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IT MUST HAVE BEEN YOUR EYES

A Thesis

by

CHRISTIAN VAZQUEZ

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2020

Major Subject: Creative Writing

IT MUST HAVE BEEN YOUR EYES

A Thesis
by
CHRISTIAN VAZQUEZ

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December 2020

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ABSTRACT

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This fiction book entails the story of a Mexican orphan girl, Mariana, who is propelled on to a journey to the U.S. along with her mysterious ability to see the future in people's eyes. Her plight lands her on a shelter for unaccompanied immigrant children in Texas where she is forced to confront her fears and grow. In this surreal story that is based on true events, our times are reflected and even our future.

DEDICATION

The completion of this thesis, of this Master degree, is dedicated to my mother, Isabel Vazquez, my father, Martin Vazquez, my sisters, Valerie and Fatima Vazquez, and my brother Martin Vazquez. It would not have been completed without all the people I held a conversation with along the way. Most important of these conversations I owe to my best friends, Mario Vallejo and Carolina Valdez. I would also like to dedicate this to all the children who have crossed a border, whether literal or metaphorical. I hope you all continue to surpass the limitations that have been thrown upon you so that you can help make of this world a place of less suffering for all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Brit Haraway, Emmy Perez, and Dr. Noreen Rivera for the guidance with this thesis, but also in their classes. I want to thank my colleagues who are part of the education team that I worked with at the shelter for immigrant children. These include the teachers Claudia Rivas, Erika Esparza, Laura Barrera, Rocio Castro, Rosa Luna, and our lead teacher Florentino Aguilar. Also, big thanks to Jorge Hernandez who offered an attentive ear when needed. Finally and most importantly, thank you to all the students who were or are in the shelters for immigrant children; I hope this book will help, even if as small as the flapping of a butterfly's wings.

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CHAPTER I

I used to see into the eyes of every person, and I could see, I'm telling you. I could see an ocean of the future within their eyes. I am a life coach, a business and political consultant, and a very involved one. CEO's, doctors, lawyers, politicians, anybody who can afford me has sat in my little office in Washington D.C. One of the four walls is made up of completely transparent bulletproof material like a window, as if to say that there is complete transparency here, no conspiracy or secrecy. There are both of those things, but it makes most of my clients comfortable. To others, I close the large curtains and we talk among the darkness. By that transparent wall is where we sit, and we are divided by a small coffee table. There is a view of green pastures in the distance, and the city is seen far away from here. On rainy days I see my reflection upon the glass, like I am doing now, and I can't help but notice how similar I have become to my clients in their sharp fashionable suits and dresses, even the brownness of my skin grows paler. I try to look at my reflection's black eyes, to remember who I really am because it is only in there where I can find myself. Those black eyes I have refused to face in what seems like a millennia.

I never reveal to them that I can see into their future. In fact, I wouldn't even call it *the* future. Yes, I see what someone is going to do moments after, but it varies. Sometimes I can see what they are going to do months after the moment we are talking, weeks, days, minutes, and rarely seconds. Future is an oversimplification. I see *a* future. One of the endless streams that can form. If I were to look upon your eyes, I would see the future that is set to happen now, this very instant. If I were to look at them again, in another instant, the future I had first seen would not be entirely there.

When I was a small girl I suffered from constant seizures. Information overload is what I learned to call it. I was nine when my parents died. No, I did not foresee that. The death of my parents had been the catalyst that had started it all, I think.

“Mariana cuídate mucho, mijita. Cuida a mí viejo,” were my mother’s final words before the cancer finished its crusade among her cells.

She was laying on a bed with white sheets in a room where our village of Sor had it’s only venerated convent. Our pueblo was near the municipality that is Iturbide in Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Everything in our village was engulfed with green because of its great natural expanses, but my mother’s grayness, at least in my childhood eyes, stood out more than the mountains that surrounded us.

Her gray face, enveloped by sheets of white made her look like a mummified angel, too feeble to save us. Nuns were taking care of her. The room was part of their convent. It was where most of the sick went to die in my village, close to the eyes of God. The room had no doors. It was a hallway where the air easily flowed, and you could see the mountains outside like ancient green guardians standing tall around us. There was no way our people could afford a hospital,

and even if we could, we would have had to travel to the city of Linares that was 40 minutes away from Iturbide, which was itself a thirty minute drive.

She wasn't the only one dying here. She was one among a row of nine. The hum of a small single rotating fan that was placed among a desk was heard over the chirps of the birds outside. The sun tried to see what was going on inside with its hot rays coming through the windows, heating the orange tile floors and the beige walls. The room itself seemed to sweat.

Nobody had known she was going to die that day. She had started to eat well, began to talk more. The nuns, with their solemn looks, had gone away to save the world in another room. My father...My father. Que te dire. It is such an odd feeling mentioning him, like if I am confronting a fear. Mentioning him I am though. I guess I must name him too, for the nuns always said that demons lose their power once their names are exposed. Well, my father was Enrique. Enrique and Luz, my mother. They were popular among the village, until their luck put a barrier around them. Bad luck was a disease and a contagious one too. As soon as we were diagnosed unlucky, either by ourselves or others, usually from others, we would run to the brujos and brujas for limpieas, but hardly ever to las monjas. So, we tried to hide any oddly bad thing that happened to us like hiding the tell-tale symptom of a sickness. By adding a positive fiction, the bad occurrence would go unnoticed. Mi madre una vez inventó toda una historia. She had once said she found a white pigeon that steered her away from a rabid dog as she walked the muddy streets to the store, fortunately saving her. Things like that, until something really bad like cancer came.

My father had been at some cantina that day. Nunca le ponian falta ahi. It was permissible, considering the gradual putrefaction of his wife and small wealth. People even payed for his mezcal. I alone saw the last breath of life from my mother. When word got to my

father an hour or so after, he went missing. What he didn't find at the bottom of the bottle, he found at the end of his sawed-off shotgun. Not even hours after my mother's last wish, I had already failed to fulfill it.

Las monjitas absorbed me into their life. Era como si habían llegado en una tal inundación. They took some sort of fascination in my pain, took it as something divine. Here was a small girl being stabbed by tridents of misery from above. She must have been put in their path for a reason, they surely thought, to heal her with the special balm that was the word of God.

The first thing that was taught to me was to thank God for taking away my parents, for ending up with the nuns. The second, that only He had control over my life, able to save us if we lived a life without sin. The third was to obey, which was something I had the most trouble with. The seclusion, overtime, made me forget the world and what had happened to my parents. All that existed in my young mind were the nuns. Before I could even cope with the tragedy of my parents' deaths, they had taken me with them and sown that wound with their own needle.

I still find it funny how they walked constantly, their black and white robes always lifting the dust as if they were not walking, but floating. They were like busy ants, here and there, attending this, attending that. I was another job for the ant hive, to mold into one of them. They were tender when I cried, ruthless when I angered, especially the young girls in the convent like me.

They were inside my head and outside, and when I dreamed my dreams always took place in the convent. Even in my dreams, the farthest I could go was to the river that sinuously made its way towards the great green mountains in the distance, sometimes blocking the sun.

I was fifteen. Three more years, and I would have officially become a nun along with some other girls in the convent who were just as determined as I was. Those days I tied my hair neatly back, made sure there was not a single strand jumping out. I washed my tattered leather sandals two times a day. I carried my bible everywhere I went as if it had become another part of my body. It was a small little red book with yellow pages, bookmarked with rose petals. I placed each petal on every section that I questioned, the sacrifices, the punishments, the deaths, the murders, the conquests. It wasn't long before it thickened, and the covers began to rip. Those petals remained confined in the pages, withered just like I would have done if I stayed in that beautiful place, those silent stone walls, all my life.

I wanted to impress mother superior, everybody did, but for me that was the only reason why I studied whatever they told me to. Lorena, la madre superior. Her beauty was stunning, even with the wrinkles that had already covered all the traces of youthfulness that were once on her face. The image of Lorena being a young woman was already long forgotten in the village, but not her name. Todos la conocían. Muchos la odiaban. Muchos la amaban. Even people of Iturbide heard of her, but it was in Sor where she was a towering presence.

Before she had passed away, my mother told me that one time people from the municipality of Iturbide had come to cause problems in Sor. In a way, we were also part of Iturbide because their mayor governed our Sor, and we went there to buy clothes if we had the luxury to go. Yet, the people of Iturbide never set foot in Sor. Once somebody left Sor, they never came back, especially if they left to the U.S.

My mother had said that the mayor Juan Roberto Carpa Esponjado had wasted all the money of Iturbide in extravagant beauty pageants that were heard of all over, echoing through the valleys of our mountains. It did not help Iturbide or its people, but still the pageants needed

to go on. There came a point when he couldn't provide his people even the basic support. That's when he was finally threatened out of office. La federacion could not help him out either, so many unfinished construction projects for the municipality were frozen. Even though he was old, the mayor had this youthful charisma. He was a poor man's Vicente Fernandez, even sang some of his songs in the pageants. With that same charisma, he promised his people that the economy would recover soon and even promised a space observatory to attract more tourists that search for the great natural beauties all around. *Cómo es que siempre las promesas crecen como hierba mala donde sea que los políticos pisan, cumplidas o no.*

He sent armed men to Sor with the intentions of collecting their money, as if a few coins could help the economy. We all knew he wanted the money of the convent. That money was absorbed by donations from other convents all over the country, whoever that was near, rich or poor, that needed to ease their conscience. It was said that the men who the mayor sent, all carried a handgun at their hip, shiny boots and shiny belts. They entered la cantina, friendly and social, but their guns betrayed them always like the fangs of a wolf. That evening they drank, and by night time it was proposed to all the men in the cantina, almost all the men of Sor, even a few women, if they could contribute money. The normal banter had stopped within, even the bartender had stopped talking. Almost everybody present gave money, except for the homeless. The mayor's men said that all the money was not enough, and that was when the real plan was proposed. The men with the guns asked if the convent of Sor could help, if perhaps they could come from up the mountain to donate just for this time. It was to be a donation that would be paid back, of course, personally by Mayor Juan Roberto Carpa Esponjado, they had said. Madre Superior Lorena was called for, and it was said that she did not come the cantina of Sor, but her words did. It was said she told a messenger to tell the men publicly, *que se vayan a chingar a su*

madre, and for them to go to the cartels since they were already behaving like them. My mother says that the mayor went all the way to the convent of Sor to personally speak to Lorena.

Somehow after that the wolves were out of Sor and Iturbide now has a space observatory. The Mayor Juan Roberto Capa Esponjado went missing shortly after that, and Iturbide's crime took his place.

CHAPTER II

Lorena was old when I got to her convent, long before that heroic stance against the mayor. The convent was as busy as ever, saving Sor from Mexico itself. She walked among the stoned walls of the convent every day with a solemn look and a powerful stride as if she had just finished staring down the devil himself. That was the thing. She said she could see the exact moment when the devil was inside a person's eyes. She said she saw him in the eyes of those men lost to the cartels, in the eyes of the mothers who let their sons abuse women, in the wounded men who came to the convent to be cured from gunshots. We were told that the devil could come inside anybody, and we all walked afraid, hoping we didn't have a single trace of him in our eyes when she was near.

I kissed a girl when she found him in mine. She was my age, I think. I don't remember her name. It's a shame for she was such an important part of my life. Nothing was ever the same after that kiss, well nothing is ever the same after you start living. To what I can remember, we were friends. We talked about the things that had no place within the walls of the convent. She had seen my book, had taken out one of my petals. It had been a fresh one, saved from its confinement as she placed it behind my ear, brushing back my hair, and kissed me.

There was a weak breeze as we stood there in the courtyard, next to the only small tree there. It was an apple tree, adorned with the green of its apples. The girl had stopped to see my reaction, almost pleading as if not to tell anyone after she kissed me. I saw that she had sacrificed so many things for this moment, so many beliefs, when her hands went up to her face

as if that would hide the present and return back time. I didn't see the sacrifice on my own part. I simply did what natural attraction was pulling me to do. I was going to return the kiss, but I was startled when Lorena snatched the bible away from my hands. I remember seeing her old distorted face, what I had thought to be hatred back then, now realize it was fear. She struck me with the bible across the face. I felt the stone of the floor hit my temple when I fell as if to help Lorena herself. The last thing I saw was my own oil-thick red blood on the stone floor, spreading away from me as I lay there, towards the rose petals that had fallen as if some horrid ceremony had taken place. Lorena's polished black shoes peeked beneath the black tunic.

The entire color spectrum floated before my eyes as soon as I woke up in the nursery room. It wasn't just the visible part of the spectrum, but everything, beyond what the normal human eye can see...and it was one of the most terrifying things that has ever happened to me. The shock was so great that I thought I had gone blind, or that I was in a colorful hell with colors I had never seen before, lights I could never possibly describe because there are no words that have been invented for them. My mind naturally tried to escape its new reality, went back to the comfortable blackness as I lost consciousness again.

What pulled me back was the warmth of Lorena's hand embracing my own. It was a tight grip as if the harder the grip the harder it made my soul disperse on to the wind. The colors were still there, everywhere. Even with the dimness that only two lightbulbs provided in the nighttime, colors danced before me like flames in the air. I looked around and noticed I was in the same bed my mother had died in. I'm sure it must have been. I noticed everything was animated. Lorena's face moved constantly, every single part. Everything danced as if to be made of flames. Her wrinkles grew deeper, deeper, and deeper still, then restored back to the present form. Same went for everything that my eyes focused on. The bulbs reached their last ray. The fan rusted and spun

until it's last electric breath. The dust particles in the air moved back and forth, forever existent, not telling which was of the present or not. The walls, their beige paint peeled and molded. Then everything fell back to the present. I was seeing the movement of the present and the future in one constant overwhelming moment like a loop. The reach was advancing, transcending more, and the walls were disappearing. Lorena was decaying. Shadows of things were beginning to appear. I couldn't control it. Lorena's grip on my hand squeezed harder, and my eyes focused on her brown ones. The surroundings fell back into place, but inside her eyes I saw a story through her perspective.

I saw myself with a bandage wrapped around my head, resting in that bed. I saw her never leaving my side, her focus from the rosary on her hand then to me, even after the other nuns came calling for her. I couldn't hear. It was a colorful silent movie in which she silently cried in front of a mirror when she returned to her dormitory every night.

Then I saw my recovery, my scared look ever after. I saw her searching in her bible, after talking with me every day. Every night, I saw her under the golden light of a small lamp reading it, trying to decipher something, the darkness creeping in just as much as her sleep. I saw her cry again. Until, I saw her live again.

In the vision, I told her something. I saw the bandaged form of me talking to her with a blank stare. Yet, so heavy it must have been, that it pushed her physically away. Through her eyes, I saw her leaving the room we were in, going to the nearest cross, and fall on her knees before it.

She would resign her post weeks after my banishment. The story within her eyes went exceedingly long with the power I couldn't yet control. So far, that I saw her falling in love and

marrying an old handsome man. So far, that I saw her meeting another version of myself, greatly aged, face to face in a beach with the bluest of waters and the whitest of sands.

More or less, everything happened like I had seen through her eyes after I recovered. I understand now that there is a lot that gets fast forwarded because the conscious does not get stimulated by it, and so I don't either. I'm sure there were many more insignificant things that I saw in that vision, but only remember the impactful, the life-altering.

When I finished seeing through her eyes, I felt like I had been somewhere else entirely. I had been away from my own body but still conscious. It was as if her eyes had absorbed my spirit like in a dream in which you do not feel yourself physically traveling after waking, but you know you were somewhere far away when you were asleep. That sensation seemed to not have lasted just one night like a dream, but for a whole year. It had felt like I had actually lived for so long, to jump back suddenly in my young body. It impacted me so much that it took me days to regain my senses of myself, of who I was, of where I was. I had lived part of a life through her eyes, without her thoughts, aboard a plane where she had been captain and I the observer. Tired, frustrated, depressed, it was difficult to shake everything off once I got back out of her eyes, and that has been the hardest a vision has knocked me out.

The thing that had impacted her, the thing I had told her was of that old handsome man she was in love with. It was a secret of hers, a constant affair so heavily hidden, that when it finally saw the light of day, she was forced to reconsider everything about her life. It was the Mayor Juan Roberto Carpa Esponjado that had been her lover, the old man I was to meet alongside her on some beach.

I carried the burden of that secret, but time after time, I gave away other secrets carelessly. I would just say what I saw in the eyes of the other nuns. I saw one become pregnant. I saw one die. Those visions became true, and slowly so did a certain respect for me as well, a fear close to the fear for God.

The first days after waking up, after my visions had been known in the convent, I was alone. The stone walls of the convent echoed the busy steps, the busy voices, but I never saw the origins of them, not when they knew where I was. The girls, the nuns, everybody ignored me. My only companions during that time and the last two years I spent there were books that had nothing to do with the bible. I sought for explanations that simply the bible could not answer. I read science books, psychology, physiology, physics searching for what was happening to me, but I found nothing that could possibly explain how I got my ability after being hit by a bible and going to almost fatal coma. I wanted to know everything that was outside of the convent, only that way I thought I could explain everything that was happening inside of my head. That was one of the good things about the convent too. It was the only place in Sor that had a large library. I spent most of the days there either in the courtyard or among the books with yellow pages and shelves of red wood. I finished the education the nuns provided in an accelerated pace that would have earned me an official status if it was not for my visions, and past action of kissing a girl. That girl, I never saw. I could not remember her name and nobody talked about her no matter how much I described her face to everybody. It was as if she never existed, but then I asked further, and some of the new nuns said they had seen her in one of the pageants of Iturbide.

There were some nuns who I think were not there for the word of God. I think they pretended to be, because I would stumble upon a few, lonely like me, but not alone. Their books surrounded them with words of progression and sustenance, and I found those nuns in the library

too. That was the only way in my pueblo a woman was ever to be seen at leisure with a book and not cooking for her husband or attending to her kids or father and brothers.

There were other things that appeared by my side at that time of great, but endurable solitude. I saw transparent orbs falling gently like snow or floating upward like dust, transparent enough to not obstruct my vision and indifferent enough to not be affected by weather or matter itself it seemed. I did not know what they were, but each day I tried to touch one, poke at them as if they were bubbles. Each day I failed to feel anything from them like if those things were some sort of hologram. I never stopped trying anyways. I must have looked crazy poking at thin air, but to me the nuns looked crazier. *Ellas tanto que creían en los milagros.* They walked and talked without noticing the orbs floating up to their nose or through their heads, and so desperate they were to have seen something so miraculous. I wondered each time I touched the orbs what was going on with me, and for some reason I thought that maybe if I felt their texture, really touch them, maybe I could grab one and show it to the nuns so they could see and understand. I kept quiet about it though. They will always remain completely intangible, to this day. So I said nothing because the orbs never did either, and I did not want the nuns to lock me up somewhere o que me fueran acusar de brujería. *De por sí ya sospechaban que era una.*

Lorena dispelled those rumors in the stoned way that she told them I had just been affected by the fall I had. Yet, she kept on being vigilant of me. It was our secret. I had one on one sessions with her in her office, and nobody asked why. They simply thought I needed more help because of my injury, and slowly the rumors of my visions died down when Lorena told me to shut up about that.

