

THE NARROW ROAD

by

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A fallen giant. Its roots were a labyrinth risen from the broken soil. Staring at them filled me with shameless curiosity like when I was a child. A bright kitchen and my grandfather picking up a knife. It had a wide blade. It dug into a block of butter. And the brown bread in his left hand would turn yellow. He chewed with no teeth and he swallowed. He had been a musician. His hands. I would stare at the veins bulging under his ancient skin, horrific and beautiful.

Then I was not in the kitchen. I was back in a car. Straps across my chest and waist. Next to me sat another man. He had stopped just in time. His fingers were not like my grandfather's. I looked over. He was gripping the steering wheel, choking it. His fingers were strong but not beautiful. He wanted to turn the car around. He eyed the narrow road. It was a typical mountain road in Puerto Rico, on one side a steep cliff, on the other, dense vegetation all the way to the edge. It would take my husband some maneuvering.

I unbuckled. I jumped out. I shut the door behind me. All without a sound.

Through the windshield he gave me the look. I ignored it.

Then I thought I heard music. Drums. My feet danced. I glided closer. My fingertips wanted to dive into the labyrinth. My hands moved closer and closer. I heard a loud honk behind me. I pulled back.

And that's when I saw the wooden house, a worn tarp tied over a side of its roof. Broken.

As my husband blasted the car horn behind me, I ran. The humidity was fierce. The path was muddy. The shoes I had carelessly put on this morning were worn too. I slipped.

On the ground I thought about everything that was choking us. The banks. The storms. The earthquakes. And now this. That morning I had told my mother over the phone. To forget. Her kitchen. Her garden. Her house. The taxi. The airport. She had left after the earthquakes. With my father in a wheelchair. And just one change of clothes. It was too dangerous now. It could be anywhere. Death. I might never see them again.

A small lizard looked at me. Its claws clung to a twig. For life.

I jumped up. I ran to the door. I knocked. No answer.

My husband was blasting the car horn again. Maybe it was time to go back. Instead I walked to the side of the house. I saw on a window ledge a doll. Somebody had tied a red bow around its neck. Somebody *had* loved it. And now it would rot away. Alone.

I took it back with me and laid it down in a dark corner of the trunk.

I got back into my seat. I pulled off the gloves. Then opened the vanity mirror. My reflection carefully slipped off the mask.

My husband had turned the car around. His foot rested firmly on the brake pedal.

I heard his voice: "What was that thing in your hands?"

"A broken dream."

Maybe he was surprised by my words. Maybe not. He said, "You know what you have to do."

"Burn it."

He took his foot off the brake. I felt the car drift. A moment.

Then he hit the gas pedal. We went down, back the way we had come. In silence.