

Trapanatans

BEATRIZ RIVERA

“As the silliness of trying to ban all alien plants becomes more and more recognized, the attention is being placed on simply plants that are truly invasive, whether they’re immigrant or natives.” Wildflower Information.org

I arrived in late June. It was an unusually cool, wet summer in the Hudson Valley, with fog tangled up in the trees. By then, all the spring blooms had passed. In my possession, I had a stolen iPod that was almost broken and a guitar minus two strings. I didn’t know how to play, but in my mind I did because the music in the iPod made me believe that music and the words to music belonged to me. I arrived with a torn backpack held together with silver duct tape, a pocketful of White Out, and a broken heart, but I wasn’t aware of the broken heart. All I knew was that I would have gladly traded my life for the iPod and the guitar.

I got off the bus in Rosendale. Not a depot, just a creepy parking lot. Foster mom was there waiting. I saw her in a split second, fast and slow like lightning, but I didn’t know it was her. Parked in front of a Dollar Store, she was leaning up against a gray Chevy Lumina. Hoping she wasn’t the person waiting for me, I crossed my fingers, but my wishes never used to come true. I have no idea how she recognized me and my heart sank when she called out my name as if I were her son, as if she had always known me. That little detail really spooked me, so I took a step back, but I guess she read my mind because she took one step forward.

I had never seen anybody that looked like her. She was big and curvy, with blonde kinky hair, yellow eyes, alabaster skin and black features. I wondered if she

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was a bad person, the type that took kids in for the money only, or the type that liked hurting kids. As big as she was, she would probably hurt me real bad. Then I wondered if she would approve of me bringing a guitar. Again, she read my thoughts as if they were an ad posted on the side of a blimp because she said, “I’m glad that you came with the guitar.” I shrugged, pretending I didn’t love my guitar.

By then, I was so spooked that I was ready to beg her to take me back to the home. My heart sank for the second time when the bus pulled out of the parking lot. Away it went: my last hope. Now if anyone knows how dogs feel when they are sprung from a high kill shelter, I do, but at that moment I was certainly wishing for the high kill shelter, at least until she touched me lightly on the shoulder, looked at my guitar and said that before we did anything else we needed to get those two E strings replaced.

She wasn’t just kidding, before going *home* we went all the way to Kingston in search of a music store. I couldn’t believe it. I was happy all right, but I couldn’t show it. I was feeling stuck inside myself like Elmer’s. Quite reluctantly, I thanked her for the strings. We were walking across the mall parking lot back toward the car.

I sat in the back seat holding on to my newly-stringed guitar. For the entire ride the only sounds to come out of my mouth were either *uh-huh* or *unh-unh*. She must have been used to kids like me because she didn’t seem to mind my deliberate rudeness.

Finally, after maybe an hour worth of driving, I don’t really know, maybe less maybe more, she pointed to a little white house and said, “We’re home.” There was this woman standing outside next to a fancy car, looking mad. When she saw the woman, foster mom didn’t look too pleased either. She made a rasping sound with her throat as she pulled into the driveway.

“This can’t go on!” the woman yelled hysterically at foster mom when she stepped out of the car.

I chose to get out from the other side in case there was a fight. All I wanted was to protect my guitar.

“Get off my property, Iris!” foster mom yelled back.

“You need to clean this dump up! This is a crime against nature!”

What followed was a shouting match. Foster mom motioned for me to go into the house. She told me it wasn’t locked.

“Listen, Mrs. Maleza, or Mrs. Osain, or whichever one of your husbands’ names you’re using today,” Iris said with an indoor voice before she started yelling. “You need to get rid of all those nasty children and clean up this place! I’m sick and

tired of having one neighbor hoarding rescue animals, another one hoarding trucks, and you hoarding children and junk! My property is a mile away and you are causing me economic harm! Do you or do you not understand? This is *el dumpero! Mucho basuro!* Don't make me hire an interpreter simply because you're an American who hasn't bothered to learn the English language!"

I heard all that just as I was setting foot in the little white house on Mettakahonts Road where I was supposed to live until I turned eighteen. Sure! I had already heard that.