Only in front of her long desk of dark polished wood was I really me. Her office was circular, and within those curved stoned walls I saw her and she saw me. Lorena and Mariana.

“You must learn to control it. Breathe, remember you can breathe, swim those waters,” she would say when I told her the visions were too long to just peak into one specific moment.

“You don’t understand. They’re too strong, Madre Superior,” I would say.

“Niña, you are much, much stronger. You are here. The visions are not.”

The days began to make sense again. Once I began to control what was in my head, my life began to be more in control too. There Lorena was, always after both of our duties were done with, late in the evening talking about a topic that could have collapsed the stones of the convent if spoken more loudly. It went well until my sessions with her began to transcend more and more of her duties.

Thanks to her, I can turn my visions on now only if I want to delve deeper into the eyes of a person, only get impacted if I plunge on to those unknown waters by choice. Also, I learned that if I look into somebody’s eyes with the idea of what I am looking for, that I am more inclined to rush to that moment in the vision like some sort of magnetism.

One of the most important rules she told me was to never use the ability to inflict pain on others. Unfortunately, I outgrew her sessions. She had been right, even in my mind her office cannot contain me. Yet, even now just thinking of her, calms my nerves like the aroma of a freshly brewed te de manzanilla. I even told her about the orbs, she told me to ignore the orbs. “Dejalas en paz y ellas te dejaran también.” So I did.

With her, I learned to focus the ability on one single thing, one single person at a time. Still, what is difficult is controlling the length to what I choose to see, like a weak dam stopping a current that is the birth of one second. One second, can change the whole momentum of this river that flows into months, years, decades. Of course, people don’t change their lives in one

second. All I am saying is that it is possible. Most people take a week, maybe a day, which makes things far easier for my mind. One second, though, is sharp enough to cut the chains that imprison or even deadly enough to kill us.

My heart sank with fear when she finally told me I had to go, that they were all already looking for a place for me. It was a shock of cold water. Just out of nowhere she had already planned along with the rest of the nuns to send me off. She kept talking about how my abilities were destined to help the world outside, not the world in the convent. I stormed out of her office that night, hating myself for thinking it could end in any other way. I did not want to go. I was scared of going somewhere I had no idea about.

The last of her arduous sessions in which she usually tried to explain the ethics of my abilities.

“I know you hate me,” she had told me in those forced lessons, “but you need to know this. It will help you survive out there. The world is a terrible place. I’m sure you have seen it in the eyes of the other nuns.”

“Why do you care?” I had asked my eyes glued to a book.

She took the book away from me. “Porque eres lo más mágico que e visto en este mundo.”

“Why are you kicking me out then? Like some *dog* into the streets,” I didn’t want her to see me cry, and I felt the salt of my tears in my throat. I wanted to stay.

“These walls can’t contain you here. They can’t contain me either anymore. We need to leave. But I am not coming with you.”

Later over time she had deviated again from her leadership duties, but this time her enemies in the convent and even in Sor placed greater attention. Something had snapped within her, something the existence of my ability had awakened.

It was only a matter of time until Lorena finally resigned, and before she did, she found a place for me. She sent me off with a nice family of Sor who had accepted to take me with them on their journey up north to the United States. Well, also to be their babysitter for their child, and Lorena had also paid them a good sum to go along with the offer. She thought the U.S. was going to be the place for me, a place that could not contain me.

Before sending me off, she called me into her office one last time.

“God made everything in this universe...All the universes, and He has made you exactly the way you are,” she had said reclining on her desk, and there was a silence after. She looked around as if something was going to happen magically. “The force of love is pure, remember that Mariana. Escape this place while you can. Before they shoot your wings off. Can’t you see the blood on mine? I am leaving this place too, but I have to stay in Mexico. If I was your age I would go with you, but it’s too late for me now. I have sowed in this land, but you... You can choose where to reap what you sow. You have to trust me. You will fly high in the U.S., Mariana. I know you will.”

“I don’t know anything about the people I’m going. They have only visited our convent *two* times.”

There was no convincing her. Everything had been put into place already. Then I remembered how the girl I had kissed had ended in the pageant of Iturbide. Was that what was going to happen to me?

The last night I was with the nuns, I dreamt that the wind carried me so high up that I could see the peaks of the mountains, but the sun was trapped among the three of the peaks. The sun was crying, and its golden tears filled the river. The higher I went, the darker it became. I woke up in the middle of the night sweating, thinking that I was about to make a terrible decision if I decided to stay. I did not have to worry about planning or anything. Everything was already planned, my guides, my transportation, everything. I just needed to jump to the risk. It was the most trustworthy way to get there. They had lied to all of Sor, all those people who made it a business to make people cross the border.

I was convinced with lies until my courage grew. The morning of my departure was all action, and it kept going and going until we got to the U.S. I met first with the family of three, and we were immediately off to the North. I remember the tortillas de harina con frijoles had made my stomach upset because I was so nervous. Yet they assured me they had a plan, Benito and Carmen. They talked about it every time there was food on the table, and the table always kept moving. During those serious conversations of planning Carmen nodded and played with her brown short curls, while Benito massaged his black beard like a wise man. We were constantly on the move, and they kept reminding me over and over of the secret code word we had to use with the coyote. *Cascabel*, that would make it known that we were with the coyote that had been assigned to us, and not of another group.

I took care of their only son, Benjamin, of seven years old. I always tried to keep the long black hair out of his eyes, and to tie the laces of his old little shoes. They were escaping poverty as if the faster they kept on the faster they rid themselves of it, but also they were escaping a death sentence. Benito told me during one of those random spots we stopped to rest how one narco had cut his ear off, had been spared. A week ago before they escaped he was

going to be forced to work for el cartel del golfo. Carmen just nodded like she had heard the story a thousand times, staring at swirled stump that was now his ear, her eyes glistening. I watched Benjamin sleep thinking how he didn't even know that his life was in jeopardy.

Anywhere we stopped we ran the risk of some member of that cartel to find us. There was no turning back for them, but for me, I have to admit I thought about leaving them and going back to Sor, to the things that I knew. I felt I was in an ocean with turbulent waters and I had to keep on swimming to stay afloat with them. What if I stopped? What if I just floated away back to Sor? Then I remembered about Lorena, how she had planned this trip, how the nuns did not want me there, not even Lorena herself anymore. No, I was not going to give them the satisfaction of me begging to be back. A chingar su madre. I went on, and why not, help Benjamin in the process. The boy was like a mirror in which I saw how my innocence had long been gone. That's what I had thought back then. Yet now I know that my innocence of childhood was really lost after that journey.

When we were near the border of the United States, we walked a lot, until it felt there were knots of steel that we were carrying inside of our legs. The sun did not behave with us as it would with tourists, enjoying a lovely tan. No, it had the cruel objective of burning into our skins so that it could touch the white of our bones. I was young, but old enough to feel I was a burden to Benito and Carmen. I knew Benjamin and I were slowing them down, but, unlike Benjamin, they could have left me behind. I tried my best to help their son, to show them my value.

He couldn't control his tears, so when he cried, he cried for us, for all of us that so desperately wanted to. We were part of a group of twenty or so, following one single man who had promised us the United States, the land completely enveloped by cool air conditioning. I believe we were nearing Arizona. We really had no idea. We placed too much trust upon that

man, and back then the lessons of Lorena were so engraved that I was afraid to look into anybody's eyes.

After we passed through the hell of the desert, we were left to encounter a worse one inside the oven-like darkness of an old box truck. I had been reluctant to use my ability, but before I jumped into the truck with them I had to make sure we were going to get out. I saw into the eyes of one of us, and the answer terrified me into a compulsive shock that was understood as a childish fear of darkness.

Before I knew it, we were all locked inside in a dim glow of a single flashlight. I was still in shock, but my shock had subsided into a silently internal one. I just remember my body braced as metal, and my mind swirling like a tornado. I couldn't talk. I couldn't move.

We were left for dead. The truck was abandoned after traveling for two hours. We were left inside the belly of a mechanical beast, slowly being digested with airless heat. I was in the corner. The only thing that was moving from me was the tears, as I watched the people wildly getting naked, anything to feel some trace of fresh air. That macabre white glow of the flashlight was terrifyingly casting crazed shadows as people banged on the walls, herded towards any tiny hole they could find. Our bodies were drenched in sweat, but even our sweat was boiling. The *screams*. They cried for God. Each person was crying and screaming in their own desperation. This is what the orchestra of a true demonic hell must sound like. All their hope was focused on their screams, once they knew that there was no way to get out. Have you ever heard the screeches, the cries, of an animal that is dying? Imagine those of a human being, the suffering that is expressed in a situation like that. In the final moment that is what we were. We were left like animals, screaming and crying until nothing made sense. We just wanted to get out of this dark inferno. We just didn't want to accept this horrible death. Bodies began to hit the ground as

they fainted. The last I heard was Carmen's wails, sharp still with intense anxiety and a never-ending urgency to save her son.

I thought we had all been saved. Bright daylight came in, and the breeze touched us like a guardian angel once the doors were finally opened, kissing our sweaty cheeks. It roused me back to consciousness. Instinctively, my brain saw the exit to survival. Border patrol agents found us. Benjamin and I were among the 11 or so who crawled out with death still pulling at our feet. Carmen, Benito, and the rest unfortunately did die. I noticed, when the doors of the truck were finally opened... I noticed the orbs, transparent like always, rush out like a swarm.

To the border patrol agents we were still criminals, the situation had not changed. We were given food, water, a pamphlet explaining the crime we had committed and the process that was about to begin. Regardless we said thank you, would have worshipped those men and women as saints. There were some that were genuinely good-hearted, but let us never forget that the world is not full of the good-hearted. They separated us in a detention facility where sections were divided by chain-link fences. Women in one section, men in the other. Boys in one corner, girls in another. Kids were separated from their mothers and fathers. I cried when Benjamin was ripped from my arms. I told them in Spanish that he was just a baby boy, he had no one else but me. The agent followed orders with a smirk that I would never forget. It creased the side of his mouth, and his blue eyes gleamed with curiosity. I had to look into Benjamin's eyes, had to make sure he was going to be safe.

There was no real higher supervision in those detention facilities. The light had not hit the darkness that went on in those places yet. This was happening in the beginning of 2019. The Department of Homeland Security was still working on a more effective system in place against

the unfortunate treatment of children federal custody, kids who arrived without a parent or guardian. It had happened since the creation of all those border agencies, still is to this day.

Our age did not matter. We were a target, a product, a number, an agenda. Every variable was against us, and the variable that I did not know until much after in my life was the Trump administration, intensifying the problems that had already been in the immigration system. They had temporarily given more power to separate kids that did come with their parents or guardians. The asylum we sought had been much harder to attain than at any moment in time. On the moment of it all though, you can't see the currents flowing against you, their source. You are just pushed, pulled, detained.

When I saw into Benjamin's black eyes I saw him treated worse than a pest in my vision. In weeks, the facility was about to 'lose track' of Benjamin. In months, the very world was about to lose track of Benjamin. He would sink into the depths of child trafficking, thrown upon those dark waters by the blue-eyed agent, and never see the surface again. The things I saw that entailed his future, I do not wish to write about and detail it to you for the sake of good literature.

He cried out for his mother and father as I saw him go. His little eyes left a trail of tears on the floor as he was carried away, never to be seen again. He was disappearing, and all that was being left of him were those tears.

I walked inside the section I was in, the cage I was in, with the other girls like a zombie ever after.

As soon as I had entered that detention center, I had been so grateful for the freshness inside. Then a cold dawned upon us and forever lingered day and night in the detention center. It passed freely through the chain link fences, plastering our skins, weakening our hearts. It is why

we gave that place a name of its own. To us it was la Hielera. The only way we could hide from the freezing air conditioning were with some aluminum sheets the guards gave to us to use as blankets. My hell had started with the flames from the sun, now it was in the stage of ice.

The aluminum sheets made me feel like a burrito. They let no air in, and it suffocated our bodies. Our own body heat lingered within the aluminum sheets causing us to sweat, and if we tried leave at least one little opening, the cold rushed in and iced the perspiration. There was no in-between. Our own tears felt cold on our faces, but it was the sound of others crying that froze me the most when we lay in the crowded paved floor at night. All that darkness under one roof, compacted even further by the chain link fences, and even further with the tight space with people next to me, and even much further under the aluminum sheets. I could not close my eyes. I felt one more layer of darkness would drown me forever. So all I could see were the tiny red lights from security devices, like cameras and radios, and I forced myself to think they were stars. Each time I heard someone sobbing I focused on those lights, did not lose track of how much they blinked.

The only way I knew it was daytime was when the fluorescent lights came back on. It was our new sun, but it brought no warmth. That was the only change, the lights. We stayed in the same place, smelled the same after so long that we had not showered. We were fed cold sandwiches for breakfast, cold sandwiches for lunch, cold burritos for dinner. We were crowded, but we were alone.

After the first week they finally let us shower. The youngest first, girls younger than me, seven-year olds five. I did not want to look into the eyes of any one of them, of anyone anymore. I did not want to know what was waiting for us, afraid that I might see again a fate in which I nearly died. I kept my eyes on the pavement, on the worn out, dirty shoes of the women, of the

girls. Small feet, each with a trek of their own. I remember the ones of a ten-year-old girl. Her name was Mirta.

Her shoes were like pink Crocs, each with a yellow bow. The colors of them were vanishing under the thick film of dirt, and the bows were torn. The same went for her clothes, but her smile seemed brand new, contagious even.

“You can go first, if you want,” she had told me in Spanish as I waited for the shower, picking up all the odors of sweat from the others and my own.

“No, no you go.” I told her shoes, then her smile.

“Okay,” she said content with the answer, clicking her tiny heels together as we waited.

Outside the chain-link fences stood the guards in their black uniforms. We were fortunate enough to at least have some little privacy. I looked around, trying to figure out who the little girl was with.

“Who did you come with?” I asked, interrupting her faint singing.

“I came with my Tia. She left for a little bit.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. They took her somewhere,” she got serious for a tiny bit and then, “Tia said she was going to get me a prize.”

She was dirty. She was alone. Nobody noticed this little girl. Everybody was busy watching out for themselves, including her.

“My name’s Mirta. Yours?”

“Mariana.”

“Like the lady of Shakespeare’s play,” she said adjusting her small stained clothes.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. The lonely one. Do you know when we are going to eat again?”

The truth was I didn’t know. I was not sure about anything. I was not even sure where I was going to end up, or where I was, but I looked at her straight in the eyes, and I said soon. I lied to her, and it still is corrosive as I write it down. I told her not to worry.

CHAPTER III

Together, Mirta and I, we felt less alone in that big cage, among strangers. Knowing her, made one less stranger to deal with, and I am sure she felt the same. I looked out for her, she looked out for me, and she reminded me of Benjamin.

With fingers touching the air that the guards breathed as my fingers went through the chain link fence, I would ask them, “What happened to the little boy that was with me?”

I only received the looks someone would give to an animal that was barking, a confused and curious stare. Most of them did not understand Spanish, but then again many of them did. We would gravitate towards the ones that stood out with the same color of our skin as if they were lighthouses in the distance. Swimming to them, sometimes was a grave mistake. They made sure to show, more than the others, how different they were from us.

“I don’t speak Spanish. Stop talking to me,” some would respond.

“If you don’t like being here why did you come? Get away from the fucking fence.” one guard told us in Spanish.

We just wanted asylum, shelter, safety. Was that the price? All of that? We kept going, kept waiting to see what would happen to us. I figured that if I had survived the hell I crawled out of, I could tolerate the wait. Sometimes the good ones explained to us that this was part of the process of getting our papers, and fixing our mistakes. They fed us hope sometimes, and sometimes we could not help from that hope fueling flames. In the second week we heard a small

girl had died. Another young woman had heard from one of the guards that the girl had not eaten at all in her journey, and that her father had signed a form when they got caught saying how she was healthy, so they did not give her any food. He was not explained of the document that he was signing and she died on her way to where we stood.

That's what everybody was talking about during the night and until the morning when the lights went back on. We picked up our aluminum sheets, but no matter how much we tried to clean, there was no fooling anybody. We were locked up. I just walked back and forth with Mirta. She told me everything she heard from the others. When she told me about the unknown girl, I knew that we really were not out of danger.

On the third week, Mirta had stomach pain. The lights went on again, everybody stood up except for her. The aluminum shone brightly amid all the women and girls.

"Mirta. Mirta wake up. They're going to get mad," I tried to wake her.

"Me duele la panza," she barely spoke.

"Why isn't she waking up. Wake her up. Hey, wake up," one of the guards began.

Everybody began to flock towards her. We all remembered what had happened to the other little girl who never made it to our cage.

"Wake the fuck up!" the guard began to hit the chain link fence and the entire building seemed to rumble, "Don't make me get in there."

The steps of another guard echoed throughout the detention center as he came quickly to calm the other one down. Several women inside kept asking her what was wrong, and I began to grow tense as if a bomb was about to explode.

“I need to see her eyes,” I said, my own eyes becoming blurry because I was afraid of what I was about to see, and I felt tears beginning to form as if to help me blind myself and hide from the whole thing. “I need to see. Let me see.”

I felt the skinny fingers of the women grabbing my shoulders, trying to control me, thinking I was in shock or childish hysterics. I still squeezed into the crowd, feeling one of my hairs had been yanked, and asked Mirta to open her eyes.

While the others asked the guards for help, I saw.

I saw her perspective. White lights flooded the vision. A void.

Then, an IV bag. Her blurred reflection was on the transparent plastic.

I was pushed aside. The connection broke, but the magnetism had worked. She needed the hospital. Now there was a real hysteria. Death in everybody’s mind. I could sense it too hovering above the enclosed roof like a giant vulture. Everybody crowded Mirta as if trying to hide her from it.

“Hey! Hey!” The guards screamed.

Guards finally stepped in to separate us. We pushed the guards also, resisted against them, and a rumble broke loose.

The green uniforms mixed savagely with us, a disarray of our worn out outfits. I crossed one altercation after the other, slithering my way through the more important looking guard. He was bald, bronzed, and powerful, like a statue of copper. I aimed directly at the general. He was screaming at a group of women, his hand on his hip reaching for something.

“Hey!” I screamed at him.

