

Pure Thin Bones

Lisa Madsen de Rubilar

JOSÉ LUÍS WAS SICK. That was why Michelle and Renata stopped by to see him on their way home from missionary zone meeting. They walked with Nielsen, his companion, who had gone to the meeting alone and who told them that José Luís was more sick of working than sick with anything else. “But you can come and visit him anyway, if you want; that’s why he’s home in bed,” Nielsen said, “He’d have people sitting around with him and drinking *máte* with him all day if he could. He’d have you holding hands with him next, if you would.” Nielsen looked right at Michelle when he said this, and he laughed. Renata laughed too; but Michelle turned as if she hadn’t heard and watched the wheels of a city bus spin to a halt beside them.

A flash of purple flickered at the edge of her sight; then something hit her, hard, and she fell forward onto the pavement. From her hands and knees she saw the man who had jumped from the doorway of the moving bus take lunging steps off his toes, patting the ground lightly with his fingers at each step. Nielsen grabbed Michelle’s arm just as the man righted himself and looked back at her in astonishment. Then he was jogging on up the street with a gym bag bouncing against his bright purple sweat pants.

“I know that guy,” Renata cried.

“What a pig!” Nielsen said. “He could have at least said I’m sorry.”

“I know him from a dance back home in Santiago.” Renata picked up Michelle’s book bag and handed it to her.

“Are you ok?” Nielsen said. Michelle was rubbing the heels of her hands together, but she started walking fast as Nielsen spoke.

“I’m ok,” she said.

“I wonder what he’s doing here,” Renata said. “He’s a real crazy; that’s why I’d know him anywhere.”

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“A real pig, I’d say,” Nielsen said. Michelle rubbed her hands against her skirt. Her knees hurt, too. She could still see the man who knocked her down loping unevenly along the crowded sidewalk ahead. He was very thin. His gym bag, his thick boots, even his low-slung sweat pants dragged at him terribly. It seemed impossible that a person so fragile could hit with such force. Michelle massaged her shoulder. His bones had been very hard.

“After the dance we were all just talking and sort of milling around. All of a sudden this guy runs to the stage and screams until his neck turns red — like a chicken about to get his head chopped off: ‘Shut up! Fernando’s trying to give the closing prayer.’ Then Fernando’s too embarrassed to even walk out in front. ‘Shut up!’ the guy yells again. ‘So I’ll give the prayer if you won’t do it.’ He folds his arms and shuts his eyes up tight and bellows out a prayer. He says he hopes we get home without sinning and without being hit by a truck. None of us even closed our eyes. We just laughed the whole way through. He’s a real crazy. I’d heard of him before.”

They watched the man in the purple sweats disappear around the next corner.

“What a pig,” Nielsen said.

When they got to the *pensión* where José Luís and Nielsen boarded, Nielsen told Michelle and Renata to wait in the front room. “I’ll go see if Piña’s decent for visitors,” he said.

As he spoke, the *mamita* of the house walked in carrying a basket of rolls in one hand and a pitcher in the other. “Elder Piña’s got one visitor already,” she said, her double chin brimming eagerly over her collar. Then she disappeared into the dining room where they could hear her calling, “And how are you Sisters today?”

“I guess you can come on back, then,” Nielsen said, leading the way down the hall.

He pushed open the bedroom door and walked straight across the room to slam the window up. “Man, what a smell!” he said. When Michelle reached the doorway, she noticed first the heavy odor of Vicks and steamed eucalyptus leaves and then the man in purple sweat pants standing at the foot of the bed. He didn’t turn around as she and Renata edged into the room, or even look over at Nielsen’s loud bustlings by the window. Michelle could see his ribs through his t-shirt. His gym bag dangled down his back supported by a single thread left in the strap.

José Luís was working at folding a pillow in half and stuffing it behind his neck at the right angle. His knees jerked back and forth with the effort, sending his handkerchief and various wads of toilet paper skittering across the sheet. An open wallet jiggled at his side. When he glanced up and saw Renata and Michelle in the doorway, he smiled, his eyes and nose as red as an all-night mourner’s. “Hello hello!” he said. He coughed and snorted into his handkerchief and told them the man at the foot of his bed was his friend.

“Adrian’s from my ward back home in Santiago. He’s following the bike race, the one that’s over a thousand kilometers long. It started in Santiago;

it'll end in Puerto Montt two days from now. Adrian arrives ahead of the racers in every city to see them come in. So today he's here in Valdivia."

"Your friend must have been in a big hurry to see you," Nielsen said.

