

FALL

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# SALUD, LA LUZ

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## **1. Chestnuts**

We carried chestnuts from the park, behind the trees and the smoke of our little houses. We tucked them in our pockets and hid them beyond the tips of our mittens, just past the fingers, and snuck them into our homes. We buried them beneath our beds, tucked them under our turtle's tanks, and stowed them in our sock drawers until the next day, when our mother called from beyond the door. In the schoolyard they were currency. They could be bought and

sold for Lunchables or toys or whatever we desired. We received them in outstretched palms, fingered the smooth of their bodies, and passed them to our friends so that they too could feel what it was to be full.

But when winter came the chestnuts grew scarce, and what little was left of them was lost. We buried them in the ground, and when the ground grew cold and hard with snow the chestnuts lay trapped beneath the soil.

Then when Mamá got sick we went out to our yard and dug them all up with our fingernails, snow soaking the elbows of our jackets. We carried them overflowing in our arms and our pockets to her room and one by one we placed them on the sheets, first along her thighs and her arms and her stomach and her hands, then over her toes and her chin and her eyelids and her mouth, so she could die, as she'd always wanted, a wealthy woman.

## 2. Bats

Mamá loved our little house. She liked the way the scaffolds of the veranda criss-crossed with the vines. She liked the way the light poured in through the skylight and the sharp reeds poked up from the hammock. She liked the stones below the outdoor shower and the way they cut her feet.

We made dinner in the evenings and burned fire in the stove. Smoke swept the porch. My brother Alejandro and I ate quietly. Cornbread, milanesa, a bit of red wine. Bats flashed between us as we ate, dropping from the eaves, lost to the dark beyond our yard.

## 3. Jewelry

Mamá bought pearls, bracelets, hair extensions. She put them on her body and

on ours. She held us in front of the vanity mirror and covered our noses and our hair and chins in glitter, and we smiled when she kissed our cheeks. She showed us the rubies and the sapphires she hid at the back of her closet, how they glittered and glowed on our little fingers as they did on hers. She showed us boa scarves and mascara and gloss for our lips. She rubbed our bellies and we laughed and she laughed as she held us tight against her silky blouse and purred.

When Papi came home we hid everything. He eyed us suspiciously as he put away the groceries in the dim light of the refrigerator and Mamá wiped her lipstick off with a hand towel, erasing what we couldn't afford.

Sometimes I saw her go to the window, late at night, when Papi was working a graveyard shift. I would see her shadow stretch over our little backyard, and she would cast her hands up toward the sky, toward the moon and gray clouds in dissipation. The sparkle of her bracelet refracted little diamonds on my bedroom wall, and I smiled to myself, tucked the comforter over my nose to feel the heat of my own breath, panting until the glitter was gone.

## 4. Coming to America

Mamá came to America because her family had disappeared. *Bisabuela, bisabuelo*—one day she looked out her bedroom window and they were boarding a ship, waving goodbye to the fog, a sparkling sliver in their place, a dangling dreamcatcher swishing back and forth in the wind.

Her heart was swallowed too. Her husband took her to the doctors and the doctors lifted her arms and tapped her shoulders and ran a tongue depressor along her

legs and breasts and shook their heads. For two weeks they kept her under observation. She lay on tissue paper, coarse gown swishing about her knees as she woke with a start each night to the beeping of her own heart monitor and fell back again into the unyielding mattress. Her husband, not yet Papi, watched on from the guest chair in the corner of the room. When the prodding and swabbing and flipping back and forth of paper on clipboards had ceased, when the doctors, behind their surgical masks, had lost the energy to even shake their heads, they pulled my father into the other room and told him: *You have to take her to America*.

## 5. Dollar Tree

We went into the Dollar Tree on weekends, in the morning, when the staff was young and hungover. Mamá carried Alejandro on her shoulders and I followed close behind. We went to the freezer section first, with the large, frosted windows. Mamá knelt down and pressed her finger to her lips. She smiled. *Are you feeling hot?* I nodded and she slid the frozen peas under my shirt. The bumps rolled up and around my belly. We wandered through the aisles as she patted my matted black hair, slid Nutella in my pockets, half a baguette down the back of my pants.