Inside, I thought I heard someone ask, "Who are you?" But when I turned to face the only person in there, she didn't even seem to be aware of me. She was looking the other way. I stopped to think. That was weird. Then, I took another look at her and decided that she was the dirtiest thing I had ever seen in my life. I know: Who was I to judge? Well, as a matter of fact I was because Lucy, my former foster mom, was so scared of evil spirits and germs that she had become the cleanest person in Newburgh. Her safeguard was Windex that she pointed at filth and bad energy the way cops point guns. There was nothing Windex could not clean or cure, and when there was a *bilongo* in the house it was chased away with a few deliberate squirts of Windex. Unfortunately, Windex was not strong enough to keep Lucy's cancer at bay, but I did learn about cleanliness during that year I spent with her. I will always remember her staring at a spill and saying, "*!Esteven, saca el Windex.*" And that's exactly what I felt like doing then and there, taking the Windex out of the arsenal and pointing it at this ungodly person.

Again, I thought I heard the ugly thing ask, "Who are you?" No, this time I was convinced I heard her. The front door was still open and of course I didn't know what to say to this smelly nightmarish apparition, so I blurted out my name, which annoyed her to no end. The minute the sound left my mouth she reached for it and swatted it, as if it were a flying insect that needed to die. Then she pretended to eat my words and spit them out. I didn't know what to do, so I stared at her hair and asked, "So what's your name?"

Nothing but weird sounds came out of her mouth until she said clearly, "Asún."

"Asún?"

"Asún!" she yelled as if a piece of candy was stuck in her throat.

Foster mom was still outside arguing with this woman called Iris. At that point, I already knew the neighbor's name by heart and not foster mom's because foster mom was punctuating all of her sentences with the name Iris.

“I pay a lot of taxes for my property!” the woman named Iris yelled. “Sixty acres worth of taxes! So I have more rights and that includes the right not to have to drive past a junkyard!”

What was it with the mind reading? Can't a kid have some privacy? When I heard the neighbor insisting that foster mom's property was a crime against nature I stopped to consider the word property, and I liked it, so I decided that I too would have property one day. Of course, the magic moment was fleeting because I either heard or thought I heard this girl named Asún say that nothing would ever belong to me. So I guess I wouldn't even manage to own something as disgraceful as my new foster mom's property: a little over two acres worth of thorn bushes, poison ivy, junk cars, broken toys, broken glass, broken bikes, and more junk, lots of iron, plus a clapboard house and two trailers.

So I turned to face Asún again only to hear that just like vegetation, I was no one's child, and that I belonged to the forest.

Up to that moment, I'm sure she had spoken in English but the word she used for forest was Spanish. She said *el monte* and I didn't know what to make of it since she could have been referring to a mountain, to a jungle, to Little Red Riding Hood's dark forest, or to our own opportunistic deciduous. Not having experienced anything else, I took *el monte* to be the young woodlands of the Hudson Valley that lay beyond foster mom's abused patch of earth.

She was right. Of course I belonged to *el monte*. I was born in a shabby town on Route 209, with a mountain covered with trees for a backdrop. But to this day, I don't know if that conversation actually took place. Maybe I was reading Asún's mind or hearing voices. I was too confused to collect my thoughts. As I said already, I had just walked in the door and my mind was shut down. I hadn't even let go of my backpack and my guitar and I wasn't about to, in case this creature turned crazy on me and I needed to bolt. She did scare me, especially when I thought I heard her say I was Ramón the unborn who comes from the earth. What the hell did that mean? I didn't want to know, so I panicked and decided she wasn't real, that she'd vanish into thin air the minute foster mom came to my rescue. And just as I was about to turn around and get out of there, foster mom finally materialized, glanced at me, glanced at Asún, glanced back at me, pointed a finger at Asún and said, “Don't go thinking she's retarded because she isn't. Her only problem is that she doesn't belong here.”

Here? What did she mean by *here*? This house? This road? This planet? First I thought foster mom was kidding, but she meant it, that comment was as serious as my guitar strings.

“Her name is Asunción and most of the time she’s mute,” foster mom added. “Asún for short. Treat her well, she’s my daughter and your sister.”

There was a window of opportunity there, a fast chance to disagree and also to ask foster mom what her own name was, but I did not seize the chance, the story of my life. Before I knew it, foster mom was telling the mute girl to show me where to put my stuff.

The front door was still open and I took one step back, away from the creature.

“Don’t you look at your sister like that,” foster mom warned.