I walked towards him fast, my eyes locked to his. His eyes were mine. The nearer I got, the more I was headed towards his future, and his future towards me.

An old pale woman appeared through the blinds of a blurry vision. She laid in a bed just as pale as her, in a room with just the same dullness. For a second, I thought I was seeing my mother. She had the same vacant eyes, the corpse like appearance, the childish confused look on her face like if she was afraid of something approaching from beyond the room, the vulture?

The vision focused on the machine attached to her, on the mountainous green line that appeared on the screen. Her eyes followed something in the ceiling, but nothing was there. She seemed to ignore the tears streaming down, and solely focused on the ceiling. The person of the perspective, I saw his bronze hand reaching out for her. I saw a tear landing on his skin, and the attention returned to the machine where the line now was a plain.

In an instant the hospital staff rushed in. Somebody pushed him away, and back in the present, somebody pushed *me* away.

The blue-eyed guard hit me straight in the face, and I fell to the ground.

We must have been in a trance for several minutes. When the other guard saw their commander in a stand still with me, I heard later that all of them stopped immediately in confusion as if the guards had all been in sync with the bronzed man's mind. Even all of us stopped too, and as Mirta lay in the floor shivering under her aluminum, everybody waited to see what exactly was going on. The men and boys in the other section of the building could not see what was happening but ranted and shook the chain-link fences to know.

That's when finally, the blue-eyed guard intervened and punched me in the face.

“Fucking Mexican *witch*,” is what he had after he punched me, what I heard when I came back to the present.

The bald bronzed guard grabbed him. “What the hell are you doing!”

“Your mom is about to die. You’re going to go visit her, and she will die. Unless you take the girl to the hospital,” I screamed in Spanish to the bald, bronzed guard, and he let go of the other. He looked intently into me.

It was as if he was not only thinking about how it was possible that I knew that, but also how it could be possible that I existed. I was on the floor looking back at him, the taste of blood and tears on my mouth. I wanted to sob, but I tightened my mouth and throat.

A woman guard came back from looking at Mirta. “I’m calling the hospital.” The bronzed guard couldn’t even reply.

It’s curious, the inclusiveness of Death, our common enemy, our common savior in some cases. We were all there, all inside the cage, all inside the building, all inside the same spot of the world, and we had in front of us a dying girl.

He didn’t even look at me, slowly made his way through the crowd of guards and us. Everybody hesitantly let him through. He picked Mirta up as if she was his own daughter, threw the aluminum far away. He walked out that day with Mirta in his arms, out of the cage, together.

Words traveled fast like a long trail of sparkling dynamite, only this trail had no destination, I thought. From the guards and the inmates we heard that Mirta had gotten food poisoning, that she had been taken to a hospital personally by the bald guard. He had not shown up to work since, and I wondered what he was thinking now, where he was. Had he liberated

Mirta? Could he let us all free? Would he come to liberate somebody else next? We heard that his mother had died, and I felt terrible in having lied to him that he could save her, but I didn't regret it.

He must have been in a dark place, and since the day I had made that connection, when both of our eyes had seen the same future, I felt for him. It was as if some of the shadow that was plaguing his life had found me. I was sad for him. I missed Mirta as well. I wanted to get out. Each day I gripped the chain link fence harder, buried myself under the aluminum deeper, ate nothing. I flew to my same corner each day, perched myself upon the metal, ignored the women inside, observed the guards out. I felt like a parakeet, repeating the English they spoke so I could learn the pronunciation, hoping that somebody would finally take me out to let me fly, at least just for the amusement like some guards did with other women there. In the quiet stillness of the night, it was easier to turn a blind eye, a cold shoulder. I saw several leave with guards somewhere, and then come back even more quiet than when they had returned as if they had left behind their tongues in their brief escapade. It was the tears from them that told me what I had been thinking. Son siempre los ojos los que nos delatan.

The women barely spoke to me. I had gotten now the reputation of a witch when I thought I had left that behind with the nuns. They told me more with their eyes, staring at me from far away as if waiting for me to levitate. There were some though, that thought of me connected with the divine. My ability, to me, was connected more with head trauma, felt like another thing in my life I had to deal with. I never questioned how it worked, or what it meant. I know now that it is much more than that, more than I could comprehend or maybe nothing at all. I just know that it should not go to waste, be used not to influence the suffering in the world that already is. Como se me a olvidado eso.

At that moment in time in the Hielera I thought that it was simply there, and I used it in emergencies. Women separated themselves from the flock, and they publicly came to me still, risking their reputation.

I felt ashamed for them. Why are you coming to me? I don't know anything. I'm just a girl. You are all women. Guide *me*. You're afraid? Then, I'm terrified.

They came to me. They wanted to know what lay in store for them, wanted to be assured that this was not the last place for them.

"Mija," One of them said quietly close to the time when the lights above were about to turn off. Our fluorescent sun was about to set.

"Si?" I asked, already with an idea of where it was going.

"You can see the future right?" she asked in Spanish.

"Yeah," I continued.

"Tell me what I need to do next. What is going to happen?"

"I should not tell you."

"Why? It's bad?"

"I don't know. I just...I was told I shouldn't do it just because."

"Andale, God gave you this gift to help us. Please. I just need to know. I need to know if I'll see my family again." The reflection of myself upon her eyes began to glitter more, and she looked old as if the tears about to fall were her youth.

“Okay.” I looked around, and saw the guards were distracted with the other people.

“Stare at my eyes.”

She crossed herself like if she was about to start prayer.

Seats. Many seats in rows. Seatbelts. She’s in a plane. The small windows show gray clouds. Everybody, including her, is wearing an orange uniform. The green uniformed guards are there too. She’s going back, back to her country. She finds her way to her house, abandoned, run down, forgotten. She cleans, she sweeps, she starts again. Every day, every afternoon she stares at a wall near the busy part of town. DESAPERICIDOS. She makes sure the papers do not fall. She makes sure the picture still shows her people clearly. She makes sure to not forget. She makes sure.

I had enough of being in her place. I wanted to escape her vision. I wondered what was going through her mind while I was in a part of hers. I hesitated. Perhaps too much because when I was about to speak, she said, “No te preocupes, mija. No me digas.” Without a good bye or a thank you, she walked away, as much away as the detention allowed, drying her eyes with her yellow rebozo, and I was glad.

I was glad she left on her own. She tightened her rebozo upon her body, the yellowness enveloping her from the new chill she had gotten from me. That color made her seem warm, even in this fluorescent coldness where the floor looked like ice and the metallic fence made it look more like the borders of a petri dish.

My eyes felt like I had eyeballs of stone. I had not slept good in all the three weeks I had been here. I did not have the social stamina to navigate through the dramas of those ladies. I just stood there, as close as possible to the fence, listening to the English, listening to the outside

noises beyond the metallic doors. Each time they opened I imagined that maybe beyond stood my green mountains from back home like parents ready to pick up a kid from their first day of school. Sometimes when Lorena's voice echoed in my mind like the soothing rivers that whispered through the valley I had left behind, I saw her. I saw her on the shadows, on the women guards' faces. I wondered what her and the nuns would do if they knew this is where I had ended up. All those people that had died with us in that truck. I tried not to think about it. Every time the thought came to me, I hit my head on the floor or the chain link fence or whatever I could find, my own fist. I knew that if I stayed brewing in those thoughts, I would make the poisoned caldo for my own demise. I was glad to drink it. Everything had collapsed. Benito and Carmen had died. Benjamin was lost. Mirta was in the hospital. The nuns and Lorena away forever, not even if I returned to Sor. The only way was forward. Forward.

I was still trapped only this time there was air conditioning. I was afraid of the heat of the sun, and I remembered those stories I learned in school about the Aztecs, about how they would sacrifice their own for Tonatiuh to keep him moving. I felt the sun was looking for me, felt I was supposed to be part of that sacrifice many variables had placed us to be part of. It was looking for me, knowing I was supposed to be dead for him.

Thinking all of this set things in motion like an answer to a prayer. Mirta had not yet returned, but they were gathering all the kids now, including me. They behaved as if they were escorting cattle, refused to talk to us, to answer our questions. While the other women stared at us, concerned for us but for themselves as well, they began to put tape with numbers on our shirts.

We were going to be transferred somewhere. The guards that stopped to answer our questions told us we were going to a much better place. A place where we could watch tv, play

videogames, where all the kids were sent. A much better place. That was it. No exact location, no descriptions of how our destination looked like, just put into a bus, and we were gone. We left the women and men to God knows what, left the cage so that others could get to touch upon the cold chain-link fence where we had rested once our heads and had gripped it with all our might.

In the bus were boys and girls. I felt I had jumped into some futuristic world like those movies they would pass on tv. I had never been inside a bus like that one.

I saw the roof of the blue bus loom beyond the line we were being escorted in. As soon I saw the first kid being shoved in, I stopped so abruptly that somebody behind me fell on top of me. The sun was out again. It had found me. This was going to be another sacrifice. I needed to make sure. I needed to make sure I was not walking into a shared hot suffocating casket. Before I locked eyes with anybody, one of the guards just carried me into the bus, and I screamed, and kicked, and cursed, but nothing stopped him. Instead what stopped me was the blessed air conditioning coming from inside the bus.

“Are you going to behave? You’re going to a better place. You don’t want to stay here, girl,” the guard had said.

I sat down, astonished at the luxury of the bus. Now, I know that the bus had been nothing close to luxury in the U.S, but for me, at that time and moment, it was. Never had I seen a bus with such cushioned seats, so big, and so cold, even if the seats were ragged, some breaking at the seams.

I didn’t see the sun anymore. It was going to have to wait, and thank God it is still waiting, or perhaps it lost interest of me, and I have become just another under its reign.

The whole ride was as if we were inside a breeze traveling through the road. There were no conversations, only amongst the guards. There conversations we did not understand. I only focused on the window beside me. I forgot everything during the day. There was no hunger, kept at bay with multitude of different snacks of grain bars and cookies, but also there was no sense of danger. For me, there was just too much outside my window. The sky was one that I had not seen before, the trees that swished by were ones I greeted and never saw again, plains my eyes unraveled limitlessly without a rejection from mountains. Then the night came upon us.

The scenery was shut down. On came the lights within the bus. My eyes could no longer escape my own. In my window there was now me, and I felt the reflection of my eyes beckoning me to jump into them, to unravel just like with the plains. I rejected them, always have until now.

I turned to my neighbors, kids asleep, and I knew again that I was in a bus headed somewhere, but not free.

We made several other stops to gasoline stations, but only to refuel on gas. After close to a day on the road, we had finally arrived. It was night time when we pulled up on that facility. The “there” was finally known. A flag pole stood at the entrance, carrying the U.S flag droopily as if it too was as tired as we were. Under the stars, stood a white building that was framed by long black iron fences. A wide parking lot stretched directly in front of the front entrance, and beyond the parking lot was the road we had traveled on still going further than we were to go. Local business and gasoline stations stared directly on the other side, a perpetual staring contest between the long white building and them with the road to divide the two sides. I got caught in the stare, I could see some light from the transparent doors of the front entrance, but the bus was not going there.

It went around the parking lot, drove behind the building where two iron gates met us. Something was said on the square machine, and they opened. What was it that these gates protected? A heaven? A hell? I did not know, but all there was was forward, through them.

How did I end up here? How was I now exiting this bus in the darkness of the night, escorted. Why was I here again? Those were questions that arose from each step I took. I had escaped my country because there was nothing for me there, but there was nothing for me here too. From one institution to the next, ever since orphaned. Was this a step forward? Towards where? I had not thought of what I wanted to do with my life. What had been my plans? There was just so much that had happened. I lost track of everything. I had given myself away to the circumstances, to the waves that kept trying to wash me away. I needed time to think, to first figure out my footing, then start planning where to go, if I could go. If I could go. How long was I going to be here? What was this? Where we kidnapped?

I thought about all of this as the back entrance kept looming before us, as our presence made sense of the quiet hours of that night. It's crazy. How sometimes you can feel the beginning of something memorable, something that we feel will mark us forever, something we know we will be able to remember so well like I am doing now.

A car swished by behind us on the road. I turned around to see, hoping to see a face, but it had gone by too fast, and I wondered if whoever was in that car had known they were putting me here. Was everything going to be okay?

A breeze traveled through and rummaged my hair like an old woman caressing me to quiet my mind. Madre superior...I needed you.

CHAPTER IV

The door to the outside closed shut. It was not going to open again for us. Not for a long time. One by one, we entered and immediately were sorted out. Women and men with red vests began to write down things on a clipboard as soon as they saw us. In a narrow hall we answered questions, and we were glad to finally be asked in our own language. None of us were above 18. In that same hall we were finally able to sit down on chairs on either side. I was sleepy, and I could tell that some of the people in vests were also. Some of them were like robots, questioning robotic questions of information. Others, showed a fake or genuine curiosity, wondering where we were from. I was tired, and my curiosity could not match their own, so I responded in robotic answers of yes and no. Too much was going on for me to care about their attempts at conversations.

“How long are we going to be here?” I asked one of the curious ones.

“It all depends on your case,” a man as brown as me said without a care.

I was about to ask him what that even meant, but another lady in a red vest came with a cart full of little styrofoam bowls of soup. The steam from the bowls made her white skin red beneath her thick framed glasses. Even the glasses were fogged. I just wondered where had she made those bowls, so quick, and exactly the number of all of us. Beyond her, beyond the door she had come through, stretched more walls and more hallways in a dim white light. The blue plastic gloves on her hands were bright light blue. They reminded me of doctors. Was she a doctor?

First she asked if anybody was allergic to tomato or chicken. Nobody was, too hungry to even be. Then she gave us each a bowl and a plastic spoon while we were seated and questioned. Then we were answering the questions more honestly. The coldness of the hallway somewhat warmed up with each spoonful. This was all so weird like if we had just been absorbed into a unique little world with a civilization of people with red vests.

A lady was typing away in front of us like a mini piano concert. She would occasionally change the symphony with the clicks from the mouse that was connected to it. I had no idea what she was doing. I just knew that it had to do with what we were answering. I focused on my bowl, answered questions intuiting that the answers were going to follow me somehow. This was like answering questions to the nuns, but instead the answers were going to be stored inside those computers and not in the mind.

Beads of orange were all that was left inside my bowl. I felt uncomfortable holding on to it so I saw the nearest trash bin ahead of me, and stood up to throw it away. It was as if I had cursed out loud in the room. The people with the vests immediately looked at me, and then the nearest one explained in Spanish, “Jovencita, you can’t just stand up like that. Ask for permission.”

“Yes? I did not know that,” I replied wishing I could have really had known that.

“Now you know,” the lady said focusing on the rest of the kids.

They all carried radios either inside their vests or on their hips like a fairy clinging on to them, persuading them, informing. Every now and then they would talk to them, loudly or quietly like sharing a thought. The radio people. I wondered, who was talking on the walkie-talkies. Who were the voices behind the radios? Why did they talk so much to them?

I was just glad I was no longer in the Hielera. There was actually some decency here, but I knew that everything came with a price. I closed my eyes for a minute, tried to take it all in, and to rest my mind.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” some lady asked me.

“Yes, yes. I’m just resting my eyes.” I replied.

I closed them again.

“Where are we?” a small boy sitting next to me asked. His hair had been tussled by the naps in the bus, and his eyes by things before the trip, before his journey, much before.

“San Brown, Texas.”

I closed my eyes again. Voices on the radio kept blasting. The computer clicks. Brief conversations.

“Okay juvenes. Now you’re all going to the showers, and to change your clothes,” one of the radio people announced.

What followed was a lengthy procedure of introduction to the program that was Sunrise Doors. We were escorted in rows of 8, organized by our ages and sexes. We walked onto the wings of the building where our dorms were going to be, holding clothing they had provided for us in black flimsy bags. The girls, we were sent to a separate wing from the boys.

When we finally reached the room that was set to be my dorm, my eyes immediately laid on the bed, rested on the pillow, and ran to a big dull armour. On the widest wall directly ahead, was a small window. It framed the night outside with purple curtains of cotton. There was only the view of several palm trees wanting to peek in, and more parts of the building. I could not

believe this was really for me. My own bed. It was a small twin size bed, but I was going to sleep on it by myself. It did not matter to me that I was going to have to share the room with two other girls. Even with the nuns I had to share a bed. So the small size of the wobbly mattress did not rob me of my amazement that each of us were getting our own. Were there clothes inside the armour? In some weird way, I was looking forward to being detained here.

It was told to us that there was no privacy in the room, or anywhere in the building for that matter. All of us would be under constant supervision. There were cameras everywhere except the dorms and restrooms. The dorms had no doors, and the threshold was only crossed with permission. Only the restroom had doors, and that was the only place where one could truly be alone. We could not walk freely either, always in rows, always escorted by somebody.

One by one, we entered the restroom in the dorm. We each had no more than 10 minutes to use the shower. When I was finally allowed to use it, I stood there not knowing where to start. I had never showered under a shower head. I was accustomed to shower by buckets, the water warm from being heated by a fire or stove. Even with the nuns, a shower such as the one I was staring at was a rarity. The metallic knobs confused me even more.

There was a knock on the door.

“Is everything okay, jovencita?” one of the radio people said from outside the door.

“Yes. Yes,” I responded afraid that my ten minutes were almost over. I turned on one of the knobs. Water sprung out, and I jumped. It might as well have let down ice because the water shocked my face as beads latched themselves on to me. I had the water running. There was an unknown brand of soap, of shampoo. All I needed was to jump in, and close the curtain.

I approached the falling water with my hand first as if about to enter through a portal that began with this ice water. The shock jump-started my heart, and my body leaped into the water immediately after. I gasped for air. I trembled. I just had to get it over with. I felt like a soapy tornado just trying to wash as fast as I could.

I turned the knob again to close it, got out shaking. I wore the uniform-like clothes they gave me, and got out carrying my old ones in my arms. The new ones consisted of black gym shorts and solid colored shirts. I felt like new, and I was carrying my old self like a baby in my shaky arms.

“Put your clothes in this bag. It will go in your belongings,” a radio lady said. “Why are you shaking?”

“The water was really cold,” I said.

“You don’t know how to put the hot water or you like the cold water?”

CHAPTER V

I couldn't sleep my first night there. The radio people were immediately outside, and every fifteen minutes one of them would come in with a small flash-light and aim it on each of the three beds that were inside my room. When I was finally able to push away the whispers between the radio people, I slept for what seemed like ten minutes. Their whispers seemed beyond me, like the whispers of the river I had so far left behind, crashing quietly on to pebbles and rocks. My heart was the only thing that was loud. I kept thinking of what I was going to do in the United States, what was I going to do here. Each thought woke my heart up, until the whispers came nearer and nearer. A great brightness tried to come within my closed eyelids, prying them open. My mind thought the sun had blown away the ceiling and had aimed its white eye directly at me, finally found me.

