

La frontera

Annabel Rodway

IN THE *Estados Unidos de América*, Mamá says, the women wear red rouge on their cheeks. The streets gleam, spotless under the light of the luna. Buildings grow towards the sky, she proclaims, energetically raising her arms up toward the cerulean sheet which is dotted with tiny, iridescent diamonds — she smiles and lets her eyes close in euphoric reminiscence. She opens her eyes nearly unwillingly, edges herself closer to me and gently pulls me onto her lap, the sand from the bottom of my *falda* falling upon her coffee-coloured legs. We stare out to sea, waiting for Eduardo. *One day, mi amor*, she whispers, brushing the rogue curls away from my face. I unwind her arms from around my waist and stand up. I start to spin. Spinning so the sky twirls like when you mix Sangria with a straw. Even after I stop spiralling the sky keeps going. Mamá laughs. I fall to the ground.

If you head away from where South America meets the North, and take a right turn on Corredor Sur, you will find us. Small, fragmented houses line the dirt road, which is littered with russet whiskey bottles and flattened cardboard boxes. Plastic bags crunch as they flap in the breeze like national flags, caught in the Alfajía trees. From my house you can hear the waves breaking from the Gulf of Panama — the ocean dispersing all of its debris from faraway places along our abandoned coastline. Last year, Miguel and I found a body there. I told Padre we should call the policía but he chided me. He reacted

the same way when Eduardo never came home from work, September past. My house is protected from the sun by the cedar trees, which means that I can lie on the roof and watch the ships. I have nothing else to do. I am usually alone. All of my nine brothers are Box Men — from José who is twenty, all the way down to Miguel who is thirteen. Every day I watch as they walk from the house to the docks and unload crates of white powder into the boots of shiny black cars.

My name is Lucia Perez and I have but fourteen years. I live in Panama — near where the border lies. My family work for infamous drug lord, El Padre, unloading drugs from Columbia by day, and transporting them into Mexico by night. My brother Eduardo has been missing for two months. The last time I heard from him was the night before he was trying to cross la frontera, the border, for good. I think he's in América now, and I plan on following him. I want to get into Heaven too.

Today, the ocean glimmers like one hundred individual suns have been placed under the surface, and like dominos, the palms sway down the road, one after the other, as if they are bowing down to me. I inhale deeply. The air is thick. It rained overnight, I think, imagining the helpless droplets of rainwater evaporating as soon as they made contact with the sweltering wok that was the sidewalk. From my position on the roof, I can see through the bottle-green foliage all the way to the distant horizon. The water must be flat out there, I reason, as I cannot see the ships stirring as though they are battling the white-capped, frothy waves of the Pacific Ocean.

‘Lucia!’

‘Voy Padre, voy!’

‘Lucia!’

The inside of my house smells of cigars and rosary beads. The floor is covered in a thick layer of dust. I grit my teeth as it penetrates the slits between my toes. There is a tattered

mattress on the floor that has recently become the confines of my mother's existence. I turned around.

'Lucia, why do you make me wait?'

'Sorry, I ...'

'*Armado hasta los dientes,*' he interrupts insolently, turning around. *Be armed to the teeth.*

'Lucia, there is something I need you to do for me. You must come with me to visit El Padre for his fiesta — my date. Since your Mamá is ...' He gestured to the lump beneath the blankets in the corner, 'I must take you.'

I had met this lizard only once before. The ghostly throbbing between my legs triggered again. I remembered grudgingly, how after, he had placed his grimy hand on the small of my back and traced an 'X' on my skin.

I grabbed my back where the phantom signature lay.

'But, Padre ...'

'Lucia. *Hacer lo que hay que hacer.* Do what needs to be done.'

The ocean broke beyond.

We ascended up the dirt road; the ocean chasing me beside the car, before its weariness became too great and the greenery took over. Padre had told me I must change into something beautiful; he even bought me rouge for my cheeks. This dress was Mamá's, made of buttery satin, fitting closely around my waist. The first time, wearing a mere apron, the reptile lured me into his illuminated cave. Candles flickered. He attacked me, pinning my arms down, forcing his venomous mouth upon mine. I could see his artery pounding in frenzy through the thick skin of his scaly neck ...

'Lucia. Now,' he commanded, snapping me out of my trance.

I picked at the dirt beneath my nails.

'Fernado. And, ah, you brought your lovely daughter! So lovely,' the lizard hissed.

I bit viciously into the chewy flesh of his hand, raised to touch my face. He howled. I ran but fell on the balcony — my back scraping against the panelled decking, head spinning. Momentarily, I had a view of the blushing sky, swirling like when you mix Sangria. He grabbed me, holding me threateningly against the low railing of the gallery. No one blinked. I gripped his arm firmly and threw my weight backwards. We fell to the ground.

‘One day — what?’ Eduardo asked, moving out of the shadows of the rock pool into the soft touch of the sun’s rays.

Américas, I whispered.



Annabel Rodway wrote this in 2013 when she was in Year 12 at Ruyton Girls' School in Victoria.