Apparently, my place was not in the house since Asún led the way, out the door, toward one of the trailers. And just as we were approaching the trailer, the “special bus” arrived and dropped two kids off in front of the house. Later on that same day I learned that Joey and his sister Amanda had ended up brain damaged after having been beaten by their parents. Soon enough, I would also find out that there was a distinction between local and weekend people, a hard and a soft border. Although some weekend people had been living here full time for quite a few years—or at least since nine–eleven—they remained weekend people. It wasn’t so much the weekends that made them weekend people as much as the pride they took in embellishing the place and protecting the natural environment from the locals, an unsightly blemish on the landscape. People like foster mom, Joey, Amanda, and Asún were definitely considered local by the weekend people regardless of the fact that they came from the city. But they were considered outsiders by the locals with Dutch or German names who claimed that were here first and had foregone the weekend relationship with the place. As usual, I was neither here nor there, or kind of in the middle, since I was born some ten miles away, but my heritage was elsewhere, provided I had any heritage. My mom had never ever mentioned the word heritage. So I had always taken it for granted that I was born on Route 209 by accident, and that in fact I came from nowhere.

Four of us broken children shared one of the trailers, and I much prefer the word *broken* to *special needs*: Asún the smelly mute autistic psycho, two kids who had been beaten to a pulp by their parents, and me. I had been labeled ADD, APD, OC, and LD. At such a young age I had already earned a plethora of *dyses* to my name: dyslexic, dysgraphic, and dyspraxic, just to name a few. High risk had become my middle name. The word *borderline* appeared here and there, in between the lines and on the margins of my dossier. My records also said that I was prone to violent outbursts when confronted by authority figures. This meant that I had problems

dealing with authority and that I was insecure. Tests proved that I had low self esteem, as well as an inconsistent I.Q. since my scores ranged from 70 to 140. The Family Violence Investigative Unit (FVIU for short) came to the conclusion that perhaps my societal and emotional issues had to do with my difficult family life. The Child Protective Services Unit (CPS) wrote that I was a cheater at chess and at cards, a liar, and a potential pyromaniac since I once tried to set a house on fire. Yet more scribbles said that I couldn't even spell my own name. A clever child assessor noticed that I read and wrote backwards. When she tagged my condition with some German term, I tried to steal her wallet right out of her purse, so she wrote in caps in plain English and with exclamation marks that I needed counseling and should be closely watched and placed only with a very experienced foster family.

That is how I ended up in Lucy's apartment in Newburgh where it always smelled of salt cod, like the bodega next door, not that it bothered me. I was supposed to be there until I turned eighteen, but Lucy got sick, and a year later I lost her. So there I was, back on the waiting list, back to square one, with the same child assessors telling me that soon I would be leading a structured life with a normal family out in the country.

I guess they got the country part right, since I was definitely out in the country. Soon, I knew for sure that I was out in the country because of the weekend people living all around us. Weekend people wouldn't have any use for this place if it weren't the country. And I forgot to mention that when foster mom wasn't working at Marshall's, she either cleaned houses for the weekend people or helped them with their gardens. Occasionally, she helped them decipher what destiny had in store for them either with the help of very finely ground coffee or the Tarot.

From the outside, the trailer that was to be my home didn't look like anybody's idea of home. Personally, I hated that tan color. My favorite color was the color of Windex because that clean blue had to be the color of the ocean that I had never seen. Asún pulled the flimsy door open. Inside, it smelled as bad as my mom's boyfriends' dirty clothes on the floor, but the place itself wasn't all that bad: a couch and some comfy-looking chairs, a television set, my own bed: the top bunk, with Joey on the bottom. I could have looked out the window from my top bunk except that the pane was so scratched that you could barely see out. The bathroom sucked though. The toilet was gross. The seat was broken. I missed Lucy's apartment in Newburgh. I missed it so much that I wanted to cry. So I hugged my guitar.

Suddenly, it felt as if I had been thrown back to Ellenville, to the place where we lived with mom and her last boyfriend until the raid, and before I knew it I was

reliving the day when we were taken away by children's services to Kingston. I knew my baby sister was dead by then and I was hurting like crazy. I didn't care, I just wanted to die, and at times I felt as if I were standing right outside of myself, it hurt that bad. They must have noticed I was hurting because they told me that it was just a matter of time before I'd be leading a structured life. Soon, I would have something that was mine to keep, mine!

Well, to my new life in the country, since this was supposed to be it, mine to keep. We had dinner in the little white house, and dinner was breakfast, either Cheerios, Frosted Flakes or Honey Smacks from a plain plastic bag, not a box with pictures on it, and milk, and white bread and bright orange Fanta. After the table was cleared, some food and alcohol and a cigar was laid out in front of a statue of a virgin. Foster mom lit a cigar, poured herself a glass of whisky, and sat at the table to read the Tarot. For some reason, I remembered walking around Newburgh with Lucy, past a church. The sign read: Church of the Seven African Powers Bringing You Home. Lucy always insisted on crossing the street instead of walking past that building.