I jumped and my eyes opened immediately. The lights of the room had been turned on.

"Good morning! It's time to wake up, jovencitas," another radio lady said, not the same one I had seen from the night before.

I looked around at the other girls, looked for clarity in their reactions, but they were confused as I was. I saw that beyond the threshold of our room the hallway had been lit up. Another room stared directly ahead in the other side. Everything had lit up, and the radio people walked back and forth, here and there gathering brooms and cleaning supplies. I thought I was back in the convent, seeing the nuns walk back and forth to start the day. Instead, their red vests reflected a little of the fluorescent lights.

“Soon as you wash your faces and teeth, decide who’s going to sweep, and who’s going to mop. The trash has to be changed too. Don’t forget to make your beds,” the lady said, tying again the bun on her brown hair, after she left the broom and scoper in our room. It was all confusing but I was glad the directions were in Spanish.

I reluctantly went for the broom. I began to do my sweeping ballad with it, one I had used to sweep with the nuns everyday. Suddenly the place did not look so scary anymore. I was controlling my environment, cleaning it. I kind of got lost in my sweeping, maybe the other girls even took it as offensive. I did not say a word to them until afterwards.

“Buenos dias.” I told the shortest one. She had long black straight hair, and her shortness made it look even longer, like a small dark cascade on her back. She was a small pudgy girl, with clear dark skin, and she smiled at me as soon as I told her.

“Buenos dias. Soy Laura,” she was changing the bag from the small trash bin we had in the room. The radio lady was standing on the threshold, facing us, but her attention was on the hallway as she talked to the other radio people.

“Yo Mariana,” I said. I looked at the other girl who was still in bed, but awake staring at the pink wall.

When I looked at her so did Laura. I guess we were waiting for her turn to say her name, but it did not come. Instead the lady came in again to tell her to wake up. The girl did not respond, but she did stand up. Silently, she began to make her bed, and went into the restroom and returned ready without saying a word.

After I went into the restroom to change into the different clothing they had given us, I sat on the bed, feeling my hair dripping a little from the water I splashed on it to tame. The radio

of the lady kept on saying words in English, and she told us that in a few minutes we were going to go to the cafeteria for breakfast, as soon as all the girls in the wing finished cleaning. I chose a pink shirt to wear, and it fit me quite loosely. I was growing anxious, the thought of having to meet more girls.

We were waiting for our wing to be called. The girls from the other rooms were already being lined up out in the hallway by the other radio people, about to be escorted to the cafeteria. It seemed everybody had finished cleaning and were ready to go. Then some other radio person advised the one who was with us something. She talked on the radio for sometime until she finally spoke to us. We saw the line of girls leave.

“They told me you all are going to eat your breakfast here, for now,” she said.

I found that weird. I looked at the other girls, and they were as confused as I was. I had to stop myself from looking into their eyes to search for what was coming next. It was addicting. I began to realize that. Maybe Lorena had known that, even before I had made the realization. Now that I was so far away from Madre Superior, the restraints seemed to have been from a dream of long ago. Yet, I felt I knew what was good for me. I remember how I felt weeks ago in the Hielera after everybody knew of what I could do. This was going to be a fresh start, fresh reputation.

We did not talk. Laura sat there on her bed. The quiet girl was even more quiet.

“What's your name?” I asked the radio lady in Spanish.

“Angela. Call me Miss Angela,” she responded also in Spanish.

“I'm Mariana.”

There was another silence.

“Why did the other girls get to leave?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it. All the new kids have to go through this. Usted va ir despues.”

The ‘usted’. All the workers spoke to us by ‘usted’ and not ‘tu’. The ‘this’ she referred to was a whole set of procedures we needed to participate in order to be cleared so that we could join the normal population. We went through numerous basic medical exams after we finished eating our breakfast. I felt the cold metal of the stethoscope like an intrusion upon my skin. I felt like the medic was eavesdropping on my being. I came out of the medical office frustrated and annoyed, but a line of girls came right after me, including Laura and the quiet girl. Laura came back smiling, escorted on to the chairs we were waiting on. The quiet girl, I could tell they had trouble doing the exams on her. At one point I saw the door opened, and then closed immediately as if she had tried to walk out. She took the longest out of all of us.

After, we were all escorted on to a room that had round black tables and posters of cartoons plastered upon every wall like if the people who placed them there were trying to hide something.

“What are going to do now?” I asked Angela, interrupting whatever she was saying to her little black radio.

“Now they’re going to talk to all of you about the rules and everything that goes on here. Don’t be nervous,” she said as she walked beside our line of eight girls.

“I’m not.”

Laura took a seat on the round table I was in. The quiet girl too. We waited for about ten minutes, and all the girls there were quiet too. Until several boys were brought to the room as well. The boys came talking amongst themselves. Several even joked. Most of us were the same age, fourteen through seventeen, but there were boys and girls who were as young as ten or eleven.

In came a tall thin man, with short hair that was parted to the side. His black beard was trimmed almost to perfection, the lines straight, the lock almost squared.

“Welcome to Sunrise Doors. I’m Adan. You all can call me Mr. Adan,” he said to all of us.

His Spanish needed much more practice. I could tell that it had not been his first language as opposed to Angela’s, and I could see that he did not talk on the radio as much as Angela either. He carried it attached to his belt more like an accessory.

He got the projector hanging on the ceiling up and running with a remote control. I stared at the device, followed the blue light it radiated upon the white board behind him. I think it was about two hours that he spoke in a monotone, reading off some slides that detailed all the do’s and don’ts. We could not touch each other. We could not be too close to each other’s space. We could not horseplay. We could not pass notes or letters. We could not leave anywhere without somebody escorting us, without permission. We were to wake up at 6:30 in the morning every day. We were to shower at nine every night, sleep at ten every night. We were to follow a rigid program schedule, where Monday through Friday we would be inside a classroom for eight hours. The restroom breaks were also part of the schedule, and eating time as well. There was going to be a Case Manager, a Clinician, and a Teacher that would be assigned for each of us.

“Is there any questions or some confusion?” he asked finally.

All of us were too timid to raise our hands, but I pretended to have absorbed all of it.

“Well, if there are no further questions, I will begin with a presentation we must introduce to you all. It is about PSA, or Prevention of Sexual Abuse. Does anybody need to use the restroom?”

This is where all of us raised our hands.

CHAPTER VI

We were escorted eight by eight on to a hallway that had a restroom. Throughout the hallways and wings I noticed decorations of things I did not understand. Art pieces of construction paper taped to various walls, boards of pictures from special events and drawings. The walls were of a greenish blue. It made me feel submerged underwater, and every now and then there would be an open office with dim warming lights. A person worked busily on their computer inside each one, too see us staring into their offices.

When we returned from our restroom break, Adan was already there. Sexual abuse. That was the topic. In an almost childish way, Adan explained to us what it was, and that if it were to happen in the program, who to report it to which was anybody at the program. There were boxes throughout the program where one could fill out a form and put in if we wanted. He also explained that there phones that were readily available to us that had a direct number to the embassies that we belonged to. He demonstrated the types of contacts that were acceptable, and cartoon illustrations tried to do the job on his slides. Back in my country, I had been groped more than four times, and in the U.S I first saw it at the Hielera. Adan's slides, to me, were childishly offensive. Of course, I knew what made me uncomfortable. Of course, I knew where my private parts were.

"It is never the victim's fault," he said, and I think that was what caused the quiet girl to suddenly leave the room. Angela talked to the radio rapidly, about to go after her, but decided to watch her walk away. The entire room went quiet, and Adan could only stare at Angela as she

talked more on the radio to the point that she breathed on to it so close. Adan continued the slides, until he announced that in five minutes we were to go to the cafeteria for lunch.

The quiet girl came back, had been escorted by several radio people, both men and women. When she sat by Luara and I again, I saw that below her eye was still the damp, thin trail of a tear that had been dropped.

Laura stared at me, and her eyes tried to figure out my reaction so that she could react the same way, but I pretended to not see it, and so did she. I felt like the quiet girl needed her privacy, but I remembered there was no such thing in the program. Except the restroom.

“Why don’t you go to the restroom?” I asked the quiet girl.

I realized how stupid it sounded after I heard my words out loud.

She did not respond.

It was time for us to go to lunch. While the normal population returned to their classes from their own lunch, we ate at last. The girls were escorted first, and then the boys. The tables were like long benches with one metallic chair on each end. Fake fruit and bread served as decorations on the corners of the cafeteria. There were windows, but for some reason the curtains did not let anybody appreciate whatever view they offered. In between the gaps that curtains were unable to cover, I could glimpse the auras of a sunny day. My eyes returned to the cafeteria, everything submerged in blue. The walls. The ceiling. Everything, except for the brown cafeteria tables, and the small multitude of people wearing red vests, talking amongst themselves, but for the most part attentive on us, waiting for something to happen.

Angela was still escorting us, and we waited in line to pick up our plate. It consisted of milk, a serving of fruit, rice, meat, beans. I did not know it then, none of us did, how much I was to detest milk after. With every meal, we were to perpetually have the only option of milk, unless we were allergic. Not surprisingly, a lot of kids then claimed to have allergies of milk to get a more tolerable orange juice.

At first, I was glad. I was hungry, and compared to the food they gave at the Hielera, this was five star. We were escorted to the cafeteria table, told to sit together with the group. Laura and the quiet girl were part of mine. I wanted to talk to the quiet girl most of all. Her mysteriousness intrigued me, but she was also one of the few in the place that might have had my age. The majority of the girls there were below seventeen. Angela sat on one of those metal chairs at the end of the table to supervise us, still talking on the radio, maybe asking it what it thought about the food because she was eating the same plate we were given. I looked around and noticed all the radio people at the cafeteria were eating on those metallic chairs, and the same rectangular plate as us. This was like a whole different kind of convent. I began praying as we used to in my own convent before we ate. I noticed some other girls were doing the same. I prayed for Benjamin. I prayed for Mirta. I prayed for my parents long gone, for those people of the truck, Benito and Carmen. I even prayed for the nuns. I thanked whatever were the variables that led me to this plate. Gracias a Dios. Even as early as back then, God to me was not a man in the sky, regardless of how much the nuns referred to God as Him, but I just couldn't decide on what God was so I stuck with the He. It had been as if the moment Lorena had hit me with that bible, she had shaken all that I had absorbed from it loose and had begun to fall down.

Now I believe in a He/She/It/They/, God, is simply the truth. The highest source of truth to everything. I have realized how flawed humanity is, and everything created by us, must then

surely be flawed, even our religions. Everything. I still thanked God, who is beyond these flaws, beyond our conclusions, beyond the unknown.

“Are you okay?” Angela asked.

I was startled, interrupted. “Oh, yeah,” I said and began to eat.

Laura was right next to me. She was poking her food with the spork, afraid of how it might taste. I got a bite. The ground beef needed salt, but it was better than those cold sandwiches.

“It’s not bad,” I told her.

She ate a spoonful, made a confused look, but smiled afterwards.

“Where are you from, Laura?”

“Honduras,” She said.

“Me too,” the quiet girl said all of a sudden.

Laura and I looked at her, then nodded. We didn’t want to ruin the moment.

“I’m from Mexico,” I told both of them.

“They keep saying that we’re close to Mexico here,” Laura said.

“Yeah, we’re close to the border,” the quiet girl added. “I’m Rolanda.”

Laura and I introduced ourselves again out of habit. How many times had we introduced ourselves to people recently? It felt as if I had been doing it everyday. The three of us continued eating in silence. Perhaps all that needed to be said at the moment had been said. I noticed that most of us were quiet, all occupied with our own thoughts or too timid to talk. Most of the

talking was being done by the radio people, and when Angela finished we were allowed to put up our plastic pink plates next to the trash like a small tower. Next to the small tower on the rack, was a door with a small window that allowed me to get a small view of the kitchen. People were with hairnets busy, walking around amid the vapors of it all. I wanted to go in. I wanted to help cut the carrots, cut the tomatoes, do anything in the kitchen just to be there like in the convent. There was a certain peacefulness the kitchen in my convent had brought me, noises crashing and dispersing like waves. All these noises created the beautiful aromas of cooking, until I was completely synced with no thoughts that belonged to the world outside of the kitchen. I wanted that again, and in that small glimpse I saw that the people were shrouded in this kitchen world, shrouded with hairnets, shrouded with the heat of the stoves.

“Pongase en linea porfavor, jovencita,” Angela spoke from behind me.

I got in line, and we were off to the hallways again, each in a group of eight like a worm. The head was Angla, except she was in the back of the line, beside the last girl. She told us when to stop, when to keep going, so a disfigured worm then. There were other worms on to the same path behind us, and the hallways seemed like our tunnels burrowed under the surface of the world, or where we inside a corpse?

We returned to the room the presentation had been conducted in and were told that we were going to be allowed to go outside. I had forgotten that I had been inside the building for the whole day, without seeing the open sky. Finally, out of the tunnels, on to the surface. Angela and the rest of the batch of radio people that were with us all morning suddenly left, without a goodbye. In their place came a fresh new dozen of them. They came in laughing with each other, talking amongst themselves, and moving all around the room. Some greeted us, others came in already attentive to what the radios had in mind.

“We’re finally going outside, Laura,” I told her.

“Yose. Ya me estaba volviendo loca sin mi solecito,” Laura said.

The sun. That made me remember what I was trying to forget. I began to wonder just how exactly were we going to go outside. Before my thoughts ran into a sort of quicksand, they called all the girls to line up.

Again in the hallways, again in a group of eight, all of us headed towards an exit passing the cafeteria. We waited at the exit for the radio person to scan his card upon the door. It gave a loud beep, and he pushed through it. I winced at the light of day, winced at the black bars of the fence’s gate that immediately stood beyond on us to our left.

To the right, I could see a wooden swing set, a pavilion, and a field with soccer goals in the distance not so far away. Beyond, glimpses of another fence. There was almost no grass, whatever that had grown, had grown there out of pure luck. You could tell the ground was constantly stepped on, by us.

I felt it again, felt the sun breathing at my back, waiting.

“Stop staring at the sun, you’re going to hurt your eyes,” the radio person said as we walked further on.

If only he knew that the sun had already hurt more of me than my eyes.

I kept walking behind Laura who was in the line with me, so was Rolanda. Laura turned to look at me quickly, smiling. The wind lifted the ends of her hair as she walked , and I got the aroma of lavender shampoo. I couldn’t help, but smile too.

There was a warehouse to our right, and as we passed that there was a small basketball court. On the other side were two soccer fields, vast until the fence right away stopped its limits. We were encircled all around by a chain link fence, and if that wasn't enough, we were also fenced in by cable posts like a big wrestling ring. In tiny glimpses I saw that outside of the fence there were houses, streets. We were right beside a neighborhood. We lived amongst the townspeople, *el mismo pueblo*.

We were not out yet with the full population, as the medics had not cleared us. So all of us out that day were new to the place. It seemed like such a big space for our small group. We were there still, free to roam to a certain extent, but we are all too timid to explore the outside area. The radio people, like ants in sync, began to spread out each in one corner. They were still close to us, but their presence was less suffocating. I went to the bleachers, gray and shining like silver under the full sun. It was windy, and the wind kept rushing to my face as if it was trying to look for something in my eyelids. Squinting, I saw other small groups of new boys beginning to come outside too. Some girls were already forming into their cliques. Laura was among one of them, laughing. Rolanda had sat on the bleachers too, but a good space away from me. I had forgotten about the sun for a while. As long as I felt the wind, I think I was fine.

The dirt of the grassless soccer fields was constantly being lifted, and sprayed on to our faces like an outburst. The sky had small blue patches because most of it was covered with great white clouds, *como una cobija grande encima de nosotros, de esas que sacamos nada mas en invierno*.

I closed my eyes because I thought that maybe if I did I could picture myself again in the mountains where I grew up, by the river, by the nuns, by my mother's side, by my father when he was happy. He killed himself when I was so young. I would have remembered more of him if

he would have waited longer, would have had more of those happy moments. He was not bad. I was afraid of him though. I was afraid of his anger, of the way he talked with his hands as if they had power to shake the sky. My mother always waited patiently during these spells, waited for her opportunity later to strike back with her venomous tongue. Maybe a day, maybe a week. It was always when he was in a good mood. When he came home from work, fixing somebody's car. She sure had a way to make him angry. I never knew what she exactly meant, I just know the tone was equal to my father's powerful hands. Even before the cancer, I don't think we had a happy moment. We did, but not shortly before the cancer. It feels all the bad led up to that.

I remember he bought me a coke, those that are sold on glass bottles, when he told me she was not going to get better. We had just dropped off my mom with the nuns. The day was very similar to the one when I was sitting on those bleachers, squinting against the sun and the dirt. He never bought me anything, and that's why I never asked for anything. Everytime we entered the small store, the only one in our pueblo, was just for tortillas and his beer. That time, with the dirt flying everywhere, with the wind making sure it reached our eyes and mouths, I stared at that soda.

"Agarrela, hija," he had said. I did not know if he was serious. "Andale."

"Y ese milagro? Y la cerveza?" the store owner had asked, his glasses eternally dirty, hair always disheveled.

"No, hay me la guardas."

As I drank the coke, he told me about my mother, told me how she was not going to come back to the house. The cold carbon burned my throat a little, and my eyes watered because I had drank too fast. I had heard too fast.

“Oye, voz. Are you crying?” Rolanda asked.

When I opened my eyes again I noticed my eyes had watered in the present too.

“No. It’s just the dirt gets into my eyes,” I said, rubbing away the tear that had transcended the border of memory.

“How did you get caught?”

“They found us in a truck.” I turned to look at her, squinting my eyes from the silver gleam of the bleachers and the heat they gave off. Her long curly black hair like hungry snakes biting at the wind. The last thing I wanted was to go over those events. “You?”

“I didn’t get caught. I turned myself in.”

“You did?”

“Yes. We were walking for so long in the desert. We were lost. Our water was too. We were walking until our feet had started to bleed inside our shoes. I felt the plastic on them had melted with the heat. We had to choose. Let all our money, all our battles go to waste, or catch the attention of the patrols cruising in the distance. It’s not really much of a choice when you’re dying. They would have found only our corpses if it wasn’t for us. Or maybe that’s what they were trying to see, how long we lasted without calling their attention.”

Rolanda looked straight into my eyes, everything in her frozen except for her curls. I was so tempted to look, to look more profoundly into her eyes. To see the dimension within.

“I hope not,” I said instead, and then looked away towards Laura and the group of girls she had befriended who were laughing, staring at the new boys that were now outside with us. She waved at me to come, but I just waved back.

