

Creative Writing Contest 2023
It Was Don Goyo's Fault by Sandra Dymerski
Creative Nonfiction – 1st Place

December 17, 2000

It's getting cold, and the floor rumbles under my feet. I feel like I am walking on the belly of a sleeping, hungry giant. It's strange to walk in this desolate place, next to this stranger who's telling me about his life in a different language. Thankfully, with his dictionary we can communicate better. Without it, I would not have understood that he loves doing these things. A sudden feeling of fear comes to me. I suddenly realized that every step is more dangerous. We must turn around and return soon; we are far away. I no longer see the sun. It seems that we are approaching the mouth of the giant. I feel danger, the darkness, the fierceness, and I begin to feel nervous. "We should go back," I said to this stranger. What am I doing here anyways? If we get stuck here, then what in the world will I do? I thought. I begin to think about possible dangerous outcomes. Why didn't I think of them before?! Impulsive.

I didn't think this guy who intimidated me so much would be so nice. I had seen him once before, five months ago. He showed up one day at my work; he was all business, serious, formal, and his height of almost two meters imposed on all those who stood in front of him. His physique reminded me of the legends of those cold and distant places I had read about as a child. His dirty blond hair, red beard and mysterious colored eyes that seemed to reflect the dark green of the pines made me imagine a frigid ocean in them, deep and distant. I thought of him wearing a helmet with horns and a bearskin, disembarking from a huge ship made of different types of wood and a sculpture carved on the bow of his ship resembling the head of a fierce dragon. Impulsive.

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This guy can crush me with just one of his gigantic hands, easily double the size of mine. There is no one else near, no one around us. We are completely isolated from civilization, at a place where nobody visits lately, except the insane. Fortunately, my mother knows where I am, although I am three hours away from her and nothing guarantees that an incident or accident will not take place. What the hell was I thinking when I opened my mouth and said, "I can go with you if you want. I know that area." I did not think the Korean would abandon me and leave me at the mercy of this "Viking."

My Mexican fellows call me "La Coreanita" because my eyes are kind of small, but according to the Koreans I am too big to be like a Korean woman, and I guess it is true. The wives of these men look like beautiful teenagers despite their mature age. I've never been that small and not even by starving myself could get to that size. Neither could I get used to their traditions. Me, cutting their "bulgogi" meat so that they can cook the pieces on the small, elevated grill at the center of the table in the restaurant? Me, serving soju to each of the men every time they finished the contents of their glass while talking and laughing? Me, walking one meter behind them? Ha! My Mexican blood can cause a rebellion, but yes, I have done it. Why? Because it is interesting to learn about other cultures. If they did not pay me for cutting their steak at lunchtime or pay for my lunch, I probably would not have done it. I like to learn new things.

I remember when I saw HIM for the second time after five months, and my boss Kim told me with a Korean accent, "Take us to buy gifts for Christmas, since you know the city." We went to several stores, but the most interesting one had artisan made goods. There were ceramics, masks simulating Aztec gods, hand-carved wooden pieces, embroidered napkins, and

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animal figures of colorful blown glass. I felt so proud and interested in every item at that store.

For the first time I saw all that talent from the eyes of a foreigner, as I was accompanying two of them from different nationalities. I was appreciating the beauty of Mexican creativity in the colors, symbols, and all of the culture and history in each piece made by artisans. After they bought their Christmas gifts, I sat in the back of the car and they sat in the front. I was sunk in my thoughts as I was watching the “gringuito” driving. He looked very serious, very composed as he was driving. I noticed he had an aristocratic profile; his nose seemed to be of a duke or a prince. We parked and I followed behind them to an American restaurant, fulfilling my role as the good “Korean woman” employee. All that shopping at several different stores stoked our appetites. The “Viking” ordered French onion soup. “What the heck is that?” I mumbled to myself. Finally, when the food arrived, he noticed my curiosity about his dark broth full of onions with cheese and a slice of bread floating on his plate. “Do you want to try?” He offered. I nodded; curiosity won. Impulsive.

A couple of hours later, my boss and I were waiting for our respective taxis at the hotel where Tony, the American guy was staying. While watching TV, Tony mentioned that a volcano nearby was throwing fumaroles. “It is active now,” he exclaimed.” In reality, it has been active for many years, and from time to time that specific volcano likes to get attention. Its massiveness makes it look majestic with its often-formed snow crowns, due to its height of more than 10,500 feet (about 3.2 km). On a cloudless day, without so much pollution, it can be seen from Mexico City approximately 45 miles away. “I’m going to go see it tomorrow,” blurted Tony enthusiastically.

