

## THE STORYTELLER OF LAKE COATEPEQUE

---

ALEXANDRA LYTTON REGALDO

Pedro rose slowly to the surface, lifting just his chin to take in another lungful of air, and dove back down into the lake. As he swam through the columns of sunlight, trails of bubbles rose from the dense weed beds, their tendrils reaching out from the dark. Weeds like hair masking a face. Weeds, where he'd found the drowned girl just two days earlier.

He kicked deeper into the cold and near the base of the dock he saw a tail fan and swish. Everywhere he imagined there might be a fish there was a fish. He aimed the spear and released the sling just as a light blue head emerged just beyond the piling. He could feel the weight as he reeled it in, the fish thrashing toward him through shafts of sunlight.

He pulled himself up onto the first step of the dock, laid his sling to one side and slipped off his mask. The tilapia was two hands long and never had he seen one with such colors—its dorsal fin tipped in coral, and its wide eye reflecting the midmorning clouds. Pedro unfastened the wire belt stringer from around his waist and held up the gleaming catch.

For two days he had followed the same route—starting at the public beach and working his way along the shoreline of the fancy vacation homes to the tip of the peninsula, and stopping just before the ramshackle village where he lived.

Twenty fish in two hours, a record. Their tails curled and flapped on the wooden planks. Was the dead girl's spirit guiding him to the right places? It was not the first dead body he'd come across. He'd grown up on the banks of Coatepeque, *nominated as one of the wonders of the world*, he'd heard a local guide tell a boatload of tourists. At twenty-four years old Pedro still found it beautiful, the ring of mountains huddled shoulder to shoulder, the way they seemed to embrace the lake in their arms.

But Papá said you can never be too trusting of water. When the afternoon wind kicked up, storm clouds blotting out the far shore, the crater-lake seemed more like an ocean. Many fatigued swimmers, usually unwary visitors or reckless young men, had been swallowed up, their bodies never recovered.

But he had looked into her face, pale skin beaded with tiny bubbles, her eyes wide open and clear. *There is no spectacle in death*, his father had told him and snapped his fingers, *así se va la vida. It's not the dead we need to fear, it's the living*, the tooth and claw of every day. And now with this bounty of fish—was it a blessing or a curse?—he remembered his father on the night El Tabudo appeared to him.

Pedro stared out across the spangled surface of the lake and imagined Papá in the swaying silence of his boat, praying for something, anything. It had been a lean season and the stars were just starting to show their teeth. Without warning El Tabudo leaped from the water in one smooth arc, his scaly green skin glimmering in the moonlight. El Tabudo squatted on the prow of the boat—his knobby knees cleared a foot above his head.

Would Pedro have done as Papá had done? To have his wish granted, Papá had to lock eyes with El Tabudo. If not, would the monster have grabbed him by the neck and taken him down, down, to God knows where? Papá knew to bring a cigar. The same one he'd been carrying in a plastic bag inside the Styrofoam cooler. He lit it, took two quick puffs which he blew straight into El Tabudo's dead eyes. Papá told how El Tabudo slowly lifted his brows and vanished back into the lake without a splash. Papá couldn't pull up the nets, they were so heavy. But the fish, they flung themselves into his boat, slapping against his feet and shins.

Such luck. Pedro surveyed his own catch: guapotes and yellow-fin mojarras, their pink gills working like silent concertinas. Other days he barely managed three or four runts, not much to sell, but enough for the day's soup. He'd get at least two dollars for the tilapia. The tasty smaller fish he would keep, fry them whole, eat them slow, let their oil soak through the rice as he picked through the bones.

Just down the way, people had gathered near the water's edge where a long yellow tape ribboned in the wind. More reporters. A shapely woman in high heels tottered near the reeds. Behind her, a man shouldered a large camera and a boy carried an armful of cables, a briefcase, and a cooler. City people didn't know to cut his first offer by half, and with this big fish he had something to negotiate. Although Pedro wanted to stay clear of the Lopez's dock, the promise of easy money was too hard to pass up.

He slid back into the lake and swam a quiet breaststroke, his head out of the water. The group walked to a shaded boathouse table; when he got close, he splashed enough to turn their heads and the man holding the camera pointed him out to the others. The woman sat on the wooden bench and dabbed at her forehead with a tissue. The boy leaned over the railing as Pedro climbed the stairs to the sundeck. Curtains of water fell from his long-sleeved shirt and cut-offs. "Today's catch. *Aún coleando*, alive and kicking," he said, and held up the fish for them to consider.

"Three for two dollars, the big one for five, or you can have all of them for twenty-five." He offered them a wide smile.