"This is my *compañerito*, Elder Nielsen," José Luís told Adrian, who looked around for the first time. Leaning over to Nielsen, Adrian grasped at his hand quickly, as though afraid it might escape him. Then he stepped over to where Renata and Michelle stood near the door. "And this is Sister Godoy and Sister Lowell," José Luís said.

The perspiration on Adrian's hand made Michelle's raw palm smart. When he turned back to the bed, she wiped it against her skirt. Then she said to José Luís, "How are you feeling?"

"Better than some; worse than most," José Luís replied. He laughed; then he coughed into his handkerchief. "How was zone meeting?"

"Nothing special," Renata said.

Nielsen had seated himself on the bed across from José Luís and was scribbling on a weekly planning sheet. His pen made hard biting sounds against the stiff paper.

"Can I ask you a favor?" José Luís said to him. Nielsen looked up. "Could you walk with Adrian down to Picarte Street and show him where the buses pass on their way out of town? That would save him a trip back down to the terminal."

"I would," Nielsen said, capping his pen and placing it in his shirt pocket, "but I'm going with the García boy at noon to visit the Lagos family." He began stuffing a large binder into a backpack.

"We could go with him," Michelle said. She caught herself almost before the words were out, but not soon enough to disguise them. She added quickly, despairingly, "Is that all right with you, Sister Godoy?"

It was too late. Renata was already gazing out the window, saying, "If that's what you want." Michelle was silent. "Miss Alicia will have lunch ready at home," Renata added.

Michelle pulled a thread out of Nielsen's bedspread and wrapped it in a tight spiral around her fingertip, examining the contrast between red and white flesh. She could feel the blood pulsing there, trying to force its way past the thread barrier. Adrian watched her fingers.

"It is the heart that is alone in this lonely world," Adrian said. He walked to the head of the bed and gave José Luís a loud slap on the shoulder. "My good brother," he said, then he turned and walked out of the room. José Luís looked after him without saying anything.

"He sure didn't stay long after being in such a hurry to see you," Nielsen observed, hitching his backpack onto one shoulder and standing up.

"He wants to get to Osorno," José Luís said. "He needed some money for the bus."

"And you gave it to him."

"He's my friend. That's why he came here."

"You're not even supposed to give *me* any money if I ask for it. Now I'll have to pay your way to the conference next week; so then I'll be the one breaking the rules."

"I'll write home."

"You know that's not the point. You know I don't care about money. I have enough and to spare. I just wish you'd take care of yours — and not let every blood-sucker who comes along —"

José Luís sat up. "I said he's my friend."

"What kind of friend travels nine hundred kilometers to a bike race without any money, then expects other people to pay his way back?"

"He's going on to Osorno. I only had enough for him to get to Osorno."

"And then what? How's he going to get back to Santiago?"

"I gave him all I had."

"And you think that's the way to help him? You could've paid his way back to Santiago with that money, not left him stranded in some city further south."

"He didn't want to go to Santiago."

Nielsen lifted one shoulder and grated breath across the back of his throat. "So what kind of friend are you? You shouldn't have given him the money. From what Sister Godoy was telling us, he has some real problems; and from what we've seen, he's not even safe on the streets."

"Don't you think I know he could get into trouble?" José Luís's throat buzzed. He lifted his handkerchief from near his knee. He coughed into it and looked up with red eyes. "He stood right there and took off his sweats because I said I liked them. Then he would have gone to Osorno anyway — in his underwear — so stand there and tell me I shouldn't have given him the money." José Luís offered Nielsen the interior of his handkerchief. "Tell me trust isn't worth even this much," he said.

"*Estúpido*," Nielsen said and went out to eat lunch.

José Luís shoved his wallet under the sheet and pulled it taut over his knees. He eyed its smoothness, adjusted his grip, retightened it. Michelle felt tired. She sat down on Nielsen's bed and dropped her book bag on the floor. Leaning forward, she saw that bright spots of blood had dried on her knees.

"You know," José Luís said at last, "just before you got here I was saying to Adrian, 'Hey, you look great in those purple sweats.' The next thing I know, he's got them down around his knees. 'They'd look greater on you,' he says. 'They're too big for me.' I say, 'I have some already,' but by then he has one leg out and he's starting on the other. 'But these are much better — softer. And they're purple. Like the sun's eye,' he says. I had to argue for five minutes to get him to put them back on, and I don't think he ever would've if he hadn't heard you coming down the hall." A city bus shifting gears outside changed whine to roar and sent exhaust through the open window.

José Luís looked over at Renata. "Elder Nielsen mentioned that you know Adrian, so I guess you know how he is."

