because his father had known them. Originally, however, his father had not known chillies but had known onions. He had known onions long before Gerardo was born when, at the age of thirteen, he began getting up at before dawn to work the scorching fields of the Mexicali Valley. Before the heat became too

intense Gerardo's father would break his back pulling up the endless rows of bright-green stalks and, when the sun became unbearable, he would retire inside to one of the wooden sheds. Here he would work in the dust, cleaning the onions, tying them in bushels and then packing them in crates ready for transportation over the border. After helping load all the crates onto the open backed trucks, he would finally stop and roll himself a cigarette from a pouch of cheap tobacco and smoke under the long evening shadows.

When Gerardo's father was seventeen he had left the onion fields of the Mexicali Valley and made the journey to Mexico City with just five hundred pesos in his pocket. In Mexico City he had gotten work at the Central de Abasto, the biggest food market in all of Mexico, as a cargadore. Each morning he waited for the delivery trucks to arrive and then unload the boxes of fruit and vegetables, stacking them onto a small handcart (carts called a diablo because of their notorious difficulty to handle when fully laden). He would load up his diablo, well above the height of his head, and then set off through the heaving market aisles to make deliveries to the stall owners, hauling his cart up and down the endless series of concrete ramps and peering out from behind his teetering cargo to whistle shoppers out of his way. All day the sweat drenched cargadores of the Central de Abasto would curse and spit as they'd force their precarious towers through the thronging maze of market. It was brutal work.

And for this Gerardo's father did not earn a salary. Instead he had to pay El Chino (a former cargadore himself but who now owned all the diablos in the market) a weekly fee. His father charged the stall owners a few pesos for each box delivered, depending on size and weight and, after El Chino was paid the week's rental for the

diablo, kept whatever was left. He worked hard and saved up enough to buy the lease for a chilli stall that sat on the corner of the two busiest aisles in the market. It took him ten years.

Why chillies? Gerardo once asked.

Do you know how many tons of chillies are eaten in Mexico each year Gerardo? One billion tonnes! Can you imagine?

Gerardo couldn't.

There are only two certainties in Mexico for people like us Gerardo, hardship and chillies, so a man who cannot succeed selling chillies in Mexico deserves whatever hardships he gets.

But what about onions? Gerardo had insisted.

Fuck onions, his father had spat on the floor. Those fucking onions owe me for the childhood they stole from me in those stinking Mexicali fields. The devil can take every onion in Mexico now for all I care. I'm done with onions. And he stuck to his word, spending the next twenty-nine years turning a profit from his chilli stall on the busy corner the busiest food market in all of Mexico and never again handling so much as solitary onion.

Gerardo's father had taught him about chillies of course. And he had also taught him the art of the market, the art of being able to sell. Yes, Gerardo could sell thank god. He could smile and wave his arms and slap buyers on their backs and ask them about their wives, and they would ask about his. *For you today*, he would say holding a kilogramme of fresh cascabels, *only thirteen pesos*. And the buyers would feign

shock and grab their heads in outrage and the pantomime would play out. But they would always take them at twelve in the end. Gerardo knew the buyers didn't care about his wife, only about the price. He knew that he could massage them as he talked but if the price was wrong they'd simply walk away. And, if the price was right, he could piss on their trousers and they'd still smile as they handed over the money. Still, it was true that he could turn a profit while others in the market selling at the same price might make a loss. And his father had also given him something else. He had given it to him when he had died just over a year ago; he had given him his entire life savings, thirty thousand two hundred and twenty one pesos. And it was with his father's thirty thousand pesos now laying heavy in his pocket that Gerardo was bearing down on a chilli farm on the outskirts of Puebla.

By now the light of the sun was visible over the rocky shelves of scrubland that skirted along parallel to the highway. The last of the nocturnal scavengers could be seen fleeing from the oncoming truck and disappearing into roadside bushes. An eagle was silhouetted up ahead, hanging still in the air.

