February 11, 2020

CW104: Rubins

Short Story 1

Very First Introductions

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A few seconds ago, Mami scheduled another last-minute lesson on my womanhood and what was expected of me as a daughter of Jesus. The one-student lesson was to take place in my room and was to start after she finished hand-washing the dishes, which could be very soon –– her velocity at chores is astounding. But what was there even to talk about if I already knew everything? I already knew about sex and how babies were made through a secret I was told six years ago, back when Mami had kept the truth from me. But I mean, I bleed now, I have big boobs, I’m 14. At least, I alreadyknew everything about me.

Mami was taking longer than expected in the kitchen, and my panic was only escalating. Panic makes me wander off to the past almost immediately. This time, I wandered to when I was eight when a close childhood friend told methe secret during our very first sleepover after I insistently asked her to tell me. Her name was Sammie, she was ten. The sleepover was at the new apartment my parents were renting. We were slowly starting to get used to not being apartment-neighbors anymore.

Sammie still lived on the top floor of the previous apartment my family rented, on the better side of Albany Park. Her parents were the co-owners of the apartment along with the other family living in the middle floor. My family and I used to live in the bottom floor, the dreaded cold blue-tiled basement. We were outsiders, owners of nothing left to reside in the only place proper in the Northside of Chicago for new immigrant families: underground. But then we rose to higher newer places, which to me meant a lot of things.

My new apartment meant Sammie would finally have a reason to sleepover; before she had no need to since she could just take the stairs back up to her bed given we lived in the same multi-family, brick building. My new apartment also meant I finally had my own room. It was the perfect scenario for both our mothers to agree to have Sammie dream with me tonight.

The night Sammie told me the secret, she was laying next to me in my bed covered with the same blanket I was wrapped in. We were talking about crazy things mothers would say and how their bodies changed sometimes.

“When I asked Mami why her tummy was so bumpy one day, she said she ate a ginormous magical watermelon with magical seeds that landed on her belly and that a whole baby sister was growing in there!” I explained enthusiastically.

Sammie rolled her eyes, “What a dumb story. A baby sister from watermelons? And it’s always the same story too, something about big fruit seeds.”

“What do you mean ‘dumb story’? I saw her eating magical watermelons many times last Summer and then hundreds of days later her stomach exploded!”, I argued.

“So? People eat watermelons all the time.”

“No, this was a *magical* watermelon”, I repeated but Sammie didn’t understand. “FromtheSouth Pole. Mommy said Santa sent it to her after I asked for a baby sister last Christmas.”

“And it’s not just about the magicalwatermelon, Sammie, it’s the *magical seeds*,” I added.

“Oh, yeah? Then prove it.” Sammie challenged.

“One day, when my Mami was eating a magical watermelon my Papi found on our doorstep, she kept whispering, ‘I think I just swallowed some seeds’...I couldn’t really understand her, she was coughing a lot. Trust me, after she drank the water I got her, the seeds landed in her belly safe and sound. And I do have a baby sister now, don’t I?”

“Yeah but that’s bullshit,” Sammie scoffed, “You swallow watermelon seeds all the time!”

“Well, magical watermelons with magical seeds only work if you’re old and married.”

“And if you’re not old and married?”

*“My* Mami says you gotta be. If not, you just poop the seeds out and nothing happens.”

“Well, *your* Mami’s lying to you. That’s totally *not*  how babies are made.”

My little eight-year old mind broke down completely. It was the very first time any person had ever challenged what my mother had taught me and I resented what it was doing to my brain. My very first cognitive dissonance. I hated knowing my mom lied but I hated not-knowing what I thought I knew even more.

“Fine, then if you think you know everything, how *are* babies made?”, I challenged back.

At first Sammie hesitated in telling me, but then after asking her a few dozen times, she cuddled herself closer to my right side and spilled the unspeakable secret to my unprepared ear.

“Fine, but you have to swear not to tell your mom,” she said deadly serious. I nodded.

“The boy’s peepee has to go into the girl’s peepee.”

That was all Sammie had to say to earn a disgusted, bewildered groan from me. But suddenly out of thin awkward air, our silence turned into two puddles of uneasy chuckles. Too late at night for the perfect words, we let our grins subdue as we drifted into sleep.

That was all Sammie ever said about the secret. But you know children and secrets, they never mix well, be it keeping one from us or telling. Well, I mixed well with all the other secrets I had with Sammie, like the night we sneaked into her parent’s room to watch a telenovela of a man and a woman kissing or the following night when we were tried to understand what the fuck we had just seen by trying to imitate those actions, closing our eyes, and pretending we were the man of our dreams. That secret meant the end of our lives so we swore to keep it inside. But this one, I couldn’t let slide. It was too insane to take too seriously.

I ended up laughing at this nonsensical discovery the next morning with Mami after Sammie’s mom picked her up from the sleepover at my place, as though Sammie’s secret were one big sick joke worthy of hysterical laughter. Except, Mami wasn’t laughing along. And just like that, as if my ear had been perversed so much that not even another one of her lies could recover my innocence lost, Mami confirmed it. Imagine if Mami only knew about my perversed thoughts and lips, not that it would have made the end result any different. Maybe if I could’ve kept her secret, I could’ve kept her. I never saw Sammie again.

An impatient grunt in the background shifted me back to my present tense. My mom stared sharply into my eyes as she attempted to lock her pupils with my distraught ones. Her intense Catholic music was still jamming loudly by the sink –– I thought she was still washing dishes, but no, Mami was sitting on my bed right next to me, her leg touching mine. Goddammit.

I got up to close the door, concerned my little sister was anywhere near to hear what I wished I hadn’t when I was exactly her age. Part of me was glad Mami kept the secrets she did. That same part resented Sammie and my curiosity.