"I don't know him much."

"It was drugs — a long time ago. Before he was baptized. He feels things more than other people. Hate makes him mad."

"He has no reason to be upset," Renata said quickly. "I was just thinking of Miss Alicia waiting with lunch. But we can probably walk down to Picarte with him if we hurry." She didn't look over at Michelle.

"I mean," José Luís said, "that hate makes him crazy. He can't fit it in his mind anywhere. It knocks over the china." Michelle stared at the pattern of blood specks on her knees.

A sudden breeze flowed into the room, like one of those brief ocean waves that fills every fissure of a cavern and then recedes. Renata spoke into the well of its departure. "Well, I guess we better go if we're going to walk him down there."

"I think he's already gone," Michelle said.

"He's not gone," José Luís smiled. "He'll be waiting for you outside." Then he laughed aloud. "Adrian knows people, I tell you!"

Michelle stood up and swung her book bag in a slow arc from the floor to her shoulder. Something inside her head felt suddenly lighter. "See you later," she said to José Luís. "I hope you feel better tomorrow."

José Luís was right. The *mamita* of the *pensión* met them in the living room and told them that Elder Piña's visitor had refused to stay for lunch, or even to rest on the sofa — he was waiting outside for them to take him to the bus stop. "And Elder Nielsen's already gone, too," she said, jiggling her folds of chin. "He never will sit still a minute. Gulped his soup down, hot as it was, and wouldn't eat any baked milk for dessert. That's why he's so thin. He just won't eat the way he should. Always looking at the clock. 'Got to go, Mamita,' he always says, and poor Elder Piña just starting on dessert. 'Elder,' I say to the Gringito, 'your companion might like a little something hot to drink after lunch, you know. It's his habit. You'll give him indigestion.' But Elder Nielsen just laughs; 'I have to cure him of his *máte*, Mamita. It's bad for his nerves.' He's a good one for laughing, that Elder Nielsen. So Elder Piña gets up from the table with a spoon still in his mouth, and he throws me one of those faces of his — like a cat in love — and drags one foot along the floor as he goes. 'You'll mar the wax, Elderito,' I yell. 'Do you think I want to break my back polishing every day because of you?' He just laughs, too. The Chileno laughs even more than the gringo. He never stops unless he's eating, but he eats like no one — except for now, of course, when he's so sick. *Pobrecito*."

Michelle shielded her eyes from the sun as she stepped out onto the porch. Pebbles sparked in the asphalt road beyond the iron fence. She could not see Adrian at first and thought again that he had already gone. It was not until she approached the gate that she saw him hunched over some flowers on the other side of the bars. A space had opened up between his purple sweat pants and green t-shirt, showing a stripe of flesh and two jagged vertebrae. He was rooting around with his hands, trying to stand the flowers straight again after last night's rainstorm. At least, that's what Michelle thought he was doing.

"Those flowers are pretty," she said as she approached. Adrian looked up and then down again quickly, against the sunlight. Michelle was surprised because he was so much younger than she had thought, and because he had thrust up at her, along with his eyes, a dirty hand uncurling itself like a leaf.

"It's trash," he said. A piece of greenish cellophane glinted in his palm along with some shreds of yellowed newspaper. Then the hand turned fist and jerked back, just as his eyes had jerked up and away from the light. Without looking up again, he headed to where a candy wrapper stuck wetly to the concrete flanks of the fence. His fingers were delicate quick; the trash went into his back pocket. He murmured to himself as he ran and crouched and ran and crouched, "And this, and this, and this. . . ." Michelle and Renata looked at his curved back, at the white strip of skin above purple, at the two vertebrae jutting up like clenched knuckles.

"Shall we go?" Renata said loudly. Adrian straightened immediately. He looked at her for several seconds, a piece of clear plastic fluttering from his fist.

"Let's go then," he said, and placed himself between Michelle and Renata as they started down the sidewalk.

When they got to Picarte Street, Adrian said, "Will you wait here with me for a minute?" He said this to Michelle, but she was looking at a bike shop across the street where a little boy was trying to climb onto one of the model bikes outside. The bike was too tall for him to get his leg across the bar. Adrian said again, "*Sólo un minuto.*"

Michelle turned to Renata. "Yes," Renata said, "We can stay for a minute. Is that ok with you, Sister Lowell?"

"Yes," Michelle answered.

"We who are in the midst of darkness shall see a great light," Adrian said. He walked to the edge of the sidewalk, balanced there on the balls of his feet, and peered sideways down the street.

"You know," he said to Michelle, "if I stood one meter further south, I would be dead by now."