That night I slept with my guitar and I hugged it so tight that I dreamt it was a torso, no head, no arms, no legs, alive with a sound hole for a heart.

I would have to wait three more days to find out that foster mom's name was Dori, Dori Maleza. I was high all those three days and by the time I realized that I was sharing a trailer with a crazy mute chick, I had used up all my White Out, so I really freaked out. It wasn't so much that she talked to me whenever the others were out of hearing range, it was that she'd been taken by force from a Santería cult and I knew what that was. Windex in hand, Lucy had warned me about *brujeria* and *bilongos*, so I didn't want to have anything to do with black magic. Even my guitar was starting to freak me out and if that wasn't enough, I came to realize that little Joey was in fact a girl and that Dori and Asún shared the same last name. What if my guitar was also turning into some spirit? I didn't care if it was a good or a bad spirit. I was not spiritual and I was afraid of all spirits.

On Saturday, four days onto this new country life, my iPod played its last song before it died. Surprisingly enough, I wasn't as devastated as I thought I'd be. Immediately, I let go. I simply stuck the thing in my pocket. A few hours later what really got me was that I didn't trust my guitar anymore. To make matters worse, I was really bored and freaked out about having to live here until I turned eighteen. I was sick of watching television with the other kids. So I decided to follow Asún, as if I was her shadow. I had nothing else to do and I felt very lost. But first I felt compelled to

tell her that she wasn't my sister because I knew for sure that my mom had never had a kid like her.

"But you don't have a mother," she then grunted. "You belong to *el monte*."

For a minute I was so mad at her that I felt like yelling, but I chose to follow her instead. I became her shadow. She hesitated when she got to the road, then she turned left. The next door neighbor's dogs barked at us. We walked past that house, into the next property. I kind of liked being her shadow. We walked through the tall grass, acres of un-mowed lawn. Everything was over-grown. The place had bad energy. It felt as if the owners had left in a hurry. It had bad energy like an unfinished project. I followed Asún all the way to a large pond that was kept from sight by the cattails and tall grass.

"It's going to start raining any minute now," I said as if it mattered. And as a matter of fact it did matter, at least to me since I was so scared of thunder.

Asún was staring at the pond and I was staring at her wondering what she was staring at until I realized that she was simply staring at the pond. So I turned to face the pond wondering why it warranted so much attention and realized that its surface was completely covered by some aquatic plant. Before I knew it Asún was up to her knees in the murky waters ready to tackle the giant aquatic canopy.

"It doesn't belong here," I thought I heard her whisper.

She reached for one of the tentacles and pulled, but the plant was too strong for her. Everything was so lush and overgrown that it was connected. I thought she asked me for help so I took my sneakers off, put my feet in the muck, reached for one of the rosettes and pulled. "Dori needs it," I heard her say. "Don't break it!"

Unfortunately, I broke it the first time, only managing to tear out the top part of the plant. A giant black beetle emerged from the plant.

"Pull it from the roots," she instructed me. "Dori needs the entire plant, intact."

So I pulled with all my strength, so hard that I fell back and even managed to displace part of the entire mass of vegetation. It was difficult to decide whether this was one entity or a million entities. What I held in my hand was nude, unfinished, aborted. Long, strong roots, spiny flesh-colored seeds the size of a lime, shiny flesh-colored stems, much like arms that branched out to fingers and more fingers. It was like something that had not yet been born, or that had been kept inside after it was born. For some strange reason, it reminded me of my little sister, and suddenly I loved it.

Just as suddenly, it thundered loudly. I heard it but Asún didn't notice. She simply made me understand that before we took the plant home we had to leave

something in its place because you never take something from the woods without leaving something else in exchange. It was weird because the first thought that came to mind was leaving my physical body there, trading myself for the plant, but then I reached into my pocket for the broken iPod that I tossed into the invaded pond. Immediately, a little box turtle emerged from the pond; it was covered with leeches.

I was so focused on the moment and the thundering that I didn't hear a car pulling in the un-manicured driveway. Before I knew it we were being confronted by the mad neighbor Iris who had undoubtedly spotted us from the road and felt compelled to tell us that we had no business here.

"It's not that I have anything against you kids, but you don't belong here," she said. "I've worked hard for what I have so I have no tolerance for pollution. This is a writer's place, an artist's place, a place for successful professionals and people like you have no right to be here, polluting our landscapes, our waters, our dumps, our sound, our air, our vision! There is a code and it must be followed!"