I was about to tell her that we were safe now, but suddenly my name was in the air. The radio people begin to call out my name.

“Mariana Ventanal!”

“Mariana.” Everywhere.

I stayed seated.

“I think they’re calling you,” Rolanda said.

“I didn’t do anything. Why are they calling me?”

I got myself down from the bleachers and walked towards the people shouting my name. The girls were staring at me, and I did not know what to do but to just stare at the radio man ahead that waved a card on the air.

“Go to Mister Jose. He’s waving the card. Your clinician is waiting for you with him.” One of the radio people shouted.

Right next to Jose waving the card at me in the distance was a black man on a wheelchair. I don’t know why, but his appearance, just sitting there, made me anxious. He looked pensive as if he had been there for a long time, and had been staring at the sea while the young man next to him waved the card in the air for me to see.

CHAPTER VII

“This is Mister Rodrigo, he’ll be your clinician,” Jose explained when I got to them.

“Hola, Mariana. Como esta?” Rodrigo asked, stretching his hand.

“Hola. Bien,” we shook hands as if we had just made a business deal.

“Good. Come with me to my office.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“No, no. I know. We’re going to have our first session. I’m going to talk to you more about the program, and maybe answer some questions you might have if-”

“Okay. I do have questions.”

He led the way, gliding smoothly with the wheelchair. I walked a little ahead, and when we got to the door I was about to open it for him, but he stopped me by saying that it was not necessary. Instead he stationed his wheelchair a little next to the door, reached for the handle and opened it for me. He gave it a strong push, and he then followed me into the hallway.

“My office is right around the corner.”

I did not respond. My eyes were busy observing the festive decorations on the wall. Carefully crafted drawings and cutouts of hearts filled up the walls because of Valentine’s day.

“The kids love making things. They’re real good at creating,” he said. “Do you like creating?”

“Yes. I like art alot.”

“What kind of art?”

“I like stories,” I paused, remembered Benjamin. “Ones with happy endings.”

“Good. Me too.”

He opened the door to his office for me. It was a small space. The desk pushed to one side of the wall seemed to take half of it. The office was all illuminated by one lamplight, dim and golden. There was just one poster in one of the walls, one that captured stars from space, and that was it. I sat on the chair next to his desk, he just wheeled himself into it like a piece to a puzzle. The door closed, but there was a small rectangular window on the door that let me see the outside to the empty hallway.

“Today I’m supposed to inform you of all the services here. I suggest you take advantage of them. Anything is better than nothing. You’ll soon be part of your own class where hopefully you can learn English. There are also medical services like dental,” he thought for a second, “and also food three times a day plus snacks in between will be given, also clothing like what you are wearing now, a case manager to work on your case, and of course me to talk about anything that worries you while you stay.”

“How long? How long will I be staying?”

“I...couldn’t tell you. Hopefully a short amount of time, but it depends on your case and I think you would be better informed with your case manager about that.”

“But why? Why here? Why can’t they just let me go?”

“You can, but the only direction is back. Let me put it this way, where would you go if suddenly they let you free here in the U.S...? Case managers here are hoping to let you get out the right way so that you don’t have to go into hiding. But it requires a lot of paperwork, a lot of waiting sometimes.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I didn’t. I didn’t know anything, no cards on my sleeve. I didn’t know it would take so much to live in the U.S. I wish they would have told me, all I had to go through to just be able to breathe in this country, to have entered it the right way. I guess that is what I had wanted to say, but I didn’t.

“Well you’ve asked me a bunch of questions. Now don’t get too bothered, but I have to ask you some too, part of the job.”

My hands were sweating.

“Can you tell me how it was like living in your country, Mexico right?

“Yes,” I looked around the office, finished in one second. “I grew up in a convent.”

“How was it like there?

“It was nice.” *Lorena hitting me with the bible, the petals falling.* “They took care of me. Educated me.” *The lonely nights, the lonely days.*

“Why did you decide to travel to the U.S?”

“Madre Superior sent me.” *Kissing the girl in the courtyard. Seeing Lorena’s life inside her eyes.*

“Did she ever abuse you or forced you to do anything you were not okay with?”

“No. She wanted the best for me.” *Going away, being expelled. The forced lessons, the continuous bible studies. Lorena crying by the cross at night.*

“How did you get to the U.S., Mariana?”

Benjamin. His parents inside. ALL of us inside the windless dark. Their screams. Their scratches on the metal walls. The sweating. Heat. El sol. quema quema quema.

“Mariana where are you going?”

The truth is I had no idea. I tried looking into the poster of the stars, and tried to throw my spirit there somehow. Instead I left the office, just got up and walked away. I was nauseous. I wanted to breathe, and I could not even open my mouth. I sunk to the floor next to the office door.

“Mariana. It’s okay. It’s okay. Remember to breathe. Look at me. Look at me,” Rodrigo said as he positioned his wheelchair in front of me.

I did look at him. I looked into him. I was in a wheelchair. Saw the short beard on my face when I looked down, only it was Rodrigo’s. Outside, it was nighttime. I look towards a man on the other side of a street, waving at me to stop. I can’t control my wheels. Something has happened, but I had already pushed myself forward. Tall buildings are surrounding everything. Traffic lights like spot lights all facing me, all facing the moment the wheelchair goes forward on to a fast car approaching. The other man is going to cross the street, running towards me. Lights are fast approaching, the final great blinding spotlight, my heart sinks.

I was back sitting on the hallway. Rodrigo was looking directly at me, using a radio. The radio people were rushing in. I felt a slight itch on my nose. It was the blood that trickled from

my nostril. There had been so much stuff in that vision I had never felt or seen before. All those night lights, and streets, and cars, and the wheelchair, and the feeling of trying to get away from fast approaching death. How could I tell him?

“Mr. Rodrigo don’t get on the streets,” was all I managed to say as I was being escorted to the medical wing with a napkin on my nose as if I might leave it behind on the floor. I did not know if he heard me, but the others did.

I was examined in the medical office. The space was small, but it had all that you would imagine a medical office to have, all the gadgets and computers in such a small space. The walls were painted with Spongebob characters, each carrying some sort of medical tool. They looked terrifying to me because they all smiled, one specifically carrying a small syringe. Why were they all smiling about? After a quick check, the nurses confirmed that it was not serious, that it was a common thing that happened when you came from the heat outside and into the colder climate inside. The blood stopped almost instantly upon them seeing me. People in smocks walked in and out the small room or typed away on a computer nearby. I felt like if I was suddenly sick just being there. They asked me if I was okay. I said yes a thousand times, but a balding man in a blue mesh vest and a women with the same blue vest came to talk to me afterwards in the small medical office. They introduced themselves as the shift leaders, said his name was Luis and hers Gracy.

“What did you mean when you told Mr. Rodrigo to not get on the streets?” he asked and Gracy just stared at me.

“I don’t know.”

“Well you must know. You said it quite loud.”

“I just blurted it out. I don’t know.”

“Look, Mariana. We are going to have to document what you just said. This will be documented as an informational. You can’t be saying things like that because it sounds like a threat,” Gracy said.

“I wasn’t threatening him. I just...I don’t know what I was thinking. I was just trying-”

“It’s okay, but be very careful with your comments,” he then observed me, persuading himself that the conversation was over. “Alright. That will be all.”

They both walked away, and another radio person was there to supervise me.

I stayed there with a feeling of guilt. Waiting to be escorted wherever they were going to escort me next. I shouldn’t have done that. Chingado. I just messed the whole thing up. Now they will all know something is weird about me. It was supposed to be a fresh start. Well, it happened. There was no way of going back to change it, only what comes next. I just hoped everybody didn’t find out about this.

“Okay jovencita. Let’s go to the cafeteria. It’s dinner time already,” another radio person said, a new one I had not seen before. He had a scar across his face, a long one that kind of transcended on to his buzzcut. The scar did nothing to hide his young eyes, shining humility.

“Okay. Let’s go,” I said.

The kids were all sitting in the cafe tables, including the staff at each end on their metallic chairs. The scarred young man sat on one of the tables and told me to join the other kids. Luckily Laura and Rolanda were on the table that I sat at. Laura was talking to some other girls while Rolanda stared at me as I began to eat. She was across the table on the left side, three other girls

down. I think she wanted to ask me where I had been. Laura was too busy talking to some other girl. When everybody finished and we were allowed to set our empty plate on a rack nearby the trashcans, Laura came up to me, Rolanda behind her.

“Where were you? You took so long,” Laura said.

“I was talking with my clinician,” I said as if nothing exciting had happened.

“Mine hasn’t come for me yet. My case manager came.”

“Get in line jovencitas. We’re going back to the wings,” one of the radio people emptying their plate said. The radios were still in constant blast.

Rolanda went behind me in the line, Laura with the new girls she had met.

“You didn’t miss anything,” Rolanda said.

“Except the new circle Laura made,” I said smiling.

Rolanda smiled too, this time I saw her almost perfect teeth, white under the fluorescent lights, standing out from her gray shirt and blue sweatpants.

CHAPTER VIII

Our screening process was not over. Now we had to undergo an academic filter in the form of a test. This test was to dictate what class we were going to join the next day. The classes each had their own academic levels, from 1-4. The fours were deemed the most intelligent. I scored a three on the test, therefore I was a three. Laura scored a two. Rolanda scored a two also. I think all of us would have scored higher if we had taken it more seriously, or if we had slept better the night before. My eyes were closing when I was reading one of the passages. Some of the radio people were having conversations in English and chuckling, which somehow kept reminding me of what I had told Mr. Rodrigo. I wondered if they were laughing because of me. What was Mr. Rodrigo thinking now, if he was ever going to talk to me again.

The test had every subject in a packet. Thanks to Lorena and las monjas, it was not so difficult. I was one of the firsts who turned it in. The rest, I noticed, were answering whatever just to get it over with. We had no idea that this was going to impact our stay in significant ways. For example, all the kids looked down on the class who had the level ones. I turned it in, we all turned it in, not trying our real best. I think we were all thinking about where the hell we were at, what the hell was happening, or still digesting whatever the hell we had lived through before we had arrived at Sunrise Doors.

After all of us got the chance to the showers, we were escorted to our rooms at nine at night. The other radio people had left, and a fresh new batch of them came in, more refreshed than the others, but we were still there. We were all in bed, and we couldn't sleep. I knew Laura

still had her eyes opened, and that Rolanda did too. I couldn't see them from the other side of the room, but I could sense that they were awake as much as I was. I kept on thinking how I had noticed a new look from the rest of the kids, like if they were trying to decipher me, and how nobody else here was Mexican, except for some of the workers.

Then the radio person assigned to our room, which I could hardly see because all the lights were off, came in with her flashlight to check on us every fifteen minutes. If anybody knew about my incident with Rodrigo in the hallway, I did not know it for sure. So I continued to act as if nothing had happened, maybe nobody really found out, or maybe it had just been one of the many incidents of the day.

"Laura who are the new girls you made friends with?" I whispered to the air after they had come to check on us in the darkness.

"...What girls?" Laura asked.

"The ones that laughed at everything," Rolanda whispered.

"Oh those. They're really....They come from where I'm from...You both should hangout with us."

Both of us stayed quiet.

"Anyways goodnight."

"Goodnight," Rolanda and I said together.

I kept expecting the woman to come back with her flashlight, but time seemed to slow down. My thoughts began to unravel. I couldn't help but wonder how long was I going to spend nights like these. I wish Madre Superior had given me her phone number. I thought maybe I

could have called her the next day, but I had nobody back in Mexico. I really was alone now. Que pendeja fue Lorena, dejarme ir nomas asi.

I thought how weird it was to feel tears coming out of my eyes even though they were closed. They were there, evidence of my thoughts. I felt a swift presence like a wind. I opened my eyes thinking it was the radio lady with the flashlight, but nobody was there, only the cold freshness of my eyes drying its tears. That's when I heard the scream of a girl. Everybody did.

I thought maybe I was still asleep. But no. I saw the shadowy figures of Laura and Rolanda both sitting upright immediately. I stayed laying my head on my pillow perhaps thinking that ignoring it might put everything back to normal. But no. Things did not go back to normal, they never have been, never were.

It was a terrible desperate scream. It was sharp, and raspy, like if the girl had been silenced towards the end. The lady who was in charge of our room came running with her flashlight, the beam aiming at us frantically, moving from Laura, to me, to Rolanda, back to me.

We were just as startled as she was, only we didn't move. We just stared at her, waiting for her to tell us or give us a clue to what the hell was going on. The scream did not come from our room. I froze, but this time I did not want to freeze.

I got up, pushed the sheets of the bed away. I don't know where they fell. I just got up and walked to the threshold looking into the hallway.

"Jovencita! What are you doing?" The lady with the radio said.

“I’m not going anywhere. I just need space. I need space,” I said breathing heavily, trying to control my breathing, keeping myself by the threshold, ready to run if I had to. I was not going to freeze. I was not going to freeze.

I saw the other workers outside of the thresholds of other rooms ahead of us. Their flashlights were also aiming here and there. I didn’t understand why they couldn’t just turn the lights on again. The radios were talking.

More workers came walking rapidly. I saw they were headed towards the last room of the hall.

The woman at our room was as interested as I was. I think she knew there was no way she was getting me back to bed. We both watched as they entered the last room to see what was going on like the nosy neighbors at my pueblo when they heard my mom and dad screaming at each other.

CHAPTER IX

Turns out the girl had had a terrible nightmare, and she was too scared to go to sleep. Her roommates were too. The scream had been like a grenade, hurting with fear the closest to it. I slept for perhaps an hour that night, especially that girl. She couldn't sleep the next day after that.

It was nice to see the lights back on again in the morning. Whatever that had lingered in the night gave way to the light. It had all been like a bad dream. That's what it felt like, but I knew even as I was already making my bed that the lights would be turned off again, that the day was inevitably going to end and we would have to confront whatever happened. I looked out the window. It was still too early for the sun to appear. I wanted it to come out already, regardless of its terrifying heat, just to dispel more of that lingering scream of the night.

The new shift of workers had arrived to wake us up, and we all silently got up and cleaned. Silent, until Rolanda asked me what had happened with the girl. I told her what the lady who had been assigned to our room in the night had told me, that it had been some bad dream. What kind of bad dream would cause a girl to produce such a scream, that is what I was thinking about as I told Rolanda.

"Maybe she saw a ghost," Laura joined.

"A ghost?" Rolanda asked.

"Don't you know?"

“Know what?” I asked pretending not to care, brooming the floor.

“This place used to be an old hospital.”

“How do you know that?”

“The girls told me. These all used to be rooms where people died.”

“It’s almost time to go to breakfast. We have to hurry up,” a young radio woman told us. She looked at the other rooms and her coworkers while she said it, not trying to be left behind.

We were finally no longer NMCs or not medically cleared girls. Finally we were going to join the normal population, meet new kids, be part of the classrooms. Throughout that day though, it stayed with me. Laura had gotten into my head, *rooms where people died*. Yet, the anxiety of meeting new boys and girls and new places washed the words away temporarily like a stain on a fabric covered with soap, only to appear again after the foam.

We were finally going to eat with everybody else. Almost all the cafeteria tables were filled when our group of eight got escorted to breakfast. I didn’t know who was new or who had already a lot of time in here because we all looked the same, all dressed with the clothes the program had given us, either black shorts and some solid colored shirt or gray or blue sweatpants. Everybody was talking at once, the workers, the kids. Laura was in front of me. I could tell she was enjoying this. Her eyes travelled all over the place, while mine just stayed focused on what was ahead of me. I didn’t want to turn to them and realize that they were all staring at me, which they were probably not doing, but I didn’t want to find out.

Rolanda stayed quiet too. We all were escorted to sit on the same table. Our table was the quietest one, while the rest were laughing and talking. It is where the workers were more focused

on, as the boys over there found every opportunity to horse around with each other, or flirt with the girls and vice versa which went against program rules.

I noticed that some of the kids from the rowdier tables left most of their plates untouched. Why weren't they eating it? I stared at the watery scrambled eggs, the dry beef patty, and the thawing little carton of milk. I saw nothing wrong, but it still made me a little uneasy. I finished eating by the time they began to call all of us by class. Everything was rapid, being fast was, I think, their objective.

"Classroom 1! Who's from classroom 1? Line up over here." They said.

"Classroom 2, classroom 3, classroom 4, classroom 6, 7, 8," they continued until our groups were the only ones left.

We had forgotten what class we had belonged to, and some of us had no idea. They escorted us on to the Education Hallway nonetheless, where rows of other kids being escorted waited right in back of the other like a traffic jam.

"How many do you have in that class? Can I leave you one?" is what I managed to understand because some of the workers talked in spanish entirely.

"I have seven. You can send me one more."

The kids were escorted class after class until like pinballs in one of those pinball machines, each kid ended up in the right classroom. Thankfully, I ended up in a small classroom with Laura and Rolanda. There were four rows of four desks, ahead was the teacher's desk and the white board. I sat on one of the last ones, so did Rolanda. Laura had to sit more in front because the class was almost already filled up. As with the cafeteria, I felt that everywhere I

turned I was going to find somebody staring at me, only here in the small classroom they *were* staring at me.

“Finally we have new girls,” a boy with really dark skin and an orange cap said. He was about my age, and his eyes have always reminded me of a frog’s.

Neither Laura, nor Rolanda, nor I knew how to respond to that. Some of the other boys laughed in sync, and the rest of the girls stayed quiet except for one.

“Fresh batch,” she said smiling, joining in. She was chubby and her curly hair was tightly pulled back with a bun causing her brown dark skin to look clean as a pearl. “You all are not going to say hi? Que groceritas.”

“That’s the same thing I was thinking about you all,” I said. It just happened so fast. I was not even planning on having an altercation on the first day of class.

“Oh hi,” the boy said, but the girl stayed quiet.

We were old news by the time I turned my head to face the white board. At least, for the time being because they returned to their own conversations, everybody did, even the radio people who were also inside the classroom. Yet, it was clear to me that both the girl and the boy dominated the room. Their back and forth banter overlapped everybody’s in the class because their loudness all forced everybody else to be involved. The radio people tried to keep them quiet, but failed. The boy began to sing loudly, just to piss them off. The girl kept laughing. They got annoying fast. I was waiting for the teacher to walk in already.

He walked in quietly, but not undetected. He walked in swiftly, looking down, but his head high. A short, and thin old man. He had the body of a boy, but the face of a fifty-year old man, and immediately set his book bag on the desk that was facing all of us.

“Buenos Dias,” he told the room. Almost everybody reciprocated.

I could tell having all the attention on him made him uneasy. He set his laptop on the desk like a barrier between our eyes. The kids continued talking, and he began typing until he suddenly got up and leaned in front of the desk, crossing his arms.