Michelle looked at him quickly, starting a smile. But then she said, "I thought that once, too. Right after my friend got killed in an accident." They watched the cars whiz by in front of them. Each flash of noise and color pushed a wave of hot air against their bodies.

"Has anyone ever tried to kill you?" Adrian asked. He stepped off the sidewalk and stood in the street facing Michelle. A truck passed near his heel and lifted black hair away from his collar.

"Please step up here," Michelle said.

"When I was in prison, they tried to kill me. They all hated me, of course. In there an informer is a worm on its slimy belly. That's what they called me: Informer. And they wanted to stomp out my worm guts. Sure, I had been a snake around the guy's filthy ankles when he tried to get away with that girl's purse. Broke out two of his teeth when he hit the pavement. I took him in myself, with the purse still in his hand; but the police — did they thank me for it? They cursed me for the blood on the floor and for getting there at lunch hour. They let the thief go. And me they locked up — to be killed in there as an informer."

"Why did they lock you up?"

“There was this whole pile of garbage on the floor by the door. A real pigsty. So I yelled “Trash!” as I went out. The police thought I was yelling at them; they grabbed me, slammed me in the mouth, and threw me in jail.”

“This might be it,” Renata said. A bus was approaching. Adrian leaned back from the waist to look. A car honked and swerved toward the center lane. Adrian said, “That’s El Directo. It goes to Puerto Montt without stopping.” And the bus blasted by in a cloud of exhaust.

From the gutter, Adrian could look straight across at Michelle, the space between their eyes untilted and serene. He said, “If I could get my head through the bars, I knew the rest of my body would fit, too. Then I’d stop eating until I was pure thin bones. *Huesitos*. And out I would go onto my head.”

Michelle didn’t say anything; she just looked across the level space to where his gaze lay on a level horizon.

“I think this one is it.” Another bus’s wind plastered Adrian’s sweats against skinny thighs, and he began to run with its slowing. He disappeared inside. Then he was back in the gutter flapping his forearm behind the bus in wide circles. He held up four fingers to Michelle. “*Cuatrocientos*,” he said. “Too much.”

“But that’s the rate,” Renata said.

“From the station, not the street.”

Renata hissed between her teeth. The slant of light had already shifted on the tin rain gutters across the street, and the bridge of her nose was moist from long sun.

“Jesus,” Adrian said, “told us to love each other. That bus driver talked with his lips together like this, and said like this, ‘*Cuatrocientos*,’ with hate snaking around his teeth.” Adrian stepped up onto the sidewalk and said close to Michelle’s face, “Do you know why I escaped from prison?”

Michelle held her neck still and breathed through her mouth.

“Hate hate hate hate. I knew I would die in it. My own meat was packed in it. I had to get my own flesh away from my pure bones, and then I got through the bars and fell out onto my head. ‘This gravel in my skull means Jesus loves me,’ I said to myself and crawled home like the other times. They can’t keep me in. I go home with my pure bones.”

“Have you been in prison more than once?” asked Michelle.

“No. Just in the mental house. They lock me in there. But listen! I say Jesus said to love everyone. They lock me up so that my pure bones can scrape against his love. ‘*Y después de deshecha esta mi piel . . . yet in my flesh shall I see God.*’ Job 19:25. And before that: ‘*Se levantará sobre el polvo*. King of the dust he calls himself.”

“Here comes another bus,” Renata said.

Adrian stepped into the street. “Please!” said Michelle.

“No,” Adrian said. “It’s a cement truck with silver grating out front.” A wrinkled man on a three-wheeled bike loaded with cabbage swore at Adrian as he went by, mouth and leg tendons working in rhythm.

“God,” Adrian said, “He looks down from his blue to all this. To all this green and brown. Green for what we grow. Brown for what we rot. Some say he doesn’t dare look at the really ugly stuff — the rooty reds of what we

kill; but I saw his iris in the sun's ball one morning, watching; and at night there was this big old orange star that didn't ever blink."

A flatbed truck puffed strands away from his ears.

"Watch out!" Michelle said.

Adrian stepped out of the gutter. He ran toward two people, a man and a woman, who were walking along the sidewalk. When they saw him, they veered abruptly toward the crackled wall of the *panadería*. Between that and Adrian's body, they had to stop.

"Hey!" Adrian said to them, "I want to introduce you two to some friends. Remember, I stood by you at the finish line. And these people over here are some missionary friends."