They left the highway, spiralling around an exit road before Alejandro, still silent, dropped the engine into second and swung the truck under a white arch that marked the entrance to the farm. They rumbled up a rutted track, Gerardo holding plastic handle over the door to avoid bouncing his head off the roof. He could see green fields of chilli plants rolling off into the distance, some still covered by clouds of low clumping dew. They reached a courtyard that was ringed by a horseshoe of white outhouses and Alejandro cut the engine. *No trucks*, thought Gerardo surveying the yard. *We are the first.*

A man emerged from the largest of the buildings and walked towards them. He wore patterned leather boots that came up over his jeans, boots that marked him out as the owner, and a tasselled shirt tucked into a wide buckle belt with his thumbs resting in the loops. He was small and squat and most of his face was obscured by a pair of sunglasses.

“Yes my friend?” he said on reaching them.

“I have come to buy your chillies,” said Gerardo.

“Well, my friend, you have come to the right place,” said the farmer with a smile and he led them out of the courtyard and into a field and up a furrow between rows of knee-high plants. The leaves of the plants were still damp from the dawn and they brushed along Gerardo’s legs as he walked, wetting his trousers. The mud stuck to his shoes. Half way up the row the farmer stopped to pick a huge, green jalapeno off its stalk. “Mexico’s finest,” he said smelling it before handing it to Gerardo. Gerardo took the pepper and weighed it in his hand. He knew immediately it was very good but brought it to his nose to make a show of inspecting it further. The farmer said nothing as Gerardo examined the jalapeno.

“Twelve pesos a kilogram,” Gerardo said and tried to read the farmer’s reaction but could only see a curved ocean of green being reflected in his sunglasses.

“My friend,” said the farmer with a smile, “for the last two days trucks have rumbled into Puebla at dawn. Opportunists, like you, looking for chillies to bring back to Mexico City now that there is flooding and things are in short supply. And I say good luck to you. But you must understand you are not the first. And will not be the last.

The price this morning is eighteen pesos. This afternoon it will be nineteen and tomorrow twenty. I suggest you buy now.”

Gerardo wished he could see the farmer’s eyes, or that he had at least worn sunglasses of his own so the farmer could not read him so easily. He felt like he was fighting a duel from the bottom step of a staircase.

“Fifteen. No more.”

The farmer looked Gerardo up and down with a slow nod of his head. “The big merchants come dressed in boots and overalls because they know they will need to get dirty inspecting their investments. But you come dressed in a suit. They own their own trucks,” here he looked across to Alejandro, “but you rent a driver. We both know you own a small stall and that for you it is a long and expensive trip from Mexico City. You have rented a truck, you have paid for fuel, you have lost a day’s trade. It would be a costly shame for you to go back all that way empty.” The farmer paused and turned away to inspect another large jalapeno. Satisfied he turned back to Gerardo. “Come see me in the yard if you want to buy at eighteen. If not?” He shrugged. “Well then I wish you luck.”

Gerardo stood amid the rippling plants and watched the farmer exit the field. When he had disappeared from sight he turned to Alejandro.

“What do you think?”

“I think I am a truck driver,” said Alejandro.

Gerardo continued to heft the jalapeno in his hand, feeling its weight. Even if he sold them all at only nineteen he would still make some fifteen hundred pesos for just one

day's work. And if the floods continued? The prices would shoot up. Twenty-two. Twenty-three. Higher. The sun was getting hot.

"Well, I think," said Gerardo, turning to pitch the jalapeno as far as he could into the tide of plants, "that a man who cannot succeed selling chillies in Mexico deserves all the hardships he gets."

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Two days later Gerardo got up earlier than usual and did not turn any lights. He padded into the kitchen, lit the stove and put some coffee on to boil. Then he sat in his underpants by the flickering half-light of the gas and rolled himself a cigarette as the bitter smell of coffee filled the kitchen. He poured some condensed milk into a tin mug and, when the coffee had boiled, poured it thickly on top. Then he lit his cigarette and drank his coffee and smoked in the tumbling shadows.

