

SHORT STORY

Lengths, Depths

by Herman Kringlund



"Going to the Unknown" by Vilim Žlender

Guillermo sat leaning against the house wall and pretended to read as Julieta came walking down the gravelled main street of Guataca. She carried an old gunnysack. She always did when she came to see him, but this afternoon it wasn't empty.

"Hey there, Einstein," Julieta said. "Ready to go?"

Guillermo shut the book.

"Ever heard of a bookmark?"

"I'll remember the page," he said. "Wait here."

As Guillermo went inside the house, Señora Téllez came out to the veranda.

"Good afternoon, Juli," she said. "Headed out again?"

Julieta glanced at the gunnysack. "It's necessary."

"It ought to be. Ever since Guillermo's first meeting with *ustedes* he's been going on and on about climate change and our Caribbean Sea and the turtles and plastic straws. Is it true what he says, that if I use a plastic straw it could end up inside a turtle?"

"It is true, Señora Téllez," Julieta said and looked proud. "Likely in its nose. And if it does, you'll need a pair of pliers to pull it out."

"*Que horrible*," the woman said to herself, shaking her head.

"But it's not just straws, and not just turtles, all kinds of animals suffer from all kinds of human waste."

Guillermo, now carrying a backpack, came out from the house. The dust whirled as he leaped off the veranda onto the gravelled street. "I'll sleep in Burichaca tonight," he said.

"You just make sure to get there before it gets dark, my little prince. And you'll be back here *before* breakfast tomorrow."

"Mom..."

"*El Príncipe* is in good hands," Julieta said and laid her hand on his shoulder. "My uncle awaits us in Burichaca."

They began walking down the street and Señora Téllez smiled as her eyes followed them and they became smaller, and smaller.

"What's the little prince reading?" Julieta said just before they were to take off to the trail leading to the sea.

Guillermo wrinkled his nose. “Nonfiction,” he said and looked at her, making his best face. “Nonfiction and it’s about marine recycling.”

“How advanced! And look at you, using such words. *Nonfiction.*”

“Got to stay sharp, you know. Next month is the annual meeting.”

Julieta stopped to look at him.

Guillermo couldn’t resist lifting the corners of his mouth.

“Are you telling me that you’re coming with us to Santa Clara?”

“If you’ll let me.”

She hugged him. “Guillermo! I can’t believe you’re already so committed to this!”

Julieta grabbed hold of his hand and led him onto the narrow trail. It was shaded by leafy bushes and parrot-green coconut trees making the sand feel cool and soft under their feet.

Arriving at the beach, Julieta let go of Guillermo’s hand and disappeared into the bushes.

Guillermo walked out to the shoreline. Looking west, there were the green and brown mountains — the sun still hovering above their peaks — gracing the whole coastline until the sierra made a turn by the point of the great cape. To the east and much closer, there was the small cape with the leaning palm trees, still alit in the afternoon sun. Blue sea, white sand, green trees and turquoise sky stacked on top of each other made it look like a colourful layer cake. Some tanned fishermen stood spread out along the white layer of the cape.

“To the west — empty,” Guillermo said, having entered the bushes. “To the east there’s the fishermen, but they can’t see us from there.”

“Good,” Julieta said, standing on her knees in the sand, spreading out the interior of the gunnysack.

Among burlap weave and grains of sand laid a package wrapped in a blanket. Slowly, Julieta began to unwrap it, first a blanket, then a towel, and finally, unveiled on the fabric, a green glass bottle with a white label and a red screw cap.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” she said and handed him the bottle.

Guillermo screwed the cap off to smell it. “Of course. People drink it during fancy dinners. They make it in Chile and Argentina; you really don’t even have to go to Santa Clara to —”

“Read the back.”

Produced in France.

Guillermo immediately put the cap back on and handed the bottle to Julieta.

“Where did you get this?”

“Well, where could someone like me gotten hold of something like this?” Julieta said and put her index finger on her chin. “Ever drank wine?”

“No. Never.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t begin with... or, well, if you don’t like it, you won’t like anything else you can find out here either. And if you like it... well, then that’s good.”

Guillermo dropped his backpack on the sand. He unzipped it and dug out the package of cigarettes and the lighter. He threw them on the towel, next to the bottle.