The couple looked over to where Renata was squinting up the street and Michelle was just turning her head. The man widened the space of pavement between his feet as Adrian pulled on his arm in the direction of the gutter. The man had a sports jacket over his shoulder and big blotches of damp under each arm. The woman's narrow-strapped dress did not conform to the angle of her bra straps, and her toes did not conform to her narrow-strapped sandals. One little toe spilled onto the sidewalk.

Adrian dropped his hands to his sides and said loudly, "García would've won if the other guy hadn't bumped his wheel from behind, don't you think? I told them they should disqualify his points for this lap because he cheated, but they wouldn't listen to me. I went right up and told the guys with the stop-watches, and they wouldn't listen."

"Well, you know . . ." said the man.

"So the dirty cheater'll get the ribbon. That's what I know? That's what I call the justice of God!"

"Well," said the man, "there's really nothing . . ."

"I would've spit in that cheater's face if I could've. I told the judges he'd won by cheating. I told them."

"Listen," said the woman from behind the man's shoulders, "there's nothing we can do."

Adrian aimed his voice at her, very loudly, through the space between the man's ear and shoulder. "García should've won. He would've won if everybody there would've had the guts to say something."

"I never saw the other man cheat," the man said. "But you better calm down. They said they were going to throw you out if you didn't calm down. You should be careful. You should calm yourself down."

The woman walked out from behind the man's shoulders and past Adrian. "There's really nothing we can do," she said and kept walking.

"Hey!" I'll see you at the next race!" Adrian yelled as the man walked past him, too. Before he got back to the gutter, Adrian picked some foil from a jag in the concrete. It turned gold at the edges before it went into his pocket.

"*No podeis decir que sois aún como el polvo,*" he said, kicking dust with dust-creased boots. "Nevertheless from the dust you were created."

"Please step onto the sidewalk."

"Mosiah 2:25."

"The point is," Adrian said, "Jesus loves the dust of the earth."

“You mean the salt —” said Renata, who caught his words between truck roars. Her eyes were slitted against the sun, tiny balls of mascara stuck fast in the corners.

“And if the salt loses savor?”

Renata walked very fast on the way home. Michelle tried to keep up, but her bag was enormously heavy and there were shards of things in her mind that made crackling noises with each step. Soon she was watching the decisive pendulum of Renata’s skirt from half a block behind, observing in detail the varying angles of hem from pavement. But her sight was elsewhere. It was edging backwards through fragments and slivers to another detail she’d memorized without seeing — Adrian’s gym bag twisting gently on its thread, hanging sideways from the bone in his shoulder. Then, the bone pressing a spot of damper green into green t-shirt.

By that time, the owner of the bicycle shop was slamming metal covers over windows and shutting padlocks with quick upward thrusts of his palm. And Adrian was saying, his breath on her face, “One night when it was hot in there and I was holding the bed leg tight like this all sweaty under the sheet, I thought, ‘Even a hug from God I wouldn’t want right now to add to all this sweat.’ I was thinking of Nephi who said he was always hugged with those huge arms of love. I could understand why Jesus wanted to sweat out his blood all by himself. He needed room to breathe. But I couldn’t understand why he can’t stand to let anyone else sweat in peace.”

Then Adrian twisted abruptly toward Renata, “He said that nothing can get him away from us. Not hunger or trouble or nakedness — Romans. I was naked, but I was hot, running sweat-rivers, fear-rivers onto the stinking bed. So tell me —” He stepped in front of Renata, squinted up at her from the gutter, demanded, “if you are drowning in sweat, how can you stand to have Jesus there sweating too, hugging you with those huge arms of love?”

Renata stepped backward and wiped her lips with her fingertips.

“Please step up,” Michelle had said. Adrian stepped up; he stepped over to her, close enough for his gym bag to bump against her leg. She looked at him. She looked at his eyes, which seemed drier than the rest of him, like a strip of dry earth between two running furrows.

Adrian said to her, “Then I knew what this means: ‘*Me ha llenado con su amor hasta consumir mi carne* — Unto the consuming of my flesh, his love.’ I got the flesh away from my bones so he could get near me, so I could stand his love. And with pure thin bones I came out of there, through those bars, onto my head. Got his gravel-love stuck right to my skull.”

“You should put on some weight, then,” Renata said, but a bus wind had flattened hair black against Adrian’s ears. He ran with the gust, gym bag flying up from his hip, bits of Coca-Cola cardboard and gum foil flitting randomly, like stars, behind him. The bus door received him, but it didn’t whoosh shut until after he’d thrust three fingers back into the sun.

“Tres cientos!” he yelled. “Jesus said! Like this we should love each other. And my pure bones have scraped against his love.”