She threatened to call the police. Of course, Asún couldn't care less about her threats, but I was scared to death. I didn't want to have no business with the police, so I bolted and ran all the way back to Dori's house with the plant in my hand. Unfortunately, Iris got there before me and by the time I got there she was telling Dori about how she caught me and "the little retarded girl" trespassing.

As usual, all encounters with the mad neighbor Iris turned into a shouting match. As usual, Iris was overflowing with complaints, how this dump of ours was a crime against nature that was bringing all the other property values down. She accused Dori of "working the system" and assured her that she would see to it personally that this didn't go on. "I'll denounce you to the authorities!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "And now I have to go deal with the racetrack!" she added, as if we were the ones responsible for the loud racetrack that the weekend people despised and the locals patronized.

So much for living in the country! At least I knew that Dori wasn't about to beat me up because I was pulling an alien weed out of the neighbor's pond. What I did know was that my efforts had been in vain because what we had pulled out was not enough. In order to perform magic, Dori needed the entire plant and that included the little white flower that bloomed in the springtime. We would have to wait an entire year.

The winter was harsh, and sad. Our pipes froze and it was so cold that we all moved into the little white house. Bottini fuel didn't care if we lived or if we died so

long as we paid the bill on time, so we spent many evenings huddled up against the fireplace with our backs frozen. Dinner was always breakfast and school was only a place where I could take off my oversized down jacket. The neighbor Iris came every Sunday to deliver a threatening sermon. There was no depth to life and I wanted to get high but I was too scared of Dori to risk it. Oh, there were plenty of things to huff, Windex included. And it wasn't as if she'd beat me. But I didn't dare, simply because it felt like betrayal.

I didn't realize I had expectations until March when a remedial teacher at the school asked me if I missed my folks. Not wanting to lose my place in the text, I put my finger on the word Kaatskill (because we were reading Rip Van Winkle) and looked up.

What I wanted to say was that my mother misspelled my name. I was to be *ESteven* on all dotted lines. She also messed up my little sister's name. Lizabet was missing the big *E* that went to me, and also a softening *b* after the final *t*. Child number three was Catering, born in Kingston, New York, in 1999. Nothing to do with food service, just as we puzzled over the fleas on Mary's little lamb being white as snow, *Ca-te-ring* was how my mother interpreted the name Catherine: short *a*, no such thing as *th*, short *e*, short *i*, and an excess *g*. At least Catering left this world before realizing that she was nothing but a phonetic mishap, a bleep in the Hudson Valley.

What I said instead was that the flower of the Trapa Natans would bloom soon, very soon. At long last Dori would be able to perform magic. It was with someone else's voice that I spoke. So I realized who Dori was and understood why I had followed Asún through the tall grass, all the way to the invaded pond.

"What's Trapa Natans?" the remedial teacher asked.

"An invasive aquatic plant," I said, sounding intelligent for the first time in my life.

When May came and the Trapa Natans bloomed, I went to the pond without Asún who was too busy helping Dori prepare the altar for Osaín. The minute I got there I swear on my soul that I saw. It was a head covered with hair that smelled like something canned that had gone bad. It had feet sticking out of its ears. It was hanging from a branch of the ironwood tree next to the pond, and it laughed just before it changed shape. I also saw maggots, but I soon realized that these weren't maggots: these were entities created by the shadows and fear. The spirits were everywhere; *nganga* against *nganga*, energy against energy. I looked up and again I

saw Osáin, the master of the woods, this time flying. I saw him turn, and approach. He came and sat in my head and started licking the tumors of my soul. Before I knew it I was drinking the blood of a stray dog and eating roaches. I rolled on a dead deer carcass. I became an old man, and then a little boy. I could hear the ants and the butterflies and the mad neighbor's car approaching. I was embraced by the thorn bush. I could see Iris, confused, wondering, and so eager to protect property values and the natural environment. She could have sworn she had seen someone but she could not see me. Osáin got right in her face and bit her lip. She thought he was a bug, so she swatted him. He swerved and flew away laughing.

“Soon there will be nowhere left to go,” Iris yelled at the pond.

By then I had the entire plant in my possession and nothing to leave in its place. I had surrendered my iPod the year before and my guitar was back in the trailer, taking on a life of its own. Again, the thought of leaving my physical body there in exchange for the plant crossed my mind, but I left the mad neighbor Iris instead, mine to give away.