“How are you going to get there from here?” I asked curiously.

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"I will drive the company carpool, the same I drove today," he replied.

"You're going to drive about three hours and cross Mexico City from here?" I inquired, impressed and a little concerned. I thought it would be an excursion among some foreigners who were visiting the city, including my boss, Kim. Maybe they will invite me. I love taking foreigners to cool places and being the tourist guide showing the beauty of my country. "Who will you go with?" I asked.

"Probably just me," he replied. At that moment I began to feel even more concerned for this guy, who did not realize what it is to drive through Mexico City, especially with that Viking appearance of his. Driving through one of the largest cities of the world can be exciting, fun, and dangerous. Around twenty something million Mexicans live there; most are good, hard-working people, but there is also a great concentration of thieves as in any huge metropolis. I imagined he had never been there before, and just then I said, "I can go with you" thinking that both he and Kim wanted to go. "I can be your guide."

He excitedly told me, "Yeah, that would be great!" And then my boss declined the invitation to climb the great volcano Popocatépetl.

On Sunday morning, I did not want to get up; it was freezing outside. On the outskirts of Toluca, a mountainous area over 2.59 km above sea level, the houses are made of cinder blocks and cement. It takes a few hours before the sun warms up them and the atmosphere. In the early mornings the temperature can get below freezing during part of the winter. White, frozen dew would cover the grass and slowly the ice would disappear with the peak of the sunrise. The natives from the Toluca area are accustomed to the extreme temperatures of December, and everybody around knows that during this month you have to

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get all the blankets you can find for the cruel, cold nights. Still, by noon the sun can burn your skin while hanging your washed clothes to dry.

Tony was picking me up at 9:00 am, but my belly was hurting, and I did not want to get up. Maybe my gut was trying to tell me something, but I dragged myself out of the bed anyway. I ran out with a piece of sweet bread in my mouth and kissed my mom on the cheek goodbye, saying, "I'll see you later mommy," oblivious to the future that awaited me.

We reached the famous mountain and began to climb little by little; we walked slowly due to uneven ground. We talked using the dictionary from time to time. I had a Mexican-Korean accent and, Tony was pretty confused. I showed him where the "garrbeechee" was after he blew his nose.

"The what?" he asked me, handing me his dictionary. I looked until I found the word garbage.

"Here it is," I pointed, and he began to laugh, realizing what I meant to say. It was very pleasant to hang out with him. I found out that he liked to hike and that he had a certain fascination with volcanoes. At the end of the day, we were able to converse nicely, and I realized that he was not a Nordic ogre.

Monday after work, I heated up a Maruchan in the microwave for dinner. I felt a little tired from the previous day's hike, so I lay in my parent's king size bed to watch TV while eating my hot soup. As I was listening to the news, I almost choked when images of a volcano erupting appeared on the screen. About 120 miles away from my house, "Don Goyo" * is spitting ash up and around him. The image on the TV captured the dawn darkness with the

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brightness of the flying substance as if it were fireworks. This looked so close and real that my heart started racing. I could not help but think of my own image running through the forest of that volcanic mountain trying to evade those burning balls. This guy Tony, whom I went hiking the day before, came to my mind. I thought of calling him to let him know, so I dialed the phone number he gave me, and after the fourth ring, his deep voice answered from his home in Michigan. He had just gotten home after a long flight back.

“No way!” he replied after I explained what I saw on the news a few minutes before. It was just a few hours after we'd been there. I thought about the difference between living and dying can be decided by just being at the right place and moment.

It was the fault of "Don Goyo" that we stayed in touch with each other after that hike, the impact of the explosion one day after we hiked. It was so impressive to us that we started sending emails to each other, daily information about the volcano, photographs and articles from the Internet about that event that made our lives take a turn. That connection became a friendship and to date, that friendship has reached beyond my own imagination. We climbed Mount Saint Helens and saw its crater still active; we descended to the Great Canyon and traveled together, sharing our lives. We are currently building our house, a house made by our own hands. It's a very slow process but full of satisfaction, fatigue, despair, support, and the love of four instead of two. Impulsive.

*"Don Goyo" is the nickname natives gave the beautiful volcano Popocatepetl located in Morelos, Mexico.