“I thought you’d bring beer,” he said. “Like that time at the waterfall.”

“Cigarettes and wine go together like cookies and milk. Have you never seen a European film?”

Julieta took a cigarette out of the package and tossed her long, wavy, black hair to the side and put it behind her exposed ear. “Well done, Prince.”

Guillermo wrinkled his nose again.

“If I do this...” he said and snatched the cigarette from her ear. “And then this...”

He lit it, drew in smoke, blew out.

“...and then this...”

He fetched the bottle, screwed the cap off and drank, doing it all fast to quell the cough he felt coming. His Adam’s apple bobbed as the tender, yet sourly strong gulp of red wine ran down through the tobaccoey aftertaste in his throat.

“...will you stop calling me Prince then?” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Did you like it?” Julieta said with her head tilted.

“Incredible flavours,” Guillermo said, making that best face of his.

Julieta rose and stood up right in front of Guillermo. She took the bottle out of his hand and drank.

“Have you ever been so drunk that you felt sick the day after?” she said and returned the bottle.

“Of course I have. But on cococho.”

Guillermo drank and handed the bottle back to her.

“You won’t be feeling this tomorrow,” Julieta said and then she drank.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Guillermo said and took the bottle from her again, and drank.

For a while they stood face to face, exchanging brave words to the hollow sound of the wine splashing inside the bottle. Then they stopped, suddenly realizing that the sunlight that now shone on them was the last of the day. It beamed into the bushes and glowed in Julieta’s dark pupils, and Guillermo could see his reflection in them.

Then she started blinking rapidly yet softly the way she always did when she had been looking at something or someone for a while, and the timid wind made her short sundress tickle his thighs and her long black hair danced along her round cheeks. She blinked even faster with her long eyelashes and now Julieta really stood there in front of him and burned in the disappearing light of the sun and there was no one or nothing that could change that and nowhere to go and no one that could see them or say anything to anyone else now that she blinked faster and just burned burned burned and if no one grabbed hold of her arms she would fly away blinking with the wind and if no one let their hands sink down into hers she would burn out and if no one kissed her she would —

Julieta flinched. Guillermo withdrew his hands in horror.

“It’s the wine,” he blamed.

A warm smile spread like melting sugar on Julieta’s face.

“It’s a good wine,” she said, then turned around abruptly and walked out of the bushes.

Guillermo packed the bottle and the towels, took the gunnysack and followed her out to the beach. He cleared his throat. “While we’re here we might as well pick some up.”

“Of course. We’ll pick up the most evident ones,” Julieta said, reaching for an empty glass bottle. “Imagine the scenes if we arrived in Burichaca empty-handed.”

“No, that would look no good. Maybe the fishermen would be wondering too.”

So the boy and the girl walked eastwards along the shoreline. The sea was calm; it came and receded peacefully over their feet. They filled the sack with plastic cups, bottles, take-away boxes made of polystyrene, fishing lines and even a torn rubber boot. The wet sand made the trash heavier.

“Think that’ll be enough?” Guillermo said after a while and held the gunnysack up for Julieta to inspect.

“I think so. The wine bottle will go in there too.”

Now they were so close to the small cape that the fishermen could distinguish them if they wanted to. Julieta got behind Guillermo and opened his backpack.

“Turn around now without moving and then take a long sip,” Julieta said and pulled out the long bottle. “So long that you can float, and then we’ll go in the water.”

“And I forgot to bring dry clothes.”

“Well, then you’ll have to settle with some handwashing.”

Julieta smirked because she knew, and now she would be able to prove what she had known for a long time. She took the blanket out and laid it out over the sand, drank from the wine bottle and gave it back to Guillermo. Then, right in front of him, she got out of her short sundress and dropped it softly onto the blanket. In bikini, thin ankle bracelets twisted in different colours and black, wavy hair all the way down to her pelvic bone, she stepped out into the sea, knowing perfectly well that he, in one way or another, would follow her.

Julieta Mondragón dove into a peaceful wave. Emerged, having shaken her hair and opened her eyes, she could see Guillermo Téllez wade towards her. He dipped himself swiftly, down and up again, and then he kept wading through the sea with his soaked beige shorts glued to his thighs. Once again now under the surface. Then up again, turned towards each other, looking into each other’s eyes, the cascade dripping from Guillermo’s fringe. Now the sun was below the western mountains, its light irradiating the cumulus clouds above the peaks and the whole bay reflecting the sky like cooling fiery glass. Guillermo and Julieta disappeared under the surface again, because under the surface one has to look, listen, and speak using different means, and under the surface secrets are kept secret.