“You’re a *señorita* now. Your body is still growing and there’s a lot you don’t know.” My mom picked up my magnetic doodle-board laying on my bed. Kids my age had friends, pets phones and non-rented houses with double-doored fridges with water and ice dispensers. I had none of the above plus a purple doodle-board with a magnetic pen attached to it by a yellow string, my *pizarrita*. On my *pizarrita*, I drew my wildest imaginations away by doodling and erasing scenes of short stories I would create behind my eyes before bedtime, at least 20 scenes before falling asleep. This practice made me the best artist in class every school-year until high school. Now, my *pizzarita* was being used for something that was probably going to traumatize the hell out of me.

“As a señorita, you must know that in society, your mind’s designed for many goals like to be independent, intelligent, successful. But in nature, your body’s designed for one goal, to create life and be a mother, and it won't stop until your body’s too tired to bother for more.”In one second, she had already divided me into two worlds.

“This is your reproductive system,” Mami said as she drew a very steep parabola with two edges that curved downwards then inwards. At the very end of those curved edges, she drew an oval on each side. She labeled each one *Ovario.* Mami then divided the inside of the parabola into three horizontal sections of different sizes. Inside the top section, she drew an upside-down triangle that closed the parabola and connected the left and right curved edges together. She labeled the triangle *Útero.* Well, that’s one way of drawing a deformed ram with bigass horns.

“The top section is your uterus, where your baby will grow after you find the perfect man and marry him. For now, your body’s gonna keep shedding one egg every month, each time on a different side, and release blood until it’s done. Then you prepare for the next cycle.” I swear to God, if she says “blood”, I’m done.

I got up from my bed to make sure my sister wasn’t around, I didn’t want her to know my body did this. She’d tell everyone and my life would be over. Then, they’ll stop thinking I’m innocent. The door was fully closed though so I jumped back in bed. Phew.

“Mami, we already had this lesson, remember? Back when I first got *it.”* I whispered.

“I know, but you needed a reminder. Be patient.”

“The middle section is your cervix, the passageway of all things coming into your uterus or out of your vagina.” She labeled the bottom section *Vagina,* which was more than appropriate given the parabola curve looked exactly like what I had down there. The more audible my giggles became, the more serious and intense Mami’s voice grew. “The bottom section is your vagina, which is protected by the most sacred part of your womanhood: the hymen.” With the magnetic black pen attached to my doodle-board, she drew a tiny funnel-like figure at the very bottom curve of the *Vagina* section and said, “This is your hymen.”

“The hymen is a very thin layer of tissue protecting the entrance of your vagina. It can only be broken by a man’s penis entering your body or things like tampons, which is why we never *ever* use them. When your hymen is intact, you’re a virgin,” Mami said as she filled up the funnel-like figure with non-black streaks using the red erasable Expo marker lying on my bed. The red streaks represented the blood of an intact hymen.

“Back in Guate, doctors could tell worried parents if their girl was a virgin by opening her legs and checking for this bloody tissue,” Mami continued. Repulsed any parent could ever put their child through that situation, I slid myself a few inches back from where Mami was sitting, her leg no longer overlapping mine. My stomach began to churn.“I don’t think they do that anymore though, but you can still tell,” she added. I wanted to ask *why* or *how* but didn’t wanna risk speaking out of turn.

“When it’s not intact, it breaks”, Mami continued as she rubbed off the red ink on my *pizarrita* with her finger. She grabbed the red marker again, except this time, she drew red streaks oozing out of the funnel-like figure, as if it were injured. “When it breaks, you feel a very sharp, aching pain and you start to bleed. A lot. That’s how you show your husband you’re a virgin on your wedding night.”

“Mami, were *you* a virgin on your wedding night?”

“*Ay*, *hija,* I absolutely was *Virgen*. If I wasn’t, everyone in *Guate’* would’ve disgraced me. The *gente* would’ve never let your father marry me. The seamstress would’ve refused to tailor my pure white dress. The church would’ve banned my wedding ceremony. I would’ve dishonored my parents and your grandma would’ve kicked me out without a second look,” Mami’s voice shook. At first, I didn’t understand the pride seeping from her ego as she declared this but the moment it hit, I began to long for this new feeling and everything that came with it.

“Any guy that asks you to have sex with him without asking for your hand doesn’t love you. He’ll leave you as soon as you give him your virginity. No man would ever marry a used woman played around by others. And if you ever have sex, God will know and punish you straight to hell. Promise me you’ll never *ever* have sex before marriage. PROMISE.” I could hear the residue of my grandma’s influence in between each crack of Mami’s voice.

If daughter is anything like mother, if heaven is nothing like hell, and if pre-marital sex was the only sin to take everything good away,then I didn't really have a choice but to say, “I promise.” Besides, sex is gross so why the fuck would I ever want to have that, anyway?

Mami erased everything from my *pizarrita* by sliding its plastic eraser tab to the opposite side. Everything drawn with the black magnetic pen had disappeared, all that remained were the displaced red marker streaks. Mami wiped them off with her palm. The doodling-board was blank again. It was getting late.

The lesson ended with three recitals of the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother”. If I broke my promise to her, I would be breaking this.

“Goodnight, hija. Don’t forget to pray before going to sleep.”

“I won’t. Goodnight, Mami.”

“And remember, no boys, no touching, no kissing, no sex.”

My mom made her way out, turned off my lights, and closed the door. Just like that, another motherly lesson on my womanhood was over. From that day forward, I decided to center my identity in maintaining my womanhood and innocence as intact as possible so that my mother could continue to love me and respect me, so that men could one day long for my hand at marriage, and so that God wouldn’t send me straight to hell after dying from some clique unrequired heartbreak.

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