“Any news today? Nobody left yesterday?” he asked loudly, smiling while the class was still loud.

He walked between the rows of desk, and tried to interrupt the conversation between the loudest kids. “Anything new?”

“No, the food still sucks. The workers still suck.” The boy with the orange cap said.

“Don’t forget to take off your cap, Roscar.”

He didn’t take off his cap. The teacher went back to his laptop, and the radio person joined in. “Take off the cap, Roscar.”

The teacher had a radio too, attached to his hip on his black leather belt. The tension went away as the radio began to say, “Todos de pie para el juramento de la bandera.”

“Everybody rise for the pledge of allegiance, please.” The teacher instructed.

Everybody rose, except for Roscar and the chubby girl, and two of their followers.

The pledge kept going on the little radios. They kept seated. The teacher repeated each of their names until they finally stood, and cursed him with their eyes.

The pledge was in English. I didn't understand a word they were saying, but I tried to repeat what they said, along with their strong accents. Another pledge followed. This time in Spanish. "Yo prometo lealtad, a los Estados Unidos de America..."

Then, another one.

"Yo como estudiante de Sunrise Doors, me comprometo a respetar mis compañeros y trabajadores. Dire no a todo tipo de acoso para promover la seguridad y los derechos de todos. Juntos creceremos más fuertes."

I looked around, waited for one more, but we all sat again. I noticed that Roscar had taken off his cap.

The teacher passed around the mechanical pencils, one by one, from his black pencil bag. When he handed me mine, I noticed there was perspiration in his hands. I wondered why he was nervous because it did not look like he was agitated at all. He continued passing the papers. Nobody helped him, but I think he didn't want to be helped because he didn't order anybody to help him. He turned on the projector, and just like that he began to lecture from some slides.

"Today we will be talking about ecosystems and their-" he said and was interrupted by the radios, including the one on his hip.

"First classes to go outside are 1,2,3," the radio said.

He silenced it, and continued on and on, one interruption after the other. It was sort of hypnotic. His droning on, caused me to day dream. I'm sure that's what it caused most of us to

do, because for one small moment we were all quiet until the kids in the back interrupted with their side conversations and laughter. He kept going, walked towards them, and continued his seemingly infinite lecture right next to them until they quieted down.

“Why is an ecosystem important to plants, Roscar? Mina?”

“Because,” replied Roscar.

“But why?”

Desperately, stubbornly he tried to make us think. I did, and before I knew it, after several minutes of droning on, the radio talked once more.

“Classroom 4. Classroom 4. Could you all please make your way outside for P.E? Classroom 4,” they said this time in Spanish.

“Yes 10-4.” the radio person said, and in sync the teacher and him began to ask everybody to line up.

“Looks like you all got saved by the bell. We’ll finish when we come back. By the way, my name is Jacobo. You can call me Mr. Jacobo” the teacher said, looking at the new kids and me.

We lined up, but it was a whole different kind of struggle to get Roscar and Mina to get in line and be escorted out. After waiting an awkward eternity they finally joined the two lines. Through the hallways, more people watching us, more kids, more voices on the radio. All through the way, they could not stop singing or laughing or both.

P.E. was done where we had gone outside where those bleachers and fields were, except this time there was a coach telling us all what to do. I could feel the abrupt change of the artificial weather inside to a drier, more natural and calid one as we walked out.

I was sort of hypnotized with the shadows of clouds that moved across my feet on the dirt like a tide, coming and going, as we all waited for everybody to get ordered in lines. I looked around. Still the fence stood around us, and beyond the fence another barrier of small houses and brown crooked electric posts. A white butterfly flew past my eyes, mocking me how it could just fly away. In a type of greeting to the sun, I stared at it directly, acknowledging it. Was it paying attention?

The coach began to tell everybody to do jumping jacks in Spanish.

“Mariana Ventanal!” I heard my name as I jumped.

I turned towards whoever was screaming it, and got out of the ranks of kids. It was my clinician, Mr. Rodrigo. I was glad to see that he was willing to talk to me again, after all that weird stuff that had happened. I didn’t want to look him in the eyes, so I walked turning my head somewhere else as I walked towards him. We greeted each other, and it was much like the first time we met, until we got into the office. I was glad to enter the fresh air conditioning once again.

Almost right after I took the same seat I had taken before, he asked me, “What did you mean when you told me not to go out into the streets, Mariana?”

His hands rested on his lap as he waited for my answer in a sort of meditative pose.

I saw the options I had before me, well metaphorically. Him being a psychologist, I knew that I risked being dismissed as insane or worse, a liar. If I lied, perhaps he would think I threatened him out of anger, and that I was now taking it back. That route made me a coward. There was no way of explaining it other than the truth. I could have told him that I just spat out those words in a panic, but he would not believe me. I knew that he already had an idea of my ability. He would not have been standing before me if he had not paid some type of concern to my words. He would have died because my in my vision I think he did, and maybe it had been days after we talked. That car was going right for him. If I shut down and decided not to speak, my outburst would surely categorize me with some mental illness. That is what I thought at that moment, and perhaps it was not the best decision, maybe not even close, but I chose to tell him the truth. Maybe I was just alone. I was alone.

“When I saw your eyes, I saw a vision of you about to get hit by a car,” I said.

He looked away from me. Looked at his computer screen. Then back at me. “I remembered what you said after I left work. The brakes on my wheels didn’t work. My wheel almost popped off after I left...You observed my wheelchair closely. That was your way of telling me to watch my unmaintained wheelchair. There was no vision. Right?”

“...No... There was no vision.”

“I replaced my wheelchair with a new one. I didn’t know it needed replacing until it was about to be too late. Thank you.” He moved the wheels of his chair a little forward and backward to show me the new wheels. “And I apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable last time. They were questions I have to ask.”

“It’s okay. I just started remembering some stuff.”

“Well, I’ll be here waiting for whenever you are ready to talk about that stuff, if you want to.”

And I didn’t, not that day. We continued on talking about superficial stuff, and the happenings of the program until it was time for him to escort me back outside to P.E. It got me thinking as I walked back outside. How could I talk about something as if it was the past, when in my mind it was still going. I didn’t know where Benjamin was. I didn’t know if his parents were even buried. I didn’t know where Marta went. Those screams were still there waiting for me to hear them if I went back into the memory of that truck. I needed to get out of here. There so many things I needed to do, but did I ever really have a plan?

Rodrigo was right. If this was necessary for my next step in the U.S., well then I had to be patient. Nobody was waiting for me. That’s what I realized. There was nobody back in Mexico, nobody in the U.S. Que más daba si me quedaba ahí?

“Next time we’ll talk more about those visions....,” Mr. Rodrigo said as he left me to complete P.E.

I got back to the field where everybody was. The boys were playing soccer, the coach acting like a referee with his whistle and yellow stopwatch on the other hand. The wind carried the dirt their shoes lifted like an ocean spray. They played intensely and intently. They didn’t laugh and made a fool of themselves like most of the girls did. The girls laughed and fell funny in the smaller field next to that one. It seemed like a battle for the boys though, a pointless one it seemed to me. I continued to the bleachers. Ni de aqui ni de aya.

I didn't want to join any group, not that we could play with the boys anyway. I didn't feel like having fun, didn't feel like playing seriously either. I was about to take a seat when a radio man came up to me.

"You have to participate. You have to play something," he said.

"I just don't want to play soccer," I said, looking at Laura giggling as she missed kicking the ball. Rolanda was walking around the field.

"You have to be active. It's the rules. At least walk around like her, but you can't just be here and-"

Then there was a loud whistle from the coach as he separated two of the boys that were about to get into it, something about a penalty, and everybody turned around to see the only real exciting thing about to happen.

"Hijo de la gran puta! Si fue penal voz!"

"Que no fue pinche maje!"

Just like that the boys clenched their fists and promised the worst to each other, but just like that also the workers got around them and the coach himself eased the situation. They both were pulled away from everybody and stayed behind. Our P.E. time had finished. The teachers screamed their class numbers, and told us to form a line where they stood. One class followed after the other, back to the classes, back inside.

CHAPTER X

Each time those doors clicked shut behind us, my skin got cold from the inside my body as if my own blood had frozen and it seemed to want to escape from each and every pore. It went away as fast as it started, as soon as I kept walking in the group, turning the hallway, towards the Educational Wing.

Back in our classes all the boys came back with their shirts damp, and the girls with little hairs sticking out of their buns like coronas. I did not have a bun, and rarely wore one so my hair probably looked crazy. There was no mirror in the restrooms, and the reflections of the windows we passed by did not help much.

“Mister Jacobo, we need to go to the restroom,” one of the girls said.

“Si miss,” another one joined looking at one radio lady that was standing by the door. Beads of sweat were on her face, and even her bun too was a little disheveled from the wind outside. She wiped her glasses and faced the teacher. They both said something to each other in English and nodded after. She spoke to the radio, “Llevo 8 jovencitos a los baños de Fish Tank.”

Fish Tank restrooms are what we called them, because there was a fish tank in between the doors of the boys and girls restrooms. It was at the end of the hallway, close to our classroom, and every time we went I could hear the constant filtration of the water from the little tank, like a little river stream. The sound could never be like my river back home. This one had a whisper that repeated itself over and over, infinitely the same tiring note. There was no change,

no news that rivers seem to carry among their currents. The fish just stared at us. They were in a fish tank, inside a bigger fish tank were other bigger fishes with legs swam in straight lines.

We all sat back to a class that we forgot was still happening. Mr. Jacobo continued right where he had left off.

“Why are ecosystems important for an animal or plant?” he asked the class.

We continued to copy what was on the slides being projected. I wanted to say something to avoid him thinking we were all dumb, but I did not have the courage. What if I was wrong?

“Because the plants live there,” Roscar said then threw a paperball at one into one of the trash bins far away. Surprisingly, he made it.

“Roscar. Why aren’t you copying this down? This will be on the test and don’t be throwing papers around. That doesn’t look good on the cameras, they are always watching. Don’t make us start documenting stuff,” Mr. Jacobo looked at the camera at the top corner of the room that seemed like a black small bowl.

“I’ll remember it. I can remember everything,” he said and laughed with Mina.

“Well let’s see about that,” he said, and continued, “An ecosystem is important for a plant because it greatly depends on the type of land to make the type of plant. A cactus can’t sprout on Antarctica right? And if it were to be, and somehow survived, then that plant would have to *adapt* to its land, somehow adapt to the frozen land.”

No comments from us.

“It’s like you guys. Well everybody for that matter, but especially you guys here right now. To be in this program, you are all following its rules, its newness. You are adapting. You had to, right? To adapt to that change because it is very different from your home countries. We all need to adapt. If we don’t adapt, and try to grow with our surroundings, then we will perish like that cactus in Antarctica.”

We had to make up a brochure out of construction paper after his lecture about ecosystems, but that had stayed with me as I cutted the outer edges of my purple sheets, as I went to Fish Tank restrooms again, as I heard Laura talk among Roscar and Mina, as I tried to fall asleep by the end of the day, as I write this today.

But before the class would end, workers came again to hand out snacks to us which consisted of little juices with a packet of Oreos. Mr. Jacobo would continue his chorus of information once more, only to be stopped by a case manager who would enter the class to pick up one of the students, and again it would resume. Then a clinician would come to pick up another. Amid the sporadic voices of the radio, and another interruption from the medical department, his sails would gain strength, finally a little progress in the lesson of English or science. I, as well as others in the class, tried to focus on the English part of the lessons most of all, but at times it would all go to a complete an utter halt. After a boy or girl who had been picked up by a clinician or case manager came back to class from a batch of bad news, either from their home country, or from the happenings of their case. There were ones who sobbed silently in their desk, but others like Roscar who came back a tornado, throwing whatever there was in his path.

It was among these stormy winds in which class was given. It felt like the class was in an outside place and not in the actual classroom, vulnerable to the forces of a day in the

program. We sailed to this direction, to the other, but sometimes, sometimes we did learn. Trial and error. Repeat. Repeat, until it was a good day for Mr. Jacobo, and for us.

After his class was what they called vocational classes. That consisted of cooking, sowing, gardening, carpentry, and computer typing. Sometimes that would take place in the very same classroom of the morning so that time felt it had not travelled, and we were stuck in the same classroom morning and afternoon.

Whatever was unable to happen in the classrooms, happened during leisure time. Insults, punches, love letters were given among the kids, sometimes even to the workers too and they would get more in trouble than the kids. Fights over who would get to play next on the video games on the leisure rooms, or who would get to hear their next song on the internet. Remotes thrown; televisions screens broken. Workers more aggressive in their tones, even insulted back because they were afraid to take any chances, afraid of a serious incident happening and getting fired. So because of a few acting out we all were treated under a more vigilant and strict eye.

I was in a leisure room with Laura. Rolanda had gone to another and I was surprised she had not come with me or Laura. Girls sat all around a television where music was playing like a chimney keeping a room warm, all of them painting their nails with cheap nail paint that had been donated by the program. I just wanted to listen to the music, and hear what the girls talked about, and see them smile. I think I was in the room where most of the girls wanted to be in, where most of them were. They talked and talked and talked. It was kind of nice because sometimes they would talk about funny things that were not talked about in the classrooms around boys. They talked with hidden meanings because they knew if one of the radio people heard, we would be written up for making such comments.

“Your friend is weird,” I heard one of the girls telling Laura. I tried my best to seem occupied.

“Who?” she asked as she painted her nails a bright pink.

“That girl who always walks alone outside, I don’t know her name.”

“She’s not my friend,” Laura smiled, and blew her nails.

“Oh, good. She’s always looking at me like she has a problem. She’s gonna get slapped one of these days.”

“What did you say?” the radio lady at the corner said suddenly. We had forgotten she was there. She had been standing there like a lamp.

“No nothing. That her friend is cool.”

“No that’s not what I heard,” the lady said and started calling somebody on the radio. The girl pushed the nail polish aside.

“You all are so fucking exaggerated. I didn’t even say anything.” She said.

The group was all quiet, and the music kept on playing, Christian music because that is what the workers always allowed to play. The girl just walked off. Shoving others in her way.

The lady screamed on her radio. I think she knew her job was at stake the moment she had mentioned the slap thing, and now she had panicked. She stormed after her too, but she could not leave us unsupervised. She froze until others came to help her, and brought the tall girl back with her eyebrows so clenched there was a thick line on her forehead like a scar, or maybe it was.

Anonymously afterwards we were all asked if she had said something about slapping Rolanda. I said yes, yes she had. Her anger episodes were common I heard, due to an early pregnancy. Rumor had it the baby she was carrying was from somebody that had raped her on her journey crossing to the U.S. I never asked, nobody did, but when I saw her there was a sad feeling that deep down I knew it was true, and her belly was starting to grow. Her name was Isela and she didn't allow anybody to feel sad for her because she always had an attitude with everybody, except apparently Laura.

Before it was time to go to sleep, when we all met again at our rooms to shower, I saw Rolanda again. She was quiet as always, dealing with something, either current or the past, or maybe just being. I could not tell with her, and I did not want to look into her eyes, not anybody's. I was sorting out my own future. I did not want anybody else's plaguing my mind.

"Where were you?" she asked me.

"I was with Laura in the room where they were doing nails," I said as we got our clothes ready for the shower. Laura was already in the restroom.

"You did your nails?" she looked at my uncolored nails.

"O no. I just like being there."

"Why? It's just a bunch of chismes."

"They're funny. The things they say."

"What things?"

"Just stupid things. It distracts me for a moment. Entertaining."

“Ah okay. Like a tv show,” she finally smiled. What was funny is how that smile changed everything about her so suddenly. She went from dull, to sun-like in one instant, before it disappeared.

“Have they told you how much time you’re going to be here?”

“Not exactly, but it could be a long time. I don’t have a sponsor. It’s what they said. Nobody is waiting here in the U.S. for me.”

“Me neither.”

Laura came back strolling like the freshest creature in the world already dressed, but her towel in her hair like those rich people in novelas.

“Ay why all serious? Who died or what?” she asked.

“I’m sleepy,” Rolanda replied for us both and left to the shower.

I waited for Rolanda's presence to stop lingering like a perfume, and then I said, “Why did you say Rolanda wasn’t your friend to Isela?”

“What?”

“You said she wasn’t your friend when she asked you.”

“O you know how that girl is. So problematic. She would have made a big deal if I would have said yes.” She stopped adjusting her pillow and sheets, then turned towards me. “She would have talked more bad things if she knew Rolanda was my friend.”

The radio lady standing outside the doorless threshold of our room came in to ask if everything was okay. We both nodded, dismissing whatever vendetta we thought had risen. By

the time Rolanda came back in the lights were beginning to turn off, and our whole room smelled of lavender shampoo.

CHAPTER XI

Everything was dark again, our night during our stay would only be seen through the window. There was no scheduled time to go out at night, so we never did, never would, and that is why our night sky was our dorm ceiling. The curtains of the window in our room were closed, but in between there was a gap from which I think I could see the faintest white glow of the moon's face of that night, fortunately not letting me forget of the real night with stars. The whispers between the radios and workers outside our rooms reached and departed our ears like a slow tide.

I remembered then the girl's scream from the night before, that the building had been a hospital. Something in my mind had turned on like an engine firing up. My mind kept on spinning yarns, thinking for I do not know how many hours. To remind me that I was still awake, the radio lady had come in with her flashlight to check up on us. I stared right into the beam, and I think that had startled her, but what startled me was the small girl in the blue dress that swiftly ran beyond the threshold of our room on the dark hallway. I saw the blue even with no light. I quickly sat up, and the radio lady gasped.

"What's wrong?" she had said.

Right when I was about to tell her, the cry of a little girl surrounded us like some smoke. It was all around us, and there was no way of knowing where it was coming from. It just filled our space.

It went away just like smoke too. I could not see our faces, our confusion, our fear in the dark. Everybody heard the cry, but out of that cry like some hidden code was something that only I could hear. The words in Spanish “He is here again.”

The radio people told us that it was nothing. They knew that we had enough troubles, and I knew that the majority were actually trying to protect us, but that channel of truth had been cut off. I did not trust that. We all know what we heard, and it made me angry that they would pretend like it was nothing. It made me feel crazier than I already felt being detained. I wondered if I had been the only that had seen the little girl.

They told us that it had been the cries of a jovencita in another wing, that we needed to go back to sleep. All night, we heard how their whispers stacked on top of each other to bury the occurrence. All night, we did not sleep.

It is such a weird feeling to wake when you never slept, to start another day when the last one never ended. That is how the morning began with the abrupt flipping of the light switches. One hallway after the other, one room after another, all lit up in chain reaction. Rolanda, Laura, and I did not speak to each other as we got up to clean before breakfast..