Once back up on the beach Julieta wrung out her hair and Guillermo his shorts. Then they kept walking. For Guillermo, distances had begun to feel longer, as if the small cape was much further away than it had first seemed. For Julieta, the tilt of the beach had created imbalance, and the breeze that had formed goose bumps on her cinnamon-toned skin now felt warm.

There was only one fisherman left on the cape now, and he tossed lines, coils, hooks, and knives into his bucket and stood up.

“Oh, that’s Pacho,” Julieta said.

“Do you know him?”

“The cousin of my uncle.”

Pacho walked towards them. He waved his whole arm like a windshield wiper when he saw their faces.

“Do you think he’ll realize?” Guillermo whispered. “Do you think he’ll tell someone?”

Julieta grinned and rubbed her hand through Guillermo’s wet hair.

“Juli!” Pacho kissed her cheek. “Are you out here saving the world again?”

“It’s necessary,” Julieta said and glanced at the gunnysack.

“Look at this,” Pacho said and held up his bucket. “I took your advice and got rid of the plastic bags. I don’t want them to end up in the sea and kill the reef sharks and the barracudas.”

“Happy to hear that, uncle Pacho. The animals can mistake the bags for food.”

“*Que horrible*. And I’ve been using thousands of plastic bags in my life,” the fisherman said, shaking his head.

He looked at Guillermo. “Your boyfriend?”

Julieta looked at Guillermo. He was looking up at Pacho’s notched face. A short silence, then Pacho dragged his fish-scale-stained thumb along Guillermo’s black and blue lower lip. He squinted at his thumbprint.

“You kids sure don’t drink cococho no more!” Pacho said and laughed. “Well, it’s dinner time now, got eleven mojarras in here.” He held up his bucket again.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the sancocho,” Julieta said.

“*Ojalá*. And by the way, don’t go swimming again. I’ve felt *las corrientes malas* all afternoon. The fish have too.”

They watched as the fisherman plodded off towards the silhouettes of the mountains.

“He’s so nice, isn’t he?” Julieta said.

“Very,” Guillermo said and rubbed his lips against his upper arm.

And so Julieta did the only thing a girl or woman has to do to heal a bruised male ego — kissed his cheek.

They walked straight ahead now, aiming for the point of the cape. The sky beyond the cumulus clouds had darkened. Guillermo stopped to light a cigarette. They tasted really good now, as if every new cigarette he smoked was the first and only of the day.

As he walked behind the wine-drinking, dancing Julieta with her long hair wet and perfect and windingly tossing, he thought about the first time they had been paired together in the same picking team. It was the third meeting with the organization that his school had assigned to him as a part of his graduation project.

“Then we have the northern half of the San Lorenzo-trail. Julieta will be responsible for that today along with... let’s see... Guillermo Téllez from the School of Guataca.”

Julieta? The speech-girl? This will be one long lecture. Guillermo laughed at himself thinking about it, because the first thing Julieta had told him on the San Lorenzo-trail had not been about international corporations or recycling, but her opinion on the chairman and his ‘ridiculous’ haircut. Shortly thereafter they started making their own, unofficial picking rounds, and during each round — that Julieta, despite all her jokes, took very seriously — she told him more and bolder things, showed him more and more exciting things and always brought something with her. And after each picking round, Guillermo felt a strong motivation to learn — or at least giving the appearance of it — something new to show her the next time, and after each day gilded by her presence, he lost sleep at night thinking about what he would say to her when they met again.

At the cape’s point, where the palm trees were leaning out over the sea, there laid a washed-up piece of driftwood that Julieta sat down on. She sat there and glanced out over the bay and the western mountains. Guillermo put the gunnysack and the backpack in the sand and sat down next to her.