The woman's long hair blew in the breeze, and as she approached, Pedro smelled roses. At first glance, her eyes seemed rich, like deep pools of *melaza*, but as she moved closer he noticed a rocky bottom in her gaze. She addressed the cameraman. "*Ay, me estoy derritiendo*. Hand me a bottle of water, Samuel," and she gestured to the cooler with her long fingernails tipped red.

The man handed the woman the water and headed down to inspect the fish. Though he had the telltale paunch of most dads, he still tried to pull off the fitted jersey and hairdo of the Barça players. But while their crests mimicked impressive birds of prey, his sparse, scraggly hairs were reminiscent of a *mango chupado*, the seed after it has been sucked on. He touched the tips, stiff with gel.

"Those little guys aren't much," he said, pointing at the fish. "All bones. Probably more trouble than they're worth."

Pedro angled the stringer so the big tilapia glinted in the sun. "*Vaya, ese sí*. Now that's a good one," said the man, stepping closer.

"Quit fooling around, Samuel," said the woman. "We need to figure out what we're going to do with this story." She took a long swallow of water. "*Es el colmo*. I told you we weren't going to get anyone to talk. Not even the girl's mother."

"*Hombre*, you from around here?" the man asked.

Pedro gestured across the way towards the peninsula. "My sister's house is just over there," he said. "Beyond the hot springs where the women wash clothes. I live with her now." He always felt compelled to answer as honestly as possible. *M'ijo*, you don't think before you talk, Papa had always told him. *Answer only what's asked of you*.

The boy leaning on the railing had the man's same bushy eyebrows and cleft chin. His dad's sidekick. "What happened to your hou--," the boy's voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. "Your house?" If Pedro had known him better he'd have said, *Estas enplumando*—this baby boy is growing into his feathers. Ten years ago, Pedro was just like him, though he could only dream of having those cool neon soccer shoes.

"Hey, Samuel, let your kid interview the fisherman if he wants. But let's you and me review the footage and see if we can piece something together." The woman crooked her finger and the man started back up the stairs.

The boy held up his hand as his father passed him. "Wait, Papi, can we buy fish to take home?" asked the boy, who then paused a few seconds to swallow the squeak. "To Mami and Martita?" The boy also had the sleek, stiff soccer cut, but his was combed up into a fin.

"OK, Jaime, you negotiate a good price. And make sure he cleans them, too." The man gave his son three good whumps on the back, urging him on like a testy pony, and the boy smiled at his advice. Pedro would let the boy talk him down a little. If Pedro had children of his own he'd want it to be this way.

The boy stepped onto the sundeck and surveyed the lake. It was the peak of the dry season; pink maquilishuat bloomed thick as cotton candy and yellow sparks of cortés crowned the brown hills. It was early still, but the wind had picked up, and little waves lapped at the pilings. "I heard they've never been able to measure how deep this lake is," the boy said.

Pedro walked over to where the boy was standing. "Coatepeque means serpent hills," he told him. "The Pipiles imagined a giant snake with its tail in its mouth," and with his index finger he traced the curve of the mountains.

The boy lay down on the smooth planks and hung his head over the edge. "Is there really no end to it? What's down there?" At that age, you still believed adults had all the answers.

Pedro squatted down next to him. "Oh, I've got lots of stories." He didn't get many opportunities to sit and chat. His sister was always busy with the house, and his friends—those that hadn't become drunks or criminals—were chained to the millstone after getting some girl pregnant. He'd fallen somewhere in between: just nephews, no real job, and all day to fish, to scrounge up money for the week's tortillas and, if luck

was with him, a little bottle of *guaro*.

Pedro laid out his mask and fins, the stringer of fish, his sling, and sat down next to the boy. The planks were warm on the backs of his thighs and the sun felt good on his shoulders.

The boy lifted his head and squinted. "Yeah, like what?"

Pedro turned to watch the boy's father open a laptop on the wooden table, then unwind a long black cord and connect it to the camera. It seemed like the reporters were settling in for a while.

The boy sat up and inspected Pedro's sling, a cobbled-together couple pieces of wood, a loop of rubber tube, and the spear itself a section of rebar with a sharpened tip.

"Stories like in ghost stories?" the boy asked.

The woman pushed away from the table and called out to the boy, "Jaime, what are you waiting for? Tell him you'll take the whole lot for fifteen." She placed her hand on the man's chest, leaned in close. The wind whipped up her hair and tangled it around the two of them.

Pedro tried to catch the boy's eye, but the boy stared down and continued to press his thumbnail into his forearm, exxing a cross on a mosquito bite.

"Twenty," Pedro called out to the father.

