

# EL SOLDADO DE CABALLOS (THE HORSE SOLDIER)

**H**e waited each day in the late afternoon until she appeared at the corner of the last stall, and while she kicked one boot and the other against the wood post, he watched her. For one year he had seen caked mud from her

boots fall to the ground, and from one night to the next in his cot in the army barracks, he thought about the American girl. He saw her touching the horse, rubbing her nose against its neck, repeating in her soft Spanish ... Camaríco. Looking through the window beside his bed, the window without glass, he had dreamed she might say his name in that way: José Luis, using both names, drawing them out, the way his thoughts of her extended into the night.

Each day he hurried from stall to stall until he reached Camaríco, and then like the sun she would appear, holding carrots in her hands for the horse. The moment she rounded the corner, pausing to kick her boots, he would light a cigarette so his hands might hold something while she sank her face in Camaríco's mane. He had groomed this horse longer than any other, carefully lifting each hoof to scrape away the mud.

Each hollow of each hoof must be clean for her, so she could fill the hollows again. Later he would currycomb the horse and think of the American girl.

On days when she competed in jumping, he was there. And when the horse refused a jump and officials waved the girl from the ring, he would watch her chin begin to quiver. More than good food or a soft bed or a leather jacket, he wanted in that moment to hold her.

But while removing the saddle from the horse's back he would shrug his shoulders and say, "La próxima vez." There would be another time. Yet on a day when her eyes shone from clean jumps and a good round, he dreamed of lifting her down. But in that moment he would only say, "Sí, bueno." And she, chin quivering or eyes shining, loved the horse.

At night alone in his narrow cot, he thought of being her trough of water. Then he would laugh. He was a man, not a foolish village girl that came to the capital and worked as a maid, watching telenovelas at night, hoping and praying to meet a rich man. He would serve his time in the army and leave the capital and return home. He could have any girl in the village. The silent, handsome one they called him. And in the tradition of his grandfathers, he too would feed a family from the earth beneath his feet.

But during long nights when he tired of the stars and the cool night air, he thought about the day the



Jan Stamm

THE AMERICAN GIRL  
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BY GAIL ANN KENNA

*The girl tapped her boot against the wood post  
and dropped her riding whip.*

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American girl had stopped at the corner of the last stall and tapped her boot against the wood post and dropped her riding whip. One hand held a salt lick and carrots. The other held a pink box from a panadería, which she pressed against her so that it would not fall to the ground. He tried not to dwell on this memory. But he could not forget the girl's straight white teeth, her green eyes, and the long dark hair that fell below her shoulders. He saw her hands gathering the hair beneath her riding hat each afternoon.

It had been in that moment of watching the American girl and lighting his cigarette that he had heard, "Una torta de chocolate, para ti, José Luis."

He wondered if a puzzled look had crossed his face that afternoon.

"Te gusta chocolate?" she asked, handing him the pink box before turning to retrieve her riding whip.

He had stood there, crushing the cigarette beneath his boot, looking at the cake in the box. She was telling him that she had made it, not bought it at a bakery as the box suggested. "Te gusta chocolate?" she repeated.

"Claro," he said, feeling a lump in his throat that did not disappear even after she rode away and joined those in the ring who freely used their spurs and whips. The American girl seldom used a whip or spurs, which is why the horse had stubborn moments and refused to jump.

Opening the girl's trunk, he found a knife and began removing the remnants of the old salt lick to carve a place for the new one. He alone had a key to the girl's bál, which held things for the horse. As he scraped away the caked salt, he thought about her question. Did he like chocolate? She would never know that cacao was the crop of his father and his grandfathers. She knew nothing of cacao's bitterness or that the cás-

cara held two nuts in each shell. The American girl knew only of chocolate that had been refined.

Looking at the pink box on the bál, he wondered what to do. Had she imagined he would share the cake with other soldiers? If they saw it, they would laugh. They would call the box la cosita, and they would lick the cake's frosting with their protruding tongues. These were soldiers who climbed onto horses at midnight. They said the army did not pay them enough for a whore. Often they had asked him if he would like to put his stick in the American girl. When he didn't answer, they laughed at him. But their laughter did not matter. His grandfathers and his father had taught him to withstand the solitude of convictions and to uphold honor through silence.

When the American girl returned from riding that day, he removed the horse's saddle and bridle. Beneath his hands, the horse began to tremble. It was the same each afternoon. Once the horse was free of its blanket, the girl began whispering ... Camaríco. And filling her hat with carrots, she would place it beneath the horse's open mouth. Just as quickly, she would pull the hat away, while the horse pressed his huge head against her body.

While he folded the blanket and wrapped the reins around the bridle, he watched the girl and the horse moving in a circle near the stall. Yet that afternoon something was different. Before he could open the bál to put the bridle away, he had to set the pink box on the ground. Seeing the cake beside his feet, he felt an odd resentment. Dulce y amargo a la vez, he thought. But bitterness was not his way, and when the girl left that afternoon, he quietly said, "Gracias por la torta." Hearing his words, she turned, and tapping her whip against her boots, she waved good-bye.

While he fed and watered his long row of horses, he thought of hiding the box with the cake in one of the burlap sacks that held muck from the stables. Yet burying the girl's gift in that way was worse than inviting crude words from soldiers. He could leave the box in

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the girl's baúl. But the cake must be gone when she came to ride the next day and they opened the trunk to remove the ointments and special feed. It never occurred to him that Camaríco would not receive the medicine and food that cost more than a soldier's yearly pay. He never dwelt on those who stole money instead of buying feed and he gave no thought to those who believed the riches of life were meant for them. Yet in thinking about the privileged ones, he remembered a huge magnolia that stood at the far end of the lake near the officers' club.

The lake was where the sons of officers rowed and

held races, and where the soldiers went several times each year to clean the water of the algae that grew so long and thick. It had been a month since the soldiers had gone to the lake and stripped to their shorts and spent the day piling algae on the banks at water's edge. They had laughed at the sight of themselves, covered with the strange green tendrils. It had been that day, while enduring the slime and a strong smell that he had seen the magnolia with its beckoning white flowers. That is where he would bury the cake, leaving it whole, entrusting to memory an image he could recall when he needed something for solace.

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**FS authors who have had a book published either by a commercial or academic publisher in the past two years (2001-2002) that has not previously been featured in the roundup, should send a copy of the book, along with a press release or backgrounder with information on the author, to:**

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## F O C U S

*He would serve his time in the army and leave the capital and return home. And in the tradition of his grandfathers, he too would feed a family from the earth beneath his feet.*

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When the stables were dark and the soldiers had gone to eat, he found a shovel and put the box inside a burlap sack. At night there would be no boats on the lake or runners circling the path around it.

While walking the mile to the lake, he thought about his return home in a year. He would not talk about his time in the capital except to say that God had granted him the care of a horse. The secret of his love for the American girl would never be known, and soon her bál would be empty. She had told him she would return home for university. She had not told him when this would happen, but he hoped it would

be when he left the army. Although he would never know her body or her thoughts, he could bury her cake in moonlight beneath the white flowers of a magnolia tree. This moment belonged to him, and like the silver moon above the silent lake it filled the hollows of his heart.

Later that night in the barracks when he removed his boots, caked moist earth fell to the floor beside his cot. As he brushed the mud away, he lifted one clump and held it in his hand. Tomorrow he would see the American girl when she rounded the corner of the last stall and stopped to shake the mud from her boots. ■

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