When we passed the checkout aisle she plucked a bouquet of purple carnations from the shelf and held them out for Alejandro to smell. He smelled and he sighed and I smelled and I sighed. Mamá paid for the flowers and shuffled me along toward the sliding glass doors, the jars and candy bars and frozen peas stuffed in my clothing rustling as I did, rustling when she pulled us out into the parking lot under the graying

plumes of the early spring sky, when she throttled the gas and placed the carnations on the dashboard, when the head popped off the bobbling Buddha hood ornament she'd stolen and tumbled on the floor.

## 6. Halloween

We carved pumpkins in the dark. Mamá lit the match between her fingers. The flame danced beneath her chin as we peeled the orange skin. *Get the wick*, she said, and I did, I took out the fibrous guts and planted them down into the pumpkin's cavity. She ran her hand along its grooves, her finger lost between each bump. *We forgot to give it a face*, I said, and she told me to get the little knives.

We sawed a smile into the pumpkin's shell. The light peeked around the edges. Then the blocks of teeth fell one by one. Mamá tossed them into the woods, newspaper crinkling beneath her knees. When she turned back her face was covered by her hands.

*What is it?* we asked, and we dove in closer. She wiped the tears from the corners of her face, asked for water. We fetched it from the house. She drank and drank. We asked again if there wasn't something she needed but she said, *No, nada chicos, de nada*.

We carried the leaves in clumps to the shed. They filled the walls in big double-layered trash bags, crumbly bits spilling from the top.

One night I caught Mamá staring at the pumpkin we carved, pulling her lips back to make a smile. She stood there for half an hour, trying to make her lips as wide as the pumpkin. The next day I threw it off the roof.

Pulp splattered on the driveway. It made such a pretty shape.

**7. Blueberries**

We rose to the day and picked blueberries. It was still dark. Mamá turned to me, raised her finger to her lips. The blackbirds twittered in the trees. *The day is ours*, she said, and she opened her mouth, as if to lap it up, as if to soak it on her tongue.

**8. Fairgrounds**

Mamá carried us to the fairgrounds on her shoulders. When we got lost in the corn maze she knelt down and held us. *Hush*, she said, and we were silent.

We stayed for hours. Until nightfall, when the smell of hot dogs and charcoal wafted from across the field. She woke with dirt and twigs in her hair and we pulled her toward the smoke and laughter, where tall men caressed their bright bellies under the moon.

Papi threw another beer into the fire and laughed. Glass and charcoal burned under his feet. When he saw Mamá with her sickly eyes he swallowed and raised her wordless in his arms. Her fragile heartbeat against his own.

As he carried her down the moonlit road he nodded for us to stay back. Mamá fingered the scruff of his chin, said something I could not hear. We followed their outlines for a while, until their silhouettes blended with the night.

**9. Collapse**

Mamá had a fall. We were building an ant farm in the garage when we heard a cry, rushed up the steps. Mamá lay there on the ground. A steaming pool of water running under her leg. Her chin in a tremble. She

looked up at us and pressed her lips to gasp a vowel but she could not. She turned to the mess. Her hands bright red, the bubbling water slowly creeping toward her leg. I screamed for Alejandro to go get a towel and tried to lift Mamá but she was too heavy. I grabbed her around the arm and pulled and she started to fall onto me but it was not enough. Alejandro came back with a napkin. He said it was all he could find. Mamá leaned her head against my chest, wept as the water scared her skin.

**10. Cancer of the Brain**

The doctor showed us the MRI with the glowing ball in her head. *There*, he said, and he pointed to it with his oily finger.

*That's it?* Papi walked up to the screen, brought his nose right to the spot.

*That's it.*

*It's so small*, he said quietly.

The doctor nodded and drifted out of the room. His shoes clicked on the linoleum. Papi turned. He stepped to me, pointed down at the MRI with a shaking finger. He receded. I popped it out and handed it to him. The film was slick. He recoiled, shook his head. As he stepped back the words bubbled from this throat: *no, no*, his shadow stretched against the back wall, taller than brother, taller than me, eclipsing us both, the weight of his own words falling as his jaw crumbled in his hands and Alejandro snatched the MRI and tried to shake the tumor out, like a Polaroid.

**11. Saratoga**

We walked to the shore. Mamá was in a wheelchair, then. We pushed her over the pavement. Alejandro handed her all

the good seashells. The spokes of her chair squealed violently. We pretended not to notice. When we reached the end of the path we took up our chalk and drew all of us on the pavement. We drew ourselves big and tall, all grown up. We drew Papi with his high suspenders. And we drew Mamá with her longing and her flowing hair, with her curls that roll away like the tides.