“Andale jovencitas, se nos hace tarde,” said Angelica. I was starting to recognize the workers now.

Everything was moving, a schedule already planned out for us, and it carried us off like a current with our sleepiness and all. It rushed us to the cafeteria, to the classes, and whatever was scheduled after, every single day in the exact same order.

Clouds of bad mood hovered on top of every kid that day, and the days after. Every one of those clouds were heavier and heavier until one finally stormed. Some, with painful lightning

for others around. It was tough forgetting or moving on from what had happened to us before this journey in a place where everything was the same. Our demons were still on our backs and there was no chance for us to shake them off privately. So we entered the classes, sat on the desks, hunchbacked.

To top it all off, there was weird paranormal stuff happening in the night that robbed us of our sleep. You add all that into the mix, and the stew is bitter and hateful. Fear is the worst seed of all. From it, there is the fruit of hate, and leaves of so much negativity. It is hidden beneath the surface, and most of the workers only saw our hate. It took a great deal for some to get beneath the dirt, and take that fear out.

Those days the kids who were already the troublemakers, doubled in their troubles. Many of them complained about the workers not letting them sleep with their loud radios, and about that girl who had cried. Nobody wanted to seem crazy complaining about a ghost, especially with clinicians right down the hallways, but amongst us the word was that it indeed had been a little ghost girl's cry. It's the little girl of the old hospital from long ago, is what they said. She liked to play and run around. And what of the dark shadow man that came out sometimes too? Nobody talked more about that. Rumor also had it that one of the classrooms used to be a morgue, which I found ridiculous. Yet, the morgue had existed, every hospital has one. So it did cause me to question which room had been where the dead bodies had been stored, had that little girl's body been stored?

All these scary things, they tend to lose power during the day, or we are just not focused on them so much when everything is lit before us, the ugly and the beauty. The commotions of the days caused me to forget, or slowly detach from what had happened that night. That whole week had been a commotion. The whole month. The ghost girl did not appear. Of the dark

shadow man, only whispers of stories that everybody tried not to believe, traces that nobody wanted to follow.

For the first days after the little ghost girl's cry, the heads in my class were inevitably finding themselves magnetized to the desks. Mr. Jacobo and workers kept telling us to pick up our heads, to wake up. The energy was not there, and there was no way of catching up on our sleep because there was no nap time in our schedule that flowed in the same order day after day. The only time we were ever really alone was in the restroom, but even then we went in groups of eight, and if you took too long the workers were authorized to open the door with a key. The program schedule kept going, and our debt of sleep to our bodies kept building.

Wake up, clean, breakfast, eight hours in the same class with P.E. in the middle and lunch also thrown in, then vocational classes like cooking or painting, then leisure activities with groups, then the showers, then sleep, never separating from one another or from the workers. Still with all this unity, there was a feeling of not knowing anybody. Still with all this suffocation, the feeling of being lost.

There were some that had been immune, able to sleep over it all. I think it was only my dorm wing and the one next to us that have heard of the sleepless nights. We could not sleep, something tied our minds during the night up to a rocket that travelled to wherever our minds go when we can not sleep at night.

A boy in P.E. almost punched one of the workers when we were all outside. He had arrived barely a week ago. Our time of being the new ones in there had ended. Without an announcement without a trail, we had been absorbed into the place, had become part of it like its

walls and like its desks. That boy, though, he had screamed a night before he had blown up outside.

I was in bed, thinking about Isela, and whether I should tell Rolanda about what she had said about her. I was thinking about what I could do to get out of there quicker, if I needed to start using my ability. I could hear the steady hum of the air conditioning, and the whispers from the boredom of the radio people who had to stand vigilant. There was a smell of food that awoke all the hungry bodies because the workers also took their lunch in their assigned area in the middle of the night, amid all of us who were supposedly already asleep. Sometimes I could hear those delicious plastic crunches that anybody could universally recognize as a bag of chips. Me imaginaba las sabritas, los fritos, que vendían la tienda de mi pueblo. Then, it just happened to get colder, even beneath the sheets of the bed. Ninguna cobija había podido taparme de ese frío tan sigiloso.

I opened my eyes slowly. I couldn't tell what time it was because there was no way of knowing unless I asked the worker outside. Faint glows from the curtained windows made the darkness visible. A giant exhalation of something seemed to have followed a darkness that flowed its way through the hall swiftly like a dark wind. It's like whatever that was moving gathered the shadows that were around us as it made its path, and the place seemed darker.

The radios started going off. Something was going on. I heard the ghost girl in a whisper that sounded like she was sobbing, "Ayuda el niño." Everything in my body started to tremble. I don't know if it was the cold or what, but I sat up straight. The radio person came with her flashlight beaming at me, then at Rolanda and Laura who looked like they were asleep. I knew they weren't. I heard a faraway scream of a boy, faint but there.

I got up quickly in the darkness, almost tripped with my blanket.

“What happened?” I asked the worker.

“It’s nothing. It’s nothing. Just go back to sleep or I’ll report you.”

There was fear in her voice, and it got verified with the threat she gave me. El reporte... A documented bad behavior that stained our case file. Before she thought of more threats, I went back to bed. Fear makes people do horrible things without them knowing the horror of those things.

I tried going to sleep, but my eyes kept watering. What the hell was going on? Where the hell was I? I wanted to go back, but then I remembered everything that had happened to get here. Those lives that were lost. Adaptar. Adaptar. Adaptar. Adaptar.

CHAPTER XII

“Buenos dias jovencitas!” The lights were turned on all around. Our false sun had risen.

It was my turn to sweep and mop the room, Laura’s to throw the trash away, Rolanda’s to clean the restroom. As I was making my bed I asked without looking at them, “Did you all hear the boy’s scream last night?”

There was silence, until I stopped what I was doing to see why it had lasted for so long.

“Yes,” Rolanda said, her curly hair yet untangled from the tossing and turning of the night.

Laura stared at her, then at me, “Ya van empezar con sus cuentos.” She went to the restroom, tying her hair in a bun along the way.

Rolanda was making her bed, but she had stopped, gripping a pillow. “What do you think it was?”

“I don’t know, but...nevermind,” I said and focused on my bed.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Stop. I know you wake up in the middle of the night. I don’t sleep too.”

“Nobody can sleep here.”

“But you wake up before the really weird stuff happens.”

“No, I-”

“Mariana. What do you see or what?”

We stayed staring at each other, and I wondered, should I really stare into her eyes, see her future. How tempting it sounded, to see, but I felt ashamed, especially with her.

“Com’on jovencitas, they’re about to call our wing to breakfast. Let’s keep it moving,”
The radio lady said.

Laura came back with a neat bun, ready for the day. Of us three, she looked like the only one who had had a goodnight sleep, her brown skin so fresh with the gleam of her neat black hair.

The whole time in class, I couldn’t focus. I kept thinking about what Rolanda had asked me. What the hell was it that I saw? They were not ghosts, I think even the ghost girl was not really a ghost. Before and after my ability, I never saw what people have told across time, of those humanly transparent versions of ourselves. No, I have never seen that to this day, but I know that in this world our energies from the decisions of our lives, our intense pain, our intense happiness that we lived through, fails to disperse itself after, and it lingers. I see it in my visions, I feel it everywhere I go, and I think it has something to do with the transparent orbs so at least they got the transparent part right.

The orbs look different outside in the sunlight when I walk through Washington D.C, through the monument of Abraham, of Martin Luther King. As always, like bright drops they rain slowly downward, or float directly upward, but the multitude of them is much greater. I have

grown used to them just like the natural miracles we all grow used to, rain or snow, just like Lorena had told me. In fact, it has been a long time since I stopped by the sidewalk of the city and just *look* at them, just try to touch them like I used to when I first saw them in the convent. Always with the assurance, of course, that my fingers would go right through, touching nothing, but still I hoped of one day to feel the orbs' touch. I stopped trying. The sound of my heels under the sun or moon do nothing to waken them from stopping their paths, not even the weather. So I do nothing too.

Yet, the entities at the program...I haven't seen anything like that since. I wondered that day in class what they were, and even now I wonder. Maybe we can only see certain things at certain times in our lives. If I look for such things again, would I find them? Unfortunately I know there are simply things that we will keep wondering for the rest of our lives, a riddle without an answer. No matter the science, no matter the knowledge.

I was trying to wrap my head around what I had seen, how long could I go ignoring things under the eyes of Rolanda. Then the classes got escorted outside for P.E. on to the small fields where the coach was waiting under the bright sun. The workers, including teachers, established a perimeter around us, around the tall chain linked fence. Perimeters inside perimeters. Beyond the fence, those houses surrounding us of the neighborhood, and like tall pine trees the electric posts with long black cables stretched too around us. The black cables holding on to each pole as if they were united in keeping us there too.

After numerous reprimands in trying to keep order among the boys, we started with the warm ups. Then we were told to make 3 laps around the field we were in. Under this sun, nobody wanted to prove their athleticism. It was explained to us over and over how in the high schools we were going to be part of, if we made it to live in the U.S, it was required for us to pass this

class so we needed to get accustomed to it, we needed to participate or else we were going to get un reporte por no participar. After one group ran all the kids followed. I didn't want to start sweating, but I was already sweating anyways with the humidity and the heat. Where was Mr. Rodrigo to pull me out of this class?

By the first lap I saw some workers huddled by the metallic benches. A boy was cursing at them, and I could hear him saying he was not going to run. He was perhaps twelve, and he had been the boy who had screamed the night before.

“Me vale verga. No voy a correr.”

We were told to keep going and to ignore the commotion.

“Why don't *you* fucking run?” the boy told them in Spanish.

“It's for your health. Look, my dad, he's really old, and he runs, and it's been so good for his health. If he can do it,” a woman with the red vest was explaining to him.

“I don't give a fuck about your dad. I hope he dies.”

I couldn't hear what was said next because it was now the second lap, away from the tension, but the boy did finally run. He ran away towards the part of the field where there were no workers, and we all stopped dead on our tracks. He was headed toward the fence. His short but still long black hair flowing behind him like a wild horse. He was past the soccer goals now, and the workers sprinted now after him.

When he reached the high fence, we saw that he just sat there, or more like collapsed. He put his hands on his eyes, not seeing the workers already near him. He was crying, even in the distance I could see his chest heaving up and down, shaking.

The ones with the blue vests, the shift-leaders, came and escorted him back inside the building, but for some reason he was limping.

The theatrics of the workers already long passed, we found out back in class from other kids and even workers, that his feet were blistered. Few days had barely passed after his journey to this program, a journey in which he said he had crossed the river with shoes and all, and the long walk afterward had damaged his feet due to the damped shoes. His feet had been walking with that wrinkly skin you get when your skin has been wet for too long, making it easier for his feet to blister. He had been walking like that for days. They had said he had screamed the night before, that he had a terrible nightmare of a dark shadow man. They had said he was chiflado. They said he didn't stop crying all day. They said that when he peeled off the white new socks that the program had given him to answer all their questions, they were bloody red. Then they said nothing.

CHAPTER XIII

When the medical department treated his feet, he came to join us again. Everywhere he went, the sound of the conversations died down, but we found out his name was Alex. He was quiet after his incident.

The classes continued but the learning time, at least in my class, was decreasing too. Mr. Jacobo could barely continue a full lesson because of the incidents that he had to document in his laptop that always waited in his desk like an assistant. From kids bullying each other to even bullying the staff, and even separating a fight or two between the boys. Roscar and Mina were uncontrollable too, especially during this time. They did not try to pay attention, they did not do the work. I tried to complete it, but it was hard to learn when the teacher was occupied with other things like reporting incidents that happened constantly.

I saw Mr. Rodrigo again finally that week. He had many other kids to see but it was finally time for my session. It was something different, something to break off the monotony so I did look forward to it like now and then when I go to the market for groceries. We greeted each other courteously, and we both walked in silence as if trying to remember what had been said in our last encounter. By the time we entered his small office, we both sat down and the conversation began. His usual follow up questions passed, and I responded without interest.

“Anything you want to talk about?” He asked.

I looked up, at his eyes, kind of confused. This was not part of the script it seemed he was reading, and I thought to myself, was there really something I wanted to talk about.

“Yeah, but I don’t know,” I said.

“Go on, Mariana.”

“I’ve been having trouble sleeping.”

“Why is that?”

“I’ve been having nightmares,” I lied.

“What do you dream off?”

“Just bad things.”

He paused, waiting for me to elaborate. When he saw that I stubbornly remained quiet he said, “I want you to think of a place right now. Close your eyes, please.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks. Now think of a place. It could be make believe or real, but think of a place that makes you happy, that makes you feel at peace. Think of every detail of that place, I mean really focus on the details. If there is grass, focus on the symmetry of the blades, the gleam under the sun...”

I thought of my mother when she was alive. It was our little room made of cement bricks that we called our house, and it was raining. Outside our house there was no garden, no patio, just a patch of cement before the door where she had planted several plants inside silver cans to

get rid of all the grayness. Some still had the logos of food brands on them. The water filled them to the brim. She was wearing a pink blouse, my father a white shirt, and the three of us stared at the rain outside from the opened front door. Beyond that rectangle it seemed the world was dancing under some sort of beautiful chaos while inside our home it was just us three staring quietly. Nobody was outside but the rain shook everything with its millions of drops that even the inanimate seemed to be alive. The hood of the broke-down cars seemed to spark with each little splash, the humble aluminum roofs of the houses nearby, the pavement, the mud, the flowers of my mother.

I got closer to the door, and my mother grabbed my arm and pulled me outside with her. Immediately the shock from the cold rain hit my shoulders until there was no more shock, but just a sense that I was part of the world too, part of the rain. She was smiling, but then laughed hysterically because my father had gotten up to join us but fell with the slippery cement. He was laughing too. We were all laughing, and he came up to her and asked for her hand to dance. They danced as if the sound of the rain splashing repeatedly the aluminum roofs was a slow love song, and the spectators were the flowers in cans that stood as if in ovation. I was smiling. I was smiling.

In Mr. Rodrigo's office I was crying. A tear escaped from the confinement of my closed eyes. Free, it roamed downwards on my cheek. The feeling of its trail brought me back, and I opened my eyes.

Mr. Rodrigo offered me a box of Kleenex.

"Sorry," I said.

“No, don't apologize. I want you to think of that place, everytime you're feeling anxious. Everytime you feel afraid like before you go to sleep. Keep thinking of that place, be in that place until you fall asleep.”

“Okay.”

“May I ask what that place was?”

“It was my home before I went with the nuns. It was my mother.”

“Good. Everytime you feel you're about to explode too, use that place, like that first session we had. Be that place.”

“I will,” and I already saw myself trying to think of that memory at night. I wondered if it would work, but then I remembered this was not a problem with myself. I truly couldn't sleep because something was going on outside my head, outside my room. It had something to do with the ghost girl and that dark shadow man. I could not tell Mr. Rodrigo this. He took this as a sign of reservation, perhaps even coldness. I myself could even feel the coldness of my words. What was the protocol here, if I began to sound crazy? Would they send me off somewhere, isolate me, shove me some place alone, like they did to us in the truck. No. No. No era capaz de contarle.

CHAPTER XIV

He escorted me back to class. Roscar and Mina were talking loudly as usual in the back while the kids in the front were pretending to be doing their work, but mostly day dreaming. I watched Rolanda, hoping she would look at me when I came in, but she didn't. Not at all. She was doing something on a sheet of paper. Mr. Jacobo was on his desk behind his laptop, and the radio man named Luis, standing vigilant, but disinterested at the same time. Laura was smiling hearing the conversation as if it was a music she had heard well before. She was the only one that looked up at me as I sat down in my seat.

“Are you all already done back there?” Mr. Jacobo asked.

“Yes,” Roscar and Mina lied.

Mr. Jacobo saw the others were not done and had to wait for them. I remember him being the only man in the education department. Even his boss, the lead teacher was a woman, a big tall blonde woman, who rumor had it that she had a tattoo on her arm close to the shoulder. All the other teachers were women too, which caused curiosity about his class among the kids and staff. Kids wanted to be part of his class thinking it would somehow be of a different kind, but all classes were basically the same because they ran with the same curriculum, each with their own style of course. At least that was different. For example, I saw that the neighboring class with the teacher named Mrs. Angela had more of a childish atmosphere with her cartoon posters that decorated the wall. I saw glimpses of her posters whenever we went to take our restroom breaks or go to the cafeteria. Of all though, she was the strictest of the teachers. They said her class was

always quiet, and only spoke whenever she left the room, whenever they didn't hear the jingles of her silver bracelets nearby.

I was fine with my class though. Rolanda and Laura were there, and I just didn't see myself with another teacher. Kids could request to change or were moved if there had been a problem with another student. Also, if they finally left the program of course, which I saw first happening that day when I came back from Mr. Rodrigo's office.

A girl with a long ponytail, from Honduras, had come back from seeing her case manager. She was no older than thirteen, and she had come back to the classroom with a smile that nobody could help but follow. It was a riddle that she unintentionally flaunted.

"Ya firmo. Ya firmo. Verdad?" Roscar asked making sure everybody heard.

"Yes, I signed. My case got approved," she replied shyly and continued on the worksheet which Mr. Jacobo had passed out, but nobody was really doing. Her case had finally been approved by the government, and she was about to get reunified with her sponsor in the U.S., her aunt.

"Congratulations, Diana," Mr. Jacobo said behind his laptop, pushing it aside to make eye contact with the class. "Today it is her, tomorrow it will be you all." He then continued with whatever he was doing on his laptop.

The class grew quiet. Everybody was surely thinking about what they would do if it was finally their day to go, to be reunified. I began to think how hard my own case was going to be. My case manager had been kind in telling me that it was going to be a difficult and long case. I had no sponsor waiting for me, and it was her job to find me one, and my job to stay out of trouble while that happened.

I kept formulating plans, perhaps contacting the old convent, but I remembered Lorena was no longer there. I had seen this in my vision long ago. She found another vocation, and plus she sent me away. That was the end of it with the nuns. Screw them. Yet, I still tried real hard to remember what I saw in my vision long ago, maybe I could see a clue to know where Lorena was so as to contact her for help, just to give me some clue to what I am supposed to be doing. I just needed to know that I was on the right path.

Then Mr. Jacobo told us it was time for him to teach English. Each teacher carried a lesson of every subject on their shoulders; science, math, english, reading, and social studies. On some I was able to see the weight that burden was, but it was their eyes that seemed to carry the burden instead of their shoulders. Those eyes that looked as if about to drip with lack of sleep, carrying the lesson beneath the eyes in their dark circles.

