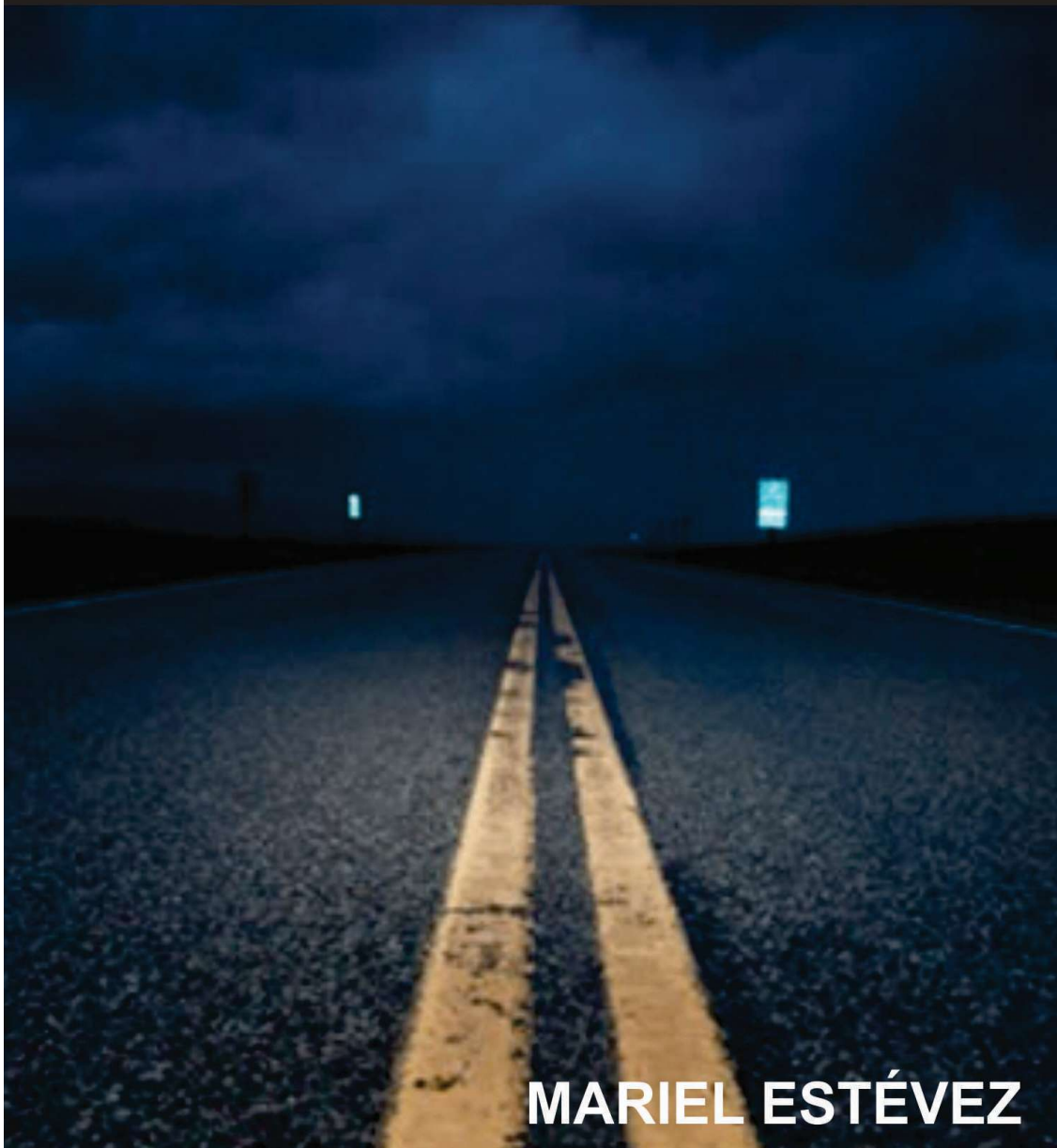


An Unexpected Visitor

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Capítulo 1

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Through the windshield, the sunlight thickened in the horizon, making the road ahead glow with a warm, orange tinge. What a pleasant surprise it would be for her parents when she appeared, unexpectedly, at their doorstep! She had not seen them for a year, and she bore some exciting news. At a deserted gas station on the country road, the sluggish attendant methodically filled up the tank and provided her with the necessary provisions to stock up for the trip ahead. Eager for conversation, he informed her that, not more than a fortnight before, a dangerous inmate had broken out of the county jail during visiting hours, posing as a civilian, and that the authorities had been unable to locate his whereabouts. The fugitive was a short-haired man in his thirties, brown-eyed, with a distinctive black tattoo on his right temple. The police recommendation was to remain alert, especially for lone hitch-hikers on the road. Locking the door of her car, she resolved not to stop under any circumstances, until she reached her parents' home safely.

Marianne drove for two more hours. The upbeat music on the radio kept her company. The dark country road, guarded by miles on end of fields and lone farms, lay cold and still as her car drove by. In the distance, across endless fields of dark, golden wheat that swayed in the breeze, several dim lights, unevenly scattered, flickered like little stars being born into the blackest of skies.