They sat in silence for a while. Spontaneous yet comfortable silence. Was it because of the view, the wine, the time of the day and the time in their lives? Was it because of the fact that no one can prevent days from passing and that no one can know when or if something alike will ever happen again? Perhaps it was so simple, that silence sometimes is the best way to say what one isn’t able to say with words, because it remained silent as Julieta shifted her hip and laid her head on Guillermo’s shoulder, and silence remained as he threw his arm around her and buried his nose in her wet hair and for the first time in his life scented what a man can remember for the rest of his days.

The sunset had almost burned out. Their skin felt warm against each other.

“It’s quite beautiful,” Guillermo said.

“It is.”

A pelican flew across the bay.

“I just wish that I had something better to say about it,” Guillermo said.

“You don’t always have to have that much to say.” Julieta stroked her head against Guillermo’s shoulder.

He closed his eyes. Then it was difficult to balance, and had Julieta not been there, had he not been holding her, had she not existed, he would’ve fallen off the driftwood. He listened

to the sounds of the waves carefully massaging the beach. That's that wave. Alive and living. Where does it go afterwards? Is there a wave-cemetery somewhere? Maybe it is reborn at once out there in the bay. Maybe it doesn't die just because it doesn't exist anymore. Or maybe each wave doesn't have its own life and neither the bay, and they're just the same loose hanging ocean fat wobbling here like it does on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro and Valparaiso.

"What are you thinking about?" Julieta said.

"Nothing really. Is there any wine left?"

Julieta handed him the bottle. Guillermo drank the last few drops and it nearly made him gag, but he managed to conceal it. He held the bottle upside down over the sand.

"Will they beat you?" Guillermo said.

"By the time they realize one is missing I'm already an adult living in Santa Clara," Julieta said. "But your mom will give you *la chancla*, won't she?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Blame it on me if she says something about it."

Guillermo laughed.

"I mean it. Tell her that the cigarettes disappeared after I had been there."

"My mom would never believe such a thing. She thinks too highly of you."

"I just don't want you to get into trouble."

"Maybe this has been worth trouble," he said and then withdrew as if he had said something inappropriate.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. That it's been good. It's always good with you. I don't know."

Julieta drew a breath under her warm smile as she turned to look at him, and now the night, the months, the picking rounds, the risks they had taken and everything that had led them to the point they now were, could've culminated had Julieta not turned her head to the sea looking horrified all of a sudden.

"I'm so sorry if I said someth—"

"Look!" Julieta said and pointed out to the sea.

"Where?"

“There!”

Guillermo closed one of his eyes and peered along Julieta’s arm. Far out in the sea, approximately at a really long rock throw’s distance, floated a neon orange gas can.

“*¡Que pelotudos!*” Julieta said. “One of the boats must’ve thrown it overboard!”

Guillermo stood up and unbuttoned his shorts.

“What are you doing?” Julieta said.

He threw his shorts on the beach and started running out into the black water.

Julieta shouted something after him, but Guillermo, deaf to her words, just kept running, splashing through the water. He dove and swam against the waves, feeling like he was coming to rescue a drowning person. He crawled, full of energy and confidence, and Julieta stood on the beach in the darkness and shouted after him. Julieta *worried* about him. When he’s coming back with the gas can like a trophy she can say to him what he hasn’t been able to say to her. Julieta is good at saying things. But how far out is that thing, really? Is it moving further away? Maybe it just feels further again, distance. But how easy it is, swimming. Such light strokes. Like cycling in a tailwind. Barely need to swim at all. No, no, no, no, no, no.

Guillermo stopped, trying to feel the bottom of the sea, just to find his feet kicking around in the darkness. He was pulled forward.

“Swim sideways!” Julieta shouted from the beach.

He tried, but as he was pulled further and further out, panic crept onto him and his breathing began to be so irregular that breaths barely gave him the strength he needed to stay afloat, even less to swim.

“Swim! Swim you fucking idiot!”

But Guillermo could only look at Julieta. He was no longer able to breathe at all and the bay, the mountains and the dark sky were no longer water, mountains, or sky but all just the same plain nothing.

His ears could hear her scream, but the rest of his body had stopped listening. He thought he heard a motorboat somewhere. Guillermo suddenly got calm as he began to sink, because surely life wouldn’t be so bad that it ran out of a person like this. The last thing he saw before his eyes sank under the surface was Julieta swimming out towards him. “Mom will kill me,” he thought, and then the scent of Julieta’s wet hair filled his fading mind.