

Martín Espada

Isabel's Corrido

Para Isabel

Francisca said: *Marry my sister so she can stay in the country.*
I had nothing else to do. I was twenty-three and always cold, skidding in cigarette-coupon boots from lamppost to lamppost through January in Wisconsin. Francisca and Isabel washed bed sheets at the hotel, sweating in the humidity of the laundry room, conspiring in Spanish.

I met her the next day. Isabel was nineteen, from a village where the elders spoke the language of the Aztecs. She would smile whenever the ice pellets of English clattered around her head. When the justice of the peace said *You may kiss the bride*, our lips brushed for the first and only time. The borrowed ring was too small, jammed into my knuckle. There were snapshots of the wedding and champagne in plastic cups.

Francisca said: *The snapshots will be proof for Immigration.*
We heard rumors of the interview: they would ask me the color of her underwear. They would ask her who rode on top. We invented answers and rehearsed our lines. We flipped through Immigration forms at the kitchen table the way other couples shuffled cards for gin rummy. After every hand, I'd deal again.

Isabel would say: *Quiero ver las fotos.* She wanted to see the pictures of a wedding that happened but did not happen, her face inexplicably happy, me hoisting a green bottle, dizzy after half a cup of champagne.

Francisca said: *She can sing corridos*, songs of love and revolution from the land of Zapata. All night Isabel sang corridos in a barroom where no one understood a word. I was the bouncer and her husband, so I hushed the squabbling drunks, who blinked like tortoises in the sun.

Her boyfriend and his beer cans never understood why she married me. Once he kicked the front door down, and the blast shook the house as if a hand grenade detonated in the hallway. When the cops arrived, I was the translator, watching the sergeant watching her, the inscrutable squaw from every Western he had ever seen, bare feet and long black hair.

We lived behind a broken door. We lived in a city hidden from the city. When her headaches began, no one called a doctor. When she disappeared for days, no one called the police. When we rehearsed the questions for Immigration, Isabel would squint and smile. *Quiero ver las fotos*, she would say. The interview was canceled, like a play on opening night shut down when the actors are too drunk to take the stage. After she left, I found her crayon drawing of a bluebird tacked to the bedroom wall.

I left too, and did not think of Isabel again until the night Francisca called to say: *Your wife is dead. Something was growing in her brain.* I imagined my wife who was not my wife, who never slept beside me, sleeping in the ground, wondered if my name was carved into the cross above her head, no epitaph and no corrido, another ghost in a riot of ghosts evaporating from the skin of dead Mexicans who staggered for days without water through the desert.

Thirty years ago, a girl from the land of Zapata kissed me once on the lips and died with my name nailed to hers like a broken door. I kept a snapshot of the wedding; yesterday it washed ashore on my desk.

There was a conspiracy to commit a crime. This is my confession: I'd do it again.