"Fine," he said, puffing up his voice over the gust of wind. "But make sure to gut them and fillet the big one," he said smoothing down the woman's hair.

The boy started to say something, but stopped when he glanced at the woman; *Ay, ay, ay!* she trilled, and swung her hair even more, playfully whipping his father across the face. The boy studied the island, the green cone jutting from the lake's center. In another lifetime, Pedro wanted to tell him, lava will explode from the tip of that new volcano and tear this crater lake even wider, deeper.

"So, hope you don't mind...it's time for the dirty work," Pedro said, and slid his fillet knife from an ankle strap. The boy watched as Pedro laid his palm flat on a *mojarra* and split it open gullet to tail. He used one finger to scoop out the guts and, with a

flick of his wrist, flung the pink and blue organs into the lake.

"*Somos malos*—we're cruel, aren't we?" Pedro said. He expected the boy to grimace or stick out his tongue, but he did neither.

"There's hardly any blood," the boy said.

"You want to try? Here, you do the next one." Pedro handed him the knife.

The boy ran his fingertip along the smooth white belly.

"It just takes the first cut," Pedro said. "Don't overthink it." Fish were easy enough to gut, but it had taken him a while to get used to the gore of larger animals. *Let the boy be a boy*, his mother used to say. But Papá insisted on showing him everything.

Once the tip of the knife split the skin, the boy cut open the mojarra with little trouble and scooped out the intestines just like Pedro had done, and soon he was moving on to the next one.

Pedro left him to it and stepped over to the railing where he could see the man and woman huddled over the screen. Pedro had a clear view of the pockmarked walls of his neighborhood, the slumped roofs of adobe tile, the fallen plaster showing through the bamboo and mud construction. The fences of izote stalks and his sister's roadside stall bannered with those flapping red and white Coca-Cola flags.

"We've got a nice, long establishing shot," the man said. The woman huffed and leaned back. "Too bad the mother wouldn't open the door." The man put his hand on her shoulder. "Wait, look. Right there. You can see her face when she pulls the curtain." When the woman angled in close to the screen, and the man started to wrap a lock of her hair around his finger, she said, "Shh, let me hear."

From the computer came the recording of a woman's voice: "I told the police I didn't want to press charges. *Vayanse*. We've had enough trouble. Go away!" It was Señor Ochoa, his next door neighbor. The man pressed a button and Pedro couldn't hear anything else, the screen a blur of images.

"Enough already. Let's just call it a day." The woman went to stand up.

"But aren't you the least bit curious to know what happened?" he asked, and gripped her wrist, forcing her to sit back down. "These are kids killing kids! No one presses

charges. The police bumble everything." He tried to get her to focus on him. "Exactly why this country is going to shit."

"Like *that's* some kind of breaking story?" She'd loosened his grip and was fishing around in her purse. "This is the *pan de cada dia* for these people. Their daily bread. They have a dozen kids because half of them die or get killed off. They don't even blink. Just want to move on."

"Hey, *cht cht cht*," the boy clucked and Pedro turned. The boy waved the knife. "I didn't say I'd do all of them!" He stabbed the knifepoint into the dock. "The rest are all yours, unless you want to split the money."

The boy leaned over to wash his hands. Pedro wanted to ask him how much he knew about the dead girl, though well aware that sometimes you had to angle back around to find the most direct way.

"When I was a kid, I also used to go to work with my dad. He did a little bit of everything. Fisherman, bricklayer, entertainer, you name it. I'd accompany him and even though he was a *parrandero*"—he tipped an imaginary bottle to his lips—"he could still play the guitar and I'd sing. A dollar for three songs." The boy watched him quietly, waiting for him to go on. In the background, the man and the woman were now talking about the trip's expenses.

"So, you and your dad are here to film something?" Pedro asked. He started gutting the fish again, inching the cuts slowly.

The boy stood and shook his wet hands, dragged them down the front of his jeans. "Yeah, the drowned girl," he said, and cleared his throat. "My dad's assistant has the flu and so he brought me instead."

He plucked a sleek phone from his pocket and aimed the camera at the swallows dive-bombing the dragonflies near shore. "You know anything about it?" He panned the camera Pedro's way.

"Ha! Now you want to tape me?" Pedro held out his hand, slick with blood and fish guts, and blocked his face.

"You think the camera is gonna steal your soul or something?" the boy said and clicked the camera off. But Pedro waved with a smile and the boy resumed recording.

"All right. You said you wanted a ghost story. Here's a true one." Only his nephews listened to the repertoire of stories, many of them in the same exact words his father used to use.