We stepped out onto the bridge and caught fireflies in our hands. The glow spilled out from the crevices. Mamá told us that we're nothing but cracks now, nothing but bursting light.

*Luz?* I asked her.

*La luz*, she said. *Salud, la luz.*

*Salud, la luz!* We cried and splashed and sweat. We were rapturous. *Salud, la luz, salud!* We threw back our heads, let fall our little red tongues, let come the sunlight on our pale skin.

*Salud, la luz, salud!*

We picked Mamá up by her armpits and carried her into the light. *Salud, la luz, salud!* She moved her lips slowly, as if gaining comprehension, as if she were saying the words for the first time. *Saluddd*, she breathed. *Saluddd*. The spittle rattled against her throat.

**12. Ayúdame**

At night I heard the long wails of his name. *Federico, Federico*. He growled. Her wheelchair squeaked shrill through the air vent. Alejandro opened his eyes and sat up, body crumpled and hunched. There was a thud and she cried out again. Her voice muffled through the walls. The sound of water running in the bathroom. The shower knobs turned and the pipes hissed and groaned. She sobbed. Alejandro stood up.

*Where are you going?* He pressed his ear to the wall. His shadow tangled with mine. The sound of metal against tile, and again the water running. *Ayúdame, Federico, ayúdame*. I pull the sheets down and look at Alejandro. His eyes are wide. *What are they saying?* He shook his head. *Federicooooooo*. She said it so long, like she was pleading from the bottom of a well. Alejandro stepped back.

*Mamí, no lo puedo, no puedo, necesito leventarte.*

*No puedo, Federico, no tengo fuerza.*

*What are they saying?*

*No puedo leventarte, Mamí, es peligroso.*

*Tengo miedo, Federico.*

Alejandro crouched in the corner and shook his head, the dim light of the rocket-ship night-light under his chin.

**13. Lost Words**

She had lost all her words by then. She sat by the river, watched the ducks flicker by in the light. I don't know how much she understood, or how much she saw.

Papi was the only one who could really talk to her by then. Each morning he rose from his bed, cheeks red, huffing, hairy back sparkling in the morning light, and held Mama's thumb. She looked at him and smiled as she woke. Her hand was so frail then—her knuckles as large as her fingers. Her eyes wandered the light of the room and her mind came again into this world that belonged only to them, these whispers of Spanish over the trees and the sparkling river, this rustling that rose and came, over and over, as the light leaked through the long glossy curtain of their bedroom and their tongues whirred once more into motion.

**14. Withdrawing Breath**

One day I came home from school with a backpack full of numbers and English words. Mamá asked to see it.

*Mi mochilla tiene números y ingles, Mamá,* I said. *No entiendes.*

Her mouth gaped, withdrawing her breath. *No me entiendes?*

*No, Mamá, no entiendes.*

*You will leave me, she said.*

*No, Mamá.*

**15. Hush**

In the end Mamá lost her hearing too. She couldn't understand anyone but Papi and his hushed voice. The rest was breeze, movements, rustling. The pouring of waves. The lights and mouths that came down to her face, placed their pinkies in her crumpled hands and twitched.

We kissed her softly. She smiled as we spoke. When we were done she turned to father and he held her hand. *How much longer?* She said this with her eyes. He rubbed her hospital gown between his fingers. It was coarse and sighed like a curtain. When he brought his lips down to her ear she wrapped her arms around the back of his neck, plastic pulse monitor cold against her finger, wire tangling around my father's ear.

And then it was only them. The air barely made it past their lips. The conversation had so many times before it became a choreographed sequence of silent shivers.

*How much longer?* she asked.

*Just wait,* he said, and he kissed her veiny hand.

**16. Fumes**

Strained the dock first, the pastor lifted his sandals from the boat, onto the riverbed where she lay. Papi held my hand so tight it lost feeling. My numb heart—Mamá's hair tangled with seaweed. He laid the burning candle between her legs and the light consumed her. Her eyelids drooped; her jaw melted; her fingers twitched over the boat's rim. The men pushed her gently into the waves, flames crackling over the sea.

Mamá had always said she wanted to drift among the waves. She had picked me up and danced with me through our living room with the torn couch and the glowing fireplace as smoke spread between her eyes. *Fumar,* she said. *Fumo.*

The sea still hums with her ash.



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