

Four
by
Four

A NOVEL SARA MESA

Translated by Katie Whitemore

Forn by Forn

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PART ONE

NEVER MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED

CELIA

The contour of the landscape curves, fades, and descends before dissolving in the distance. We are there, at the end, paused and panting under the motionless sky. It's February and still cold. The air cuts off our breath, attacks Teeny's lungs. She's been sick for weeks.

We've never made it this far. Our sneakers are soaked from walking in the muddy grass, avoiding the roads.

We wait for Teeny to catch up and then reconvene.

"Should we have breakfast now?" Valen asks.

Her chubby cheeks tremble. Valen is always hungry. The rest of us protest. It's not time to eat. We only stopped to decide where to go from here, from now. There's no time to waste; we'll eat later, while we walk. Or we won't eat at all.

We have two options: climb the hill until we reach the highway or follow the slope down and try to find the river. Though river is probably an exaggeration. Memory summons to mind a brown thread—a creek, at best—but not its exact location. None of us have been through here in years.

"I say we head for the highway. Then we can hitchhike wherever somebody will take us." Marina sounds braver than she acts. We're not convinced.

I speak up. “Hitchhike? Are you crazy? They’d bring us right back.”

“The river’s safer,” Cristi says.

“But we don’t know where it is!” says Marina.

Cristi shrugs. Valen tries again, reaching for her backpack. “We could eat while we decide.”

“What do you think, Teeny?” I ask.

She looks up. Squints. The lenses of her glasses are fogged over. She coughs again. She coughs and blinks endlessly. Her nose runs. She’s full of fluid, Teeny is. I don’t even wait for her to respond. I speak for her: “Teeny doesn’t care what we do as long as we do it quick. Sitting around in this cold is going to kill her.”

“I think she should eat something,” Valen says.

“Shut up, you greasy fatass,” Cristi says.

They fight. First, with insults. Then they throw themselves on the wet ground and roll around, theatrically, half-heartedly. Marina goads them. It’s not clear whose side she’s on. Teeny and I wait. She thinks about nothing and I try to think about everything.

It doesn’t matter. I see them coming in the 4x4, up the narrow, dusty path. They’re coming toward us and there we are, stopped, as stopped as time. I get a rush: anticipating a lecture from the Booty or punishment from the Headmaster makes me feel better.

A quail chirps in the distance. Valen and Cristi get up, brush off their clothes, and look me in the eye. Neither one speaks, but I know they both blame me.

IGNACIO

Wybrany College, seven o’clock in the evening. Ten, twelve boys in gym clothes hang around to see what’s happening. Silence has filled the courtyard at the entrance to the school. Night is falling and Héctor enters escorted by his parents, the Head, and the Advisor. He walks past the boys, glancing up and looking at Ignacio. At him, only him. The look is unmistakable, direct.

Ignacio trembles. The crunch of steps on the gravel lingers. He observes the back of Héctor, his head of full, blond hair, the smooth nape of his neck.

Only when he’s roughly shaken does he realize that they’ve been grumbling in his ear the whole time, and he hasn’t heard a thing.

“I’m talking to you, man, can’t you hear me?”

Ignacio nods, craning slightly toward the door through which the New Kid has disappeared.

The mother—the woman he assumes is the mother—is outside, closing her umbrella. She has slender calves and iridescent stockings beaded with drizzle. Lux watches her, too, his head cocked and back arched, ready to flee at the slightest movement.

It’s November 1st. Ignacio’s birthday: twelve years old and finally the prospect of a friend to protect him.

“I said, what do you think of him?” the other boy insists.

“What do I know? I just saw him.”

“But he looks queer, right?”

“Yeah. Queer.”

Ignacio senses the light is different, more yellow, or hazy. He can’t watch Héctor and listen at the same time, but they keep at him and their insistence becomes a command.

“Why queer?” the other boy presses.

“What do you mean, why? You’re the one who said it.”

“Yeah, but why did you say it, too? What do you know about that?”

A rueful smile breaks on Ignacio’s face. Caught again, he thinks, but who cares, he’ll finally have a friend to protect him. The New Kid is tall, he’s strong, and out of all the faces there in the courtyard, he chose to look at Ignacio’s.

He hears the girls’ laughter from the other side of the wall, a restless laughter, musical. He longs for girls, but only as classmates.

“Because he laughs like a girl.”

“Oh, so you’ve heard him laugh?”

“Yeah, before. When he got here.”