"That girl was from my *colonia*. And even though it's right around the corner, our neighborhood is not like anything you see here." Pedro waved back towards the weekend houses with their cheerful windows and sprawling lawns. "Ours weren't even real houses. Walls of mud and stick *bahareque*. Just some just zinc panels and a dirt floor." He spit over his shoulder, for effect. The boy had sat down again and though he'd steadied the camera on his knee, his other hand fidgeted with his shoelaces.

"But we did what we could. The house my dad left me when he died, it had brick walls and I was saving up for tile, but all of a sudden we had to move out of there. See, this guy who was my neighbor, Chepe, always a tiny kid, but mean, the first one to swing a punch, always pretended to be helpful just so he could swipe your stuff." Pedro stopped gutting the fish. He felt nervous; the words seemed to be fleeing his body as if it were on fire. The boy's hands were still, his gaze fixed.

"Well, Chepe grew up and became a big shot, some shady business with these tattooed *mara* types. Don't ask, don't tell. He got the permits to the land we'd all been squatting on and sold it off bit by bit to those who were able to buy a deed."

Scales flecked Pedro's arms; he brushed them off. "Now he doesn't even let us pass through the beachfront and when he comes around in his shiny pickup he refuses to tip his hat. Like money makes him bigger. And the rest of us? We had to find another place to live. I moved in with my sister after her husband left."

"And so, the girl?" the boy asked.

"The girl. Right, the girl. They can be so stupid sometimes. But like I was saying, Chepe, he moved to the city and took his mom with him, Niña Matilde. My sister's house is right next door."

The boy clicked the camera off, stood up and checked on his father and the woman, still sitting in front of the computer. Then he faced Pedro and said, "Hmm, hmm," to be polite.

Pedro knew there were too many characters, too many twists and turns all ending in dead ends. What would the boy, who'd grown up in a family sturdy as the four legs of a wooden table, care about? At his age, Pedro and his family were *patulecos*, three



points wobbling over a mess of broken plates. He and his sister forgave Papá his drunken fits because after Mamá died, he did everything he could for them. But this wasn't the story for now... kids want the plunge and surge, bored by all those real things they don't know to be scared of yet. The boy needed a hero story.

"But the point of it is, this Niña Matilde, she was a *bruja*. She would transform into a pig at night." Pedro nodded at the boy's wide-eyed stare. The boy picked up his camera and cupped his elbow to steady it.

"Yes, it's true. When I was a kid like you, some nights I'd hear her scuffling around outside the back wall where my dad had buried our savings in a clay *botija*. This went on for a full week, disrupting our sleep, until finally my dad, *se hartó*, he'd had it, and, with a *machetazo* like this he struck right in her *lomo*."

Pedro sliced his fillet knife through the air. "The blow didn't cut through to kill her but the next day she wouldn't get out of bed, not even when the tortilla vendor came blowing his whistle through the streets. Ever since then, she never bothered us ..."

"What does this have to do with the girl?" called out the woman from the table. She'd smeared her mascara and she was dabbing a tissue at the corner of her eye, her mouth agape. She wasn't so pretty as Pedro had first imagined. Her allure was in her tight clothes, the briar bramble of her hair.

Pedro resumed cleaning the fish. Instead of asking about the dead girl they should be asking him to finish his story, the truth in what he was saying.

"*Esos son cuentos*. Stories people tell each other so they can stop being scared," said the man. "So they can put a face to their fears."

"And nothing like that's ever happened to you, Papi?" The boy angled the camera away from Pedro and panned the shore. Small waves tongued the beach, the sand nothing more than the whorled bodies of snails, where a single yellow rubber sandal rested near the reeds. "Wait... Dad, look, this might be a good shot," and he started to describe how the light was just right.

The woman cut him off. "We don't have time for artsy shots." The man avoided his son's gaze and the woman hooked her hand around the man's upper arm.

Pedro sliced open the last fish, the tilapia. Though it was huge and its colors showy, he knew its flesh tasted like mud, like the silty lake bottom. He knew this kind of woman,

the kind that gets her way by fooling people into thinking she was smarter, prettier than she really was.

The boy muttered something under his breath; Pedro could see she did not fool him either.

The man lit a cigarette and exhaled a plume of smoke, said, "*Hijo*, grown people don't fear bad spirits. Work, bills, your health...cute girls...you'll see. You'll have other things to worry about. Once you stop paying attention, the ghosts go away."

Pedro moved the blade slowly across the tilapia's skin, careful not to tear the fat steaks. *Another day, another fish*. That's all he had to think about. Watch his own back. *We are just a series of mouths*, Papá had told him. *One thing chases another*. The woman watched him with her black-rimmed eyes, pots of ash.