When he had finished smoking he stubbed out his cigarette in the empty can of condensed milk and rooted a stub of pencil out from a drawer beside the kitchen table and began to make a series of scribbled calculations on a scrap of envelope. He stared at the calculations for some time and then he got dressed. Once he was dressed he folded the envelope into his shirt pocket, blew out the stove and then eased the front door closed behind him as he slipped into the shadow of the morning.

He arrived at the Central de Abasto market before dawn and picked his way through the labyrinth of aisles. Many stalls were not yet open but some were starting to lay out produce for the day ahead; the yellow *flueres de muertos* used for funerals

wreaths, bright pyramids of melons and oranges, net sacks full of carrots. When he reached the corner of the two aisles where the chillies were sold he turned left, away from his empty jalapeno stall. He kept walking, past the tomato sellers, past the green baskets of avocados, past the earthy stacks of jicama and yucca root.

He kept walking until he reached the cavernous loading bay with its lines of carts and towers of packing crates. It was getting busier now, a cacophony of reversing trucks and shouting and whistling, the thumping of boxes hitting the ground, the clanging of trailers being unhinged and carts rattling up and down steel ramps. Already some of the cargadores were sitting on their diablos smoking and talking and waiting for the big trucks to arrive. Gerardo walked past them and up to a glass panelled door and knocked.

“Come in,” called El Chino.

Gerardo entered and El Chino looked up from behind his desk. El Chino was old, his face was dark and lined from work and the back of his hands were ropes. The hair he had left was grey, as were his eyebrows. But his eyes still looked sharp, like the teeth of the wind when it blows in from the mountains. He gestured to a seat.

“You are Mateo’s boy?”

“Yes, Gerardo.”

El Chino took a packet of American cigarettes from his shirt pocket and rapped it twice on his desk to pack down the tobacco. He took one cigarette for himself and then offered it across the table to Gerardo, who also took one.

“You know I gave Mateo his big break?” said El Chino. “I employed him as a cargadore. That must be nearly thirty years ago now but I still remember him well. He had a hunger about him.” El Chino leaned across and lit Gerardo’s cigarette and then his own. He sat back, exhaling blue-tinged smoke which stuck to him as it rolled down his chest. “How much did you lose?”

“Twelve hundred kilos,” said Gerardo. “I had no money left to pay for a cold store to stop them from rotting. I couldn’t even leave them in the market without receiving a fine. I had to let Don Cortito take them for free.”

El Chino continued to smoke. “You were unlucky. You were not to know that the rains would clear and that by mid-morning so many jalapenos would flood the market that you couldn’t even give them away. Don Cortito has a big cold store on the Avenue de las Torres. He will keep them until the price rises again and then sell them for a profit. But, for someone to win someone else must lose, that is what the market means, no? Think of it just as the tiger gaining another stripe.”

“It was a large stripe I gained,” said Gerardo. “I lost the stall.”

El Chino finished his cigarette and stubbed it out in a silver ashtray. He leaned forward again. “You bought in a shortage and sold in a glut. What else is there to say? The going rate for a diablo is one hundred and fifty pesos. Because you are Mateo’s boy you can have one for one hundred pesos for the first week, while you find your feet. You decide what to charge for each box you carry and, once you’ve paid me, you keep whatever you have left. You know the market, you should do well.” El Chino stood up and stuck out his hand.

Gerardo stood up and shook it. "Thank you," he made to leave and then stopped at the office door and turned back. "Please," he said, "if you see my wife, I, I haven't told her."

"Of course," said El Chino, "of course. Maybe in time."

El Chino sat down again and lit another cigarette and watched Gerardo through the window. He watched him collect a diablo from the line of carts that ran against the concrete wall and then clumsily load it with boxes of bright-green onions fresh from the Mexicali Valley. He watched Gerardo strain to get the diablo moving and then teeter off uncertainly. He watched Gerardo until he disappeared from sight, until he was swallowed up by the market's hungry aisles.