“Really? Where?”

He frees himself from the arm that grabs him.

“I don’t know, before. Let go of me, I have to get to class.”

“Class? Classes are over.”

“Just let me go,” he begs.

“Cripple, sissy, fucking fag,” the other boy says, releasing him.

Ignacio hobbles away in his raised shoe with the lift. Laughter screeches at his back.

Real or imagined, Ignacio hears it all the time.

HÉCTOR’S ORIGINS

But the New Kid’s origins go back to some time before, to weeks before, days before; not that time matters much in this place, where the days are so like one another. They accumulate, piling up, creating a sense of continuity, movement, or the evolution of something.

It’s important to note, perhaps, that Héctor isn’t present on this occasion. Just his mother, or the woman who looks like the mother, and the father—him, for sure—in the Headmaster’s office. They are joined by the assistant headmistress of school, alias “the Booty.”

The office doesn’t seem like an office. It’s more like a magnificent living room, with its crystal chandeliers and perfectly-worn Persian rugs—vulgar, if they’re too new—and gleaming floor-to-ceiling windows, the glass spotless and free of flies.

Seated in leather armchairs around a low table, they speak for a long time with the particular stiffness to which they are accustomed.

The Booty—a real beauty, in another time—discreetly keeps her distance. Only when necessary does she add an opportune fact, blinking before she speaks. In general, such facts relate to fees, services, and requirements, details of which the Headmaster is ignorant, given that he delegates this minutia to her.

The tone of the conversation is sickly-sweet, good manners, slightly soured.

The office smells like cologne. Which one? Impossible to say. A mix of various scents: those worn by the people now present, and by those who are absent. The people who sat where they are now, finalizing the details of their progeny’s matriculation.

The scent of the elite, one could say if it weren’t an oversimplification, since that isn’t exactly the case. But one couldn’t claim the opposite is true, either.

“You do realize we’re making an exception . . .”

“We know, we know,” Héctor’s father says.

He moves his hands to accentuate his words, like he did when he was a government minister. Unnecessary rhetorical emphasis.

“It will be more expensive—due to the exception, you understand—still, you insist this is what you want?”

“Yes, we insist. It’s absolutely critical.”

“Though it won’t be easy for us, getting rid of the boy,” the woman adds.

“*Getting rid of* isn’t quite the right expression,” the father says. His eyes flash. He looks at his wife and she goes quiet.

The Booty smiles at them both. They shouldn’t feel uncomfortable, she says, language betrays us all. Parents undeniably feel a sense of relief when they enroll their children at the college; it happens to everyone. Bringing up a child is complicated, an act of responsibility demanding extreme dedication. There’s nothing wrong with leaving a piece of it in the hands of experts.

“Héctor is a brilliant boy,” the woman continues, speaking cautiously now. “Very intelligent, headstrong, a bit mischievous, maybe. He always finds a way to make his uniform unique somehow: a patch, a hole, a button pinned somewhere. As you know, he needs to do things his way.”

“Ah, but that’s good,” the Headmaster says. “That’s very good. It speaks of character, strength of character, manliness. We don’t go overboard on rules here. Strict on the fundamentals, flexible on incidentals. Our educational methods are liberal, they’re based in absolute freedom. Will you have some . . .” He turns to look at Lux, the cat, who has just slipped through the bars on the window, “. . . coffee?”

They drink from little porcelain cups, served with biscuits they barely nibble. Then they settle the rest: the registration, monthly payments, additional installments. The visitors express their surprise that rooms are shared, but nod sensibly at the explanation.

“At this age, boys on their own are hard to control,” says the Booty. “This way they keep an eye on each other. It’s not to their benefit to be alone in their free time.”

“Obviously, some boarding schools make private rooms a mainstay of their appeal,” the Headmaster continues, “precisely because they have nothing else to offer. Special menus, the latest technology, professional sports facilities, blah, blah, blah . . . They’re only focused on the superfluous aspects. We guarantee a sufficient level of material comfort. Not excellent, perhaps, but sufficient. But we also guarantee an extraordinarily high-quality education, which goes far beyond academics. We do not impose discipline: the children impose it on themselves. Rigorous, not rigid. Firm, not harsh. Personalities are sculpted, polished until they shine. The country’s best have passed through here. We know how to shape the best.”

He carefully cleans his beard with a napkin and waits for a reaction. The couple smiles. They are notably, visibly relaxed.

An agreement has been reached.