**A Mango Before Fall**

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My abuela sits at the thick mahogany table on a metal, mismatched chair. Her table is the nicest in her building, she frequently exclaims. Though she is, in fact, the owner and landlord of the building, she considers herself one of its humble residents, not immune from keeping-up-with-the-Rodriguezes. Such is the hierarchy of every neighborhood, from the slums of Miraflores to the wealthy boroughs of Queen Anne, with this being the former. The salty Lima breeze dances into the room and gently slaps our faces with the weight of Andean mountains it carries over from the South. The air feels good and smells like burning tires.

“Hijito!” Her eyes widen and she flashes a sly smile. Taking the playing cards from my hands, she carefully resets my game of solitaire, as I had gotten frustrated and proceeded to ignore all the rules she taught me. “Tsk, you should never cheat, even if no one but God is watching.”

My 8-year-old mind reflects on this briefly, not quite grasping the philosophical profundity of my grandmother’s words. My mind races past the thought, and onto the greener pastures of the Park of Legends, complete with worn down soccer goals and vendors selling lúcuma ice cream. Adjacent to the park was the Lima Zoo, a sprawling complex of animals and oddities that dazzled. I wanted to run around, not be trapped inside all day.

“Abuela, can we go to the park?” I asked.

“You know I can’t exert myself too much anymore, mihijito, especially before eating.”

I crossed my arms and shoved my chin into the newly formed crevice. She, pushing up on the seat of her chair, slowly rose, knees trembling, and opened the fridge.

“The mangoes are in season again, so I bought as many as I could at the market,” she said, peeling one, slicing it into thick rectangles, and arranging the slices around the precious pit on a plate. Chewing on mango pits long after they were stripped of their flesh was the greatest pleasure in the world to me. After I’d finished my mango, my abuela slowly rose and announced that it was time for lunch.

The lomo saltado smelled divine. The strips of steak sizzled in the heavy cast iron pan and blended with the aroma of frying onions, peppers, and tomatoes. Next came the French fries, which my abuela carved from massive dark brown potatoes. Before we sat down to eat, she performed her usual routine; carefully walking into the bathroom, opening the cabinet, taking out a small synthetic pouch, and pricking her finger with what I imagined was a small torture device. The resulting drop of blood was always red and shiny in the light; it fascinated me to watch it travel up into her beeping machine. A deep sigh before she drew liquid into a syringe from a small vial and a sharp exhale as she injected it deep into her abdomen. I always looked away for that part.

We prayed and ate, all while my abuela regaled me with stories from the Bible. I wondered why Cain and Abel couldn’t just get along the way I did with my baby brother. My thoughts returned to the zoo, the park, and their promise of fun and freedom.

“Abuela, can we go to the park, please?” I was more forceful this time, trying to both show my intense desire and be good so that my request would be taken seriously.

“Okay, mihijito,” she said, fetching her coat and shoes from the bedroom. “I think we can go as long as the weatherman says it’s not going to rain.”

I was unable to contain myself. When I finally sat, she combed my unreasonably curly hair. I only trusted her to do it as the curls inevitably got caught and tangled around the harsh teeth of the comb. I loved listening to her tell me about our ancestors, who had kinky hair like us; originally from Africa, they suffered tremendously but were proud and ingenious. She helped me pick my out my outfit and covered me in a quilted jacket to ensure I would not feel a second of discomfort in the mild city day. Suited in my early 00’s chic, I took her hand, and we made our way to the bus stop.

I don’t really remember how we spent those months; the memories are hazy. By the time the Peruvian winter subsided, it was time for me to return to Florida, its blazing summer sun baking me in my coat.

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Seven summers passed this way; the reward points might have earned me a free flight, had I or my parents been savvy enough to open an account. I found myself back in Peru, feeling queasy and outside of my body. The magical realism of years past was replaced with a black and white dose of actual realism; my father taught me to be cautious of strangers, as they would hold me for ransom or make me eat liver if I were to step one toe out of my family’s sight. Suddenly, the country I thought I loved became the Third World, a shithole that I could not be proud to come from.

My parents, my father especially, had been reticent to admit it, but this was a trip to say goodbye to my abuela. This was a life lesson about profound loss and sadness. I knew it instinctively and yet, I walked into the trap. My American tongue stumbled over the words. I had no idea what her life was like before I was born, and I had never thought to ask. How vain and self-centered I’d been for all these years.

The dialysis machine whirred and made a low gurgle; it was devouring the blood that poured into it from my abuela’s arm. A spiraling, concentric sun dome shined the morning into the clinic. The stained-glass panels scattered bright, white light onto her; I remember wondering whether heaven was waiting for her on the other side of those windows. She looked uncomfortable and pale, but she smiled upon seeing me walk into the room. I hugged her tightly and knelt so that we were eye to eye.

“Abuela, uh, I was hoping to hear more about your life.”

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The box that now contains my abuela is made of luxurious mahogany, crafted carefully by hand and inscribed with a gold plaque: Maria Esther Molina-Ramirez, 1948-2014, Beloved grandmother, mother, sister, and friend. It currently sits on my uncle’s mantle, adorned with her picture; she sits in a rose garden in a simple, floral-patterned dress. Her smile is warm, as it always had been, and her eyes are stoic, her gaze fixed on something or someone off-camera. I imagine all the stories that get lost in the shuffle of life and are never told or never heard. With my grandmother gone, the sharp twinge of pain in my heart tells me I’ll never know the actual ending to these stories. She had a decently sized life, she died less poor than she was born, and she was proud of her children and grandchildren. I often wonder if that is all we can really expect from our lives.