"Forever and ever, amen, people will do things they know are wrong. Isn't that right, joven?" she said, and leaned on the rail, staring down at Pedro. "There are no real monsters around here." She smoothed her hand across the wood grain. "People give magical explanations to things they don't understand or don't want to admit." This woman who was after Pedro's story, she was going to have to go scratching somewhere else.

She put her hands up to her hair as a gust of wind swept across the lake, carrying the smell of cemetery flowers, of waterlogged and wilted petals. A scent that brought him back to Papá again. They were hunting an armadillo and Papá shone a light on its armored plates high in the branches of the chilamate tree. The dogs were crazy for it, pawing the tree trunk and biting the roots. The wind clapped its hands over them and Papá's lamp went out. They stood in the dark and when it flickered back on, they saw that the long branches were touching the ground. The tree had wilted, and the dogs howled and ran back towards the road. Next to the trunk stood the figure of a naked woman, her hair long and wild. Papá picked up some rocks and started flinging them at her, but every rock he pitched reversed itself and hit him in the chest. He knew it was La Siguanaba, ready to take him away. But when he called out her name three times, she disappeared.

A drift of clouds covered the sun and the waters of Coatepeque turned to ink. Pedro held the words he wanted to say to the woman.

How on that day of the girl's drowning, he'd been hung-over, asleep in his hammock. That he awoke when two girls came to call next door at Señor Ochoa's house. Brick-

strong girls, their arms tattooed like the walls of abandoned homes. They came looking for Sara, whose name was sighed with every bead on her mother's rosary. Sara, the girl with no father to pry her from the arms of every wrong man. Pedro could describe how the mother motioned for the little sister to accompany them. How he'd seen the four girls walk down the dirt road and cut through the empty lot next to the Lopez' house.

How he'd waited there, wondering if he should follow them. The sun pressed through the tops of the trees and their shadows swept the dust. Time hung thick in the air. He saw Sara's sister come up the path with money in her hand; she bought Cokes from the corner store. Minutes were suspended in bright motes.

Pedro didn't have to explain that if he hadn't drunk too much the night before he would've been finishing right about then, that he'd have surfaced silently beneath the steps of the Lopez's dock with his meager catch and heard the older girls arguing now that the youngest was out of the way. That Sara said she knew why the girls had come. They had come for her. That Chepe had sent them, had told them bring her back willingly or bury her there.

All of this sparked in Pedro's head, plain as a beam of sun, as plain as it was to Sara that they would knock her over the boathouse balcony onto the sundeck when she said no. That they would swoop down on her, hold her down with their strong arms when she said no again, that the water would swallow her whole, never to see her mother again.

Later that morning, when Pedro awoke in the hammock, he'd heard the younger sister calling to her mother, to anyone that would listen. The girls were gone, her sister gone. Everyone thought they'd taken off together. That the girls had convinced Sara to go back with them, to be with her boyfriend. Her mother knew better, and paced the shore until long after dark, flashlight in hand.

But this wasn't for Pedro to tell. He wasn't going to describe any of this. The fish were gutted and he was done telling stories. He walked towards the reporters and he felt as if his legs were fighting against a strong current. He plunked down the fish and the man slid a twenty-dollar bill across the table.

Pedro pointed to the box of cigarettes and raised his brows; the man nodded and Pedro plucked one from the box, the man and woman silent as he lit the cigarette. Pedro hoped the boy was watching, taking note. No one to shush him or ask him to cover up. Pedro's sister had told his nephews that La Siguanaba had snatched away their father, when really, claro y pelado, she knows he's working at a car wash in

Merliot and living with some sixteen-year-old. They'd find out someday, just as this boy would have to look into the face of his own father, a face that mirrored his own, and then he'd hold in his hands all the things left unsaid.

Seño Ochoa would carry her story close for the rest of her life; she had another daughter to raise. Pedro, he had nothing to lose. The man behind the girl's murder was not a myth. Pedro could point to the hollow in his chest, and name him.

Pedro took a strong pull of the cigarette and exhaled a steady stream of smoke and, standing in that cloud, he offered the woman this, only: "The girl went to work for Niña Matilde in the city," he said. "She was a maid in the fancy new house that her son bought her. Ask him, Chepe, about the girl. Her name is Sara."

Sara, how her body floated in the wings of a flowered dress just as he'd dreamed it. How at dawn Pedro swam into the heart of the lake until he came to the tangle of weeds where he imagined the current would take her. How he put his arms around her and dragged her up into the light, into the screams of her mother and sister, the smothered wails, hands over mouths of all the village women.