All of a sudden, a wave of mild discomfort made her body shiver inexplicably. She put the blame on tiredness and the uncomfortable car seat. After two short stops by the side of the road, she carried on with the trip. An increasingly cold sweat glistened on her forehead as she steadily began to bend forward in pain every few minutes. Her physical discomfort reached such a high peak that it was impossible for her to continue driving. Swerving the car out of the highway, she managed to drive it along the right shoulder, where she stopped the engine. Tired *and* scared, her heart pounded on the double, as if she had more than one inside her body. She guessed the culprit must have been the sandwich she had eaten at the gas station's mini-shop.

Half an hour went by; there were no signs of a single car on the road. The temperature continued to drop, giving way to small geometrical patterns of ice that covered the windshield with a thin, whitish layer. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, nothing could be done but wait for help to arrive in the course of two more hours. At least she was now feeling a little better; the severe stomach cramps had momentarily ceased.

Advancing soundlessly out of the dark with his head bowed, a burly, rather rough looking man emerged into the area lit up by the headlights of the car, wearing a ragged cap pulled down over his face. Without introductions, he asked her if she was alone and if she needed help. Caught unawares, Marianne did not make it in time to go round the hood of the car, and lock herself in. From that moment on, special attention for any unexpected movements on his part would be crucial. She wondered where he had come from so quietly. Rubbing his wrists with his heavily tattooed hands, he insisted, once again, on offering her help.

Terror seized her when the man instinctively raised his cap to scratch his short-haired head, revealing a faded black tattoo on his right temple, near the eye. Though he was not wearing a prison outfit, there was no room for doubts. Feeling a mixture of uncertainty and horror, Marianne immediately regretted having set out on a trip at night instead of waiting until morning. Stubbornness had sometimes been said to be a positive trait of her personality, but not this time. Lives may have been put at risk. Once again, a twinge took hold of her stomach, twitching it painfully. Losing consciousness, she fell heavily, hitting her face on the outside rearview mirror, on the way down.

The man vigorously tugging at her clothes brought her back to her senses. Things had taken a turn for the worse: she was lying on the ground; her shoes and clothing from the waist down lay limply, next to her. Warm, thick blood dripped slowly, thawing the patch of frozen dirt where it had formed a small puddle; his pocket knife lay open on top of the hood. The man spoke roughly, but her dizziness prevented her from understanding what he was saying. She gazed blankly into the night, feeling herself being dragged along on the cold, rocky ground. The dirt stuck to her throat made her cough. In the distance, the blurred, flickering lights now seemed to fade away like dying stars; yelling for help would only be a useless waste of precious energy. Her parents always said that safety was never to be taken for granted, and she regretted having done so. The contents of her purse were scattered all over the ground. Suddenly, she felt nauseous. This could not be happening to her.

In an instant, it all became clear, and she understood what was happening. Heedless of Marianne's plea, he did not answer nor did he even look straight at her. Hurriedly, he took off his jacket and shirt, and knelt down in front of her. "*Stop twitching! You're only makin' it worse for ya',*" he grunted in a coarse voice. He did not say another word. With a grimace, he rubbed some blood off his hand on his filthy jeans. Why had no one passed by them on the road? Amidst the immense, dark fields, she felt minute, insignificant. Dirty tears trickled down her dusty cheeks as she tightly closed her eyes and wept hopelessly. His rough, tobacco-stained hand grazed her inner thigh, making her cringe and sob in gasps. Her breathing accelerated along with her terror. Grabbing her firmly by her thighs, he brusquely dragged her closer to him. Her personal-space

boundaries had so long before been trespassed, that she was no longer aware of it. His warm breath reeked of alcohol and nicotine. Still on, the headlights of the car illuminated the hellish scene she was being forced to perform. Their bodies cast long, wavering, almost spectral shadows on the ground; she averted her eyes.

Her mind wandered off, farther away from her aching and nauseated body. Stirred by fear, memories she believed already forgotten vividly sprang back into life: with great clarity, she recalled herself as a child, standing respectfully in the center aisle at Saint Margaret's Church after Sunday mass; her hands neatly folded, looking up and praying to a forgiving Jesus Christ. Even though Marianne had strayed away from God and religion for a long time now, she found herself incessantly muttering a prayer she knew by heart since childhood. *"Hail Mary, full of grace... Our Lord is with you..."* she began, a little rusty. *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus."* A feeling of dread stirred a new wave of piercing pain through her core. *"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."* Lost in the soothing, starry sky, she pictured herself once again tightly folding her hands, and she silently prayed for survival.

After covering Marianne with his jacket, the man instructed her to give one last push with all her might. Both sighed excitedly in relief when her premature baby boy was finally born. The newborn gave a loud, healthy cry as the man wrapped him in his fleece shirt, and laid him on his mother's chest. He used a shoelace to clamp the baby's umbilical cord and cut it with his pocket knife. *"Good job, ma'am, ya' did really good,"* he said with a crooked, though genuine smile. *"I called 911 from your cellphone. Help is on the way. I'd better scram now."*

With a quick movement, he stood up and disappeared scampering into the safety of the dark wheat field. *"You be a good man, little fella!"*

"Thank you!" cried out Marianne, but the words faded away in the cold breeze. Born in the oddest of places, with the oddest of helpers, a new star had been welcomed into the black sky.