

the heat on that bus to light a candle? Every week? What was he atoning for?

Now he walked briskly. Frances had to jog to keep pace. Along winding dirt paths that scaled dry, eroding hills, there was almost no shade and very few unusual plants. Frances recognized most of the species: orchids, tree ferns, a few bromeliads dangling from strangled branches. Wilted hibiscus flowers, dusty azaleas. One hillside planted entirely with the sharp spines of blue agave.

The day was so hot her body seemed to be expanding, swelling against the pressure of the atmosphere: the ring on her finger, the straps of her sandals, the button at her waist all seemed too tightly fastened. Clusters of kniphofia, shocking blazes of orange-and-red needle-shaped bundles on spindly green stalks, lined the road, compact infernal sentries standing at attention.

Javier started descending a steep rocky path. He paused, turned back toward her. Offered her his hand. “Come,” he said.

The gesture, his hand reaching for hers, was so simple, utilitarian—coming from him, as it seemed to, without any thought—it didn’t frighten her. The tone of his voice was neither pleading nor harsh, and that tone, together with the cool feeling of his hand, reassured her: We are animals, the way dogs and cats are. Not men, not women. She didn’t need to find a motive for his every action. But when she tried to pull away, he squeezed, and she felt the bones in the middle of her hand roll and crush against each other.

Where was she? And what was she doing here? The ceaseless mechanical whirring of the cicadas came now from inside her head.

“The bus,” Frances said. “I want to go back to the bus.”

But Javier continued down the steep hill, her arm twisting to accommodate his hold on her hand. “No bus,” he said. “Not for another forty minutes.” Like Frances, he was not wearing a watch.

Her breath came unevenly, the taut cord inside her chest pulling on her ribs, closing them flat like blinds, shutting out the air and light. Every inch of her was alive with a fear she hadn’t felt in a long time. How long? How long had it been since she’d felt real fear? Her life in her own hands.

She ran. She yanked herself free and ran without stopping, without looking back.

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There were no seats left on the bus. People stood in the aisle, moving to make room for her, the metal pole hot where someone else’s hand had been a moment before. Jostled on each winding turn, Frances gripped the metal pole with her damp hand, breathed the tired body-warm air in the bus, heard the shrieks of laughter way in the back, the smell of cigarettes and the fainter odor of tequila—signs that the workday was over. She pressed against the backs and bare arms and cloth bags of people just beginning their time off, their evening fun. Frances remembered something: a college freshman in Middletown, riding the local bus, on her way to a tavern hosting an open-mike—she was going to read her poetry—the butting bodies crowded together, standing room only. The shouts, the threat and the promise, the incredible raw energy of the bus ride at rush hour. It had thrilled her the way she believed love should. She remembered it now—that thrill. It was something she hadn’t thought of in years.

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PHILIP ROSENTHAL

Fish, 2011
Enamel on Panel, 36 x 48 in



courtesy: the artist