Mr. Jacobo was among the few of the program that I could perceive peace from. There was a lot of work in the program, but I never saw him tired regardless of the focus Mr. Jacobo was required to give on the rest of the subjects. Each an hour, so that meant English had one hour, two at most if Mr. Jacobo got passionate about it, and he only did so when all the students were engaged, writing on the board with a fast pace and extra long strides as if he was one of those professors out of the movies, about to crack a formula with those white chalks.

I think learning English was the only topic that even Roscar and Mina paid attention to. Everyday as soon as that hour hit in which Mr. Jacobo began his English lesson, everybody suddenly acted as if they were part of the most prestigious academia. This was the part of the class when the lead pencils needed more lead refills. It was hard for me to keep up. The majority of the kids in my class had had time already. They were there before me, able to have the days to learn the alphabet, and were at that level now where they were learning vocabulary words. Mr.

Jacobo knew this and tried to check up on most of the kids who had gotten there recently. It was through those hurried lessons in which the teacher came to my desk, that I began to catch up to the whole class. It was difficult, but not impossible. I kept studying a booklet that Mr. Rodrigo had given me too that had everything a beginner in English could wish for. Everything from the alphabet and its pronunciations and commonly used phrases were found in that booklet.

That's how one could tell who was putting determination into learning English, if they had that booklet or not. Those booklets were the ones you could ask your clinician for, and they would readily give in hopes that it could relieve the hardships of our stay. I carried mine kind of proud, a shy proudness, but when I saw the numbers multiply it was something that began to be replicated, even among the trouble makers.

Together with that, I began to learn so much English that I could understand some of the words the staff used among themselves. I needed to learn much more, but the lessons began to get slower, because of the numerous incidents in class or because one or two hours of ESL class ran out.

Something was something, little by little, day by day, I learned. Then another of the nights that I will always remember occurred, halted my steady progress. Era la niña otra vez. Also that entity which reminded me of la muerte. Eso pense que era en ese momento. I saw it as a shadow, black like the robes of la muerte are depicted in those candles and cards. It would be a while before I was able to let loose of the legends of my childhood. Even if logic told me it was not la muerte, I feared it as such. Kind of a long time had passed without them appearing. I had begun to already successfully forget, and I used Mr. Rodrigo's technique before I went to sleep. It was really before I went to sleep, not just the expression anymore because when they told us to go to sleep hardly anybody did. Finally I really slept.

CHAPTER XV

Then something happened in the shower. It was almost time for the lights to go off and the last of the kids who needed to shower before bed were hurrying. Each person only got like 10 minutes and no more. Everything needed to get washed quick. No time to think, but sometimes I washed so fast so as to have those left over minutes just to stand under the hot water. It was like a massage that I could never get in my pueblo, not even with las monjas. I let it massage my scalp, soothe my mind. The running water carried away my worries, and for that moment, in that small shower, everything looked like it was going to be okay. I heard a knock, one of the workers hurrying me up.

“Bruja,” I heard the whisper inside the bathroom, lingering in the steam under the golden light of the lightbulb. I turned off the water, almost slipped because I wanted to get out quick, but when I put my towel over my shoulder I felt the pull of it. The towel went to the floor. I dreaded turning back to see who or what had pulled it, but I instinctively turned only to find the curtain staring at me. I breathed. I tried Mr. Rodrigo’s exercise to regain my composure. My heart was the only noise I heard until it quieted down.

I came out fully dressed as if nothing happened. Laura and Rolanda were already in bed. Rolanda had been more quiet than usual those days, and Laura’s friend, Isela, louder than usual in her class. I heard she was beginning to talk a lot of mess about Rolanda and on some occasions even me.

I think something was going on with Rolanda, something against her own self, and she didn't want to talk to me because I had not trusted her to tell her what I had seen that night the boy screamed. I had not even told her to watch out with Isela.

"Buenas noches," I said to the room.

"Buenas noches," Laura said, and Rolanda pretended to be asleep.

The lights went off, the radios spoke in whispers as did the workers amongst themselves. I thought of that happy place, of my mother's smile under the rain, and fell asleep. The scream that woke me up was so sharp. It was my mother's! It was her. I sat up in the middle of the night only to find out that it had been a girl's scream from inside our wing and not my mother's. I didn't know who, but that scream summoned everybody into life. Even Rolanda and Laura sat up. There was no ignoring that type of scream from a young woman, a scream that is like a desperate cry for help to all who hear it.

"What's happening!" Laura screamed to the worker.

"It's a girl. It's a girl. She's having a nightmare. Go back to sleep. Go back to sleep," the lady said so hurriedly that she caught her breath after she finished the words.

"Don't let him win you all!" I heard the ghost girl say somewhere, and everybody heard the sound of her little shoes. Even some workers had to go check because they had thought it had been one of us. When the workers regained control of the situation, and conducted a head count, the night regained its deceitful peace. I could sense the nervousness of everybody, expecting another scream.

This could not be tolerated anymore. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I was going to do something, and those words from the little ghost girl had invigorated me with motivation and anger. I was still afraid, but more angry. Something needed to be done, and I was not going to be able to do anything without sleep. So I prayed the prayers of las monjas by custom, while seeing the rain raining down on my parents dancing, did my own spell to fall asleep. "Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos, santificado, sea tu nombre...."

CHAPTER XVI

“Okay. So everybody heard that right?” Laura asked when the morning finally came.

“Yes. The steps, the scream. We have to say something,” I said as I made my bed.

“Now you all finally say something,” Rolanda said, still in bed.

“I don’t want to sound crazy,” I told them both.

“No there’s something really going on here. This place used to be a hospital, and that girl everybody talks about probably died here,” Laura said.

“I’ve heard she likes to play, turn the light switches off and on, or knock down stuff, or run around the hallways,” Rolanda said.

“What about that dark shadow man. The kids who scream at night all have said to have seen him, and some don’t even talk about it.”

“Es el diablo,” Laura whispered.

We all stared at each other.

“No...you think so?” I asked.

Suddenly we pretended we were too busy to talk, and Rolanda went to the restroom to finish getting ready for the day.

I began with my crusade of exposition with Ms. Angelica who was monitoring us as we finished cleaning our room, waiting at any moment for that radio to voice out our next move to the cafeteria. I was remembering more of the radio people's names, and even found out their actual titles where youth care workers.

"You should have been here last night. There was another weird thing that happened," I told her, Laura and Rolanda pretending not to hear.

"We heard a girl scream. I'm sure she's going to say she saw that shadow man when they ask her, and then we all heard the little steps of the ghost girl running on the hallway," I continued.

Mrs. Angelica smiled as if she was waiting for the punchline.

"Wait. Really?" she finally said.

"Yes."

"Girls those things don't exist, come on now."

"Miss Angelica. You come on. We all heard it, and everybody always says they saw something."

"Look, you see those cameras over there?" she pointed to the small black domes protruding along the hallway. "The security monitors would have already seen something if there really was something."

"Well, I know what I heard. Ask them too. They heard it."

Laura and Rolanda agreed.

“And this place used to be an old hospital,” Laura said.

“Okay yes, the place used to be a hospital, but that doesn’t mean-,” Mrs. Angela suddenly got interrupted by the radio, blaring out that it was time for us to go to the cafe.

Just like that, my first move had been stopped. That day I had applied a bun on my hair, even a little product. I had picked out the shirt that looked best which had been donated to us, a purple one because I remembered the nuns had taught me it was the color of royalty. I figured if I was going to start speaking about the matter going on I was going to have to expose myself, to be on the spotlight. I had been going through the days, silent and observant, but the voice and words of that ghost girl had invigorated me. I had failed her once with the boy. I needed to stop failing people. I had failed to save so many people. I have failed to save so many people.

I had tried to keep quiet after that incident with Mr. Rodrigo so that they would forget what I had told him in the hallway. Perhaps they really had forgotten me. Now, I was going to be on the radar of the youth care workers, and of the kids again. I was going to return to that light that had been cast upon me ever since my ability. La rara. La bruja. La loca.

Nimodo. It needed to be done. I just could not stand there and not do anything, especially when this little ghost girl was screaming for help. The risks were high, they always are, but those days I did not care what it meant for humanity if they found out about my ability as I do know. How beautiful youth is, to live without worrying about the bigger picture, without consequences.

After so many dull days, finally there was a purpose. I felt I had power though I had to ask for permission to do anything, when I could not walk to wherever I pleased under my own free will. We were walked always. Always to another destination already picked out for us, but that day was the closest I felt to how it feels to walk with agency in the program.

The cafeteria turned into my area of interviews. When I got my breakfast and sat down in the table they told us to sit in, I began to ask the girls who had screamed in the night this time. The scrambled eggs were watery for some reason so I didn't mind wasting my eating time asking around the table. Only a few of the girls knew what had happened, but they all were sure that the scream had come from Isela's room. Isela roomed with two other girls so it could have been any one of them. Only Isela and her roommate knew what had really happened.

I looked around for her. She was sitting in the table ahead of mine. Her roommates were sitting with her, all quiet. Her pale face looked even paler. The dark brown hair, even from the distance, looked disheveled like a bird's nest. Everyone, and everything near her seemed to feed of this tension, turning them into stone.

The boys at the other side of the cafeteria were acting like nothing had happened. The young ones joking around, looking for a chance to hit one another playing when the youth care workers were not looking. I saw that the older ones though, the ones my age, were looking at her too, and they looked worried.

There was no way of going to the other table to find out who exactly it had been that screamed, but of course my best guess was that it had been Isela. Her eyes told me so, and I didn't have to use my ability. I was too far away to make eye contact. I wanted to use my ability and see what was happening to her by looking into her possible future. Maybe I could find what she had seen if I saw that she was going to see it again. My mind tries to find all possible justifications to use it, like an addiction, and it made sense to see her future to know exactly what I was up against. I already knew how the dark shadow person looked. Well we had not been properly introduced, but I had seen that shadow passing in the hallway.

Could it be that she had seen that? I needed to ask her or maybe even see. I needed to get closer. If I stood up I was immediately going to get redirected. Perhaps if I asked to go talk to her, but what would my excuse be. As I was thinking of an excuse, I saw that she stood up. She was going to throw the food of her plate away.

“Can I go throw my food away?” I asked one of the youth care workers.

“No. Wait until the whole group finishes,” she said.

“It will save time. Please, I just want to stretch my legs.”

“Alright, but just go and come back quick,” she said announcing my direction on the radio. “One youth headed to throw her trash away.”

Nobody paid attention to the announcement, and finally my path collided with Isela’s again. I couldn’t just stare into her eyes because I would look insane in front of everybody. I needed to make conversation first. Now a days, I use my sunglasses to hide this fact with clients, so that they do not know I am staring into them. They respect my odd “vision impairments” because they respect my reputation. It is like the modern crystal ball. The shades are all part of the mystery, and enchantment.

“Hi, Isela. I was just wondering if you were okay,” I approached her with my tray in hand.

“What are you talking about?” she said.

“I heard you scream.”

“Put a maje. What the fuck are you talking about? Put a bruja.

“What are *you* talking about? We all know it was you who screamed at night.”

“Well, *we* all know about your nose bleeding in the hallway telling Mr. Rodrigo his wheel was going to break. You fucking weird bitch.”

That was the last thing I heard from her because everything happened so quickly. She yelled more obscenities and pushed me to the ground. Rolanda somehow appeared, and that’s when an atomic bomb blew up in the place. Every ounce of negative energy had found its outlet in both of them. Before the workers rushed to them both of them were bleeding, and Rolanda was about to kick Isela’s stomach but stopped herself. That’s what it took for Isela to take her chance and knock her unconscious.

CHAPTER XVII

My breadth has fogged the window I am standing in front of, that window that has provided my clients and I with a beautiful view of the greenness of Rock Creek Park. Today the only view is of my eyes reflected. I relived everything I had written before this point. I relived what I have painfully lived. The pain again felt. Wounds opened and now were shutting again. It is a vision of the past instead of the future to which I normally face with my head held high. The past, my eyes try to avoid. This vision is my own past, one that I had chosen to forget. I have snapped out of it, and I now see the beads of rain that have stuck on to the glass like the blood of my past has stuck to me now again.

Lightning strikes in the distance, amid those great big clouds beyond the window. It was like I had been struck by lightning too, some sort of punishment that had to stop me in my tracks. After such a long time avoiding my reflection, I was paying attention to my own eyes now and all I saw was the past.

I had built my little web using my ability, but I had made sure to not allow it to cripple me. I had maneuvered my clients sometimes without looking in, making educated guesses on the moves they needed to do in their lives. Yet, it feels like I am cornered. There is no safety net this time, and my heart knows it. It is beating fast, trying to match my quick breaths. Soon the wolves will come, the shady clients, those that can't afford for me to make mistakes. Those clients will begrudge my reputation if I steer them wrong. They will come. They are coming. They will

perceive my new vulnerability. I'm sure I reek of it. They will sense the change of my confidence.

I found out I lost my ability today in the morning right in a session with a client. She is not one of my main clients, but still a rare anxiety found me when I could not look into her eyes to answer her question. She was wearing a suit, as expensive as mine, and she began with the superficial talk out of respect. Then she got to the real question.

"I'm just wondering if I should pull out of that company. It's going to sink, but it has faced greater threats than this one. It's just that this president...She's uncontrollable. She'll do whatever it takes to shut it down because it comes from China. The *paranoia*. She reminds me of Trump... You remember how that ended," she said and her wrinkly eyes stared into my black shades, unafraid, unintimidated, un...anything.

"Yes. I remember," I said and began to look into her eyes, but nothing.

I took off my shades. That's when I did finally detect something out of her composure, an old snake ready to strike. I couldn't look into her. I couldn't see. I can't see.

"I'm sorry, Magdalene. I can't work today. I don't want to steer you off the wrong direction. I'm afraid I will have to postpone this."

"Mariana, I understand." She grabbed her things and started walking out the door, but before she walked away, she stared at that great window, at that storm that was approaching. "Just know, a lot of people are waiting for your answer," and she was gone.

I'm ignoring my emails, my phone. I hide it among some books that now serve for great decorative purposes because tangible books are now greatly expensive. They are the paintings of

yesterday, flaunted in most respectable rooms. I'm trying to remember where I hid my cigarettes. The cigarette is still cheap because of course, what kills you always tends to be.

The clouds of the storm are so close to my window like they want to come in for a session. I haven't finished with my past. Maybe I'm in the right track. In my eyes lie the only vision that I can see, and because they were my memories, I could hear them too. I never thought that was possible in a vision. So I go to the window, and look again.

CHAPTER XVIII

Everybody had rushed to the scene, even the kids. My heart broke when I saw Rolanda unconscious and her face bleeding from scratches and a busted lip. Isela kept kicking and screaming as several youth care workers tried to hold her to be escorted away from the scene. A boy named William approached me, just broke my shock when he called out my name.

“Mariana, they’re calling us to go,” he said. I recognized him. He was a boy in my class with the same age as me, but somehow always more groomed with his black hair parted to the side with shiny gel.

I could not even see Rolanda anymore. Youth care workers were surrounding her. All I could see were the red vests. We were escorted back to class, but the incident ran on everybody’s minds, on everybody’s speech, so much so that the horror stories of the night had dwindled and been pushed aside after. Even I couldn’t even bother with continuing my campaign in exposing all the weird stuff that happened when we were told to go to sleep. It seemed ridiculous when the image of Rolanda bleeding was the only thing that played over and over in my head. I should have done something. I should have protected her. I should have told her Isela hated her.

Mr. Jacobo still attempted to get things going, even if the world was upside down. For the remainder of the class we were introduced to the author, Ray Bradbury. Mr. Jacobo gave everybody a copy he had printed. The title “A Sound of Thunder” was written in Spanish on the first page of the thin packet of papers. Nobody was in the mood for reading. I think that is why instead of asking us to read he turned on the projector and played a narration on youtube. The

words echoed through the little classroom, above the desks, below the desks, inside our heads. The words found their way like the rivers find their way to the ocean. I chose to go with the flow, perhaps more too. It was there inviting us, but only if we wanted.

Page one, page two, page three, and I was in the time machine of the story, absorbing all that was being radiated from those words and the artistic expression of the butterfly effect. I heard the shot at the end, the shot that showed how a small action in the past created a bigger one in the future.

I raised my eyes from the paper, around the class, noticed how William too, and Laura. Roscar and Mina had been just following the narration, but not reading. Mr. Jacobo droned on and on explaining the symbolisms, the metaphors, the history behind the actual story, the author's life, but the only thing I really heard was when he said, "Every small action has the potential to improve or worsen our future; being kind or being unkind."

Isela returned to her class at the other end of the hallway, distant from ours. Rolanda was given permission by the medical department to rest in her room, with supervision of course. I heard Isela had come back smiling, laughing it off. Holding her little belly as if to say to everyone that she had walked away from the fight with her baby unscathed. A serious incident report had been done for both Rolanda and Isela. I was even suspected of having done something, but the cameras didn't show me raising my hand or in any violent position. I think hate is a powerful negative force, the kind that is left behind even after we die. As much as I fought not to hate Isela, I did.

“Close the doors,” I heard from the radio by the end of class as we waited for the vocational classes to start next. The doors of the classroom are always opened. To see them close caused me to stand up. Mr. Jacobo had barely left.

“What happened?” Roscar asked, voicing all of our concern.

“Sit down. There is just a boy who walked out of class. He’s running around the halls.”

He was ten, and his name was Lucas. I know every worker considered him a lost cause. He was left alone by the people that had helped him travel, and to make matters worse, his father in the U.S. that was waiting for him had explained to the case managers that he was not interested in having his son with him anymore. The father had freaked out after receiving so many calls from the program, most likely being himself an immigrant too.

So this ten year old boy had to decide whether to get deported, or to wait for another sponsor to be found. This ten year old boy had to show up in court soon. Lucas had to sort out his life alone when he could not even sort out how to put on his clothes or wash his teeth. When it was all too much, which was almost everyday, the only way he could express it was by running around the halls faster than the rate at which his tears fell.

How do you explain to a ten year old boy what was best for him, explain why he was in the program, why his Father no longer wanted him to come to his home? It took a village. On good days, we would talk to him. On the bad ones, the workers, because we ourselves didn’t know what was going to happen to us.

It was funny, in a terrible way how we all ended up there whether we had crossed the border legally or illegally. I didn’t know the crime I was to commit when Lorena sent me to cross. Perhaps she did. Perhaps she had already heard of how, regardless if you showed up at the

border and asked for asylum properly, ICE would still detain you for an indefinite time, or even deport you back even if you were to die because of it. I heard Lucas had crossed it the so-called “Right” way, and he was still there. There are just more chances of success Lorena’s way, but I was still there too. These things disappeared when I was in the program, the bigger picture of it all. My life was inside, and so were my problems, and that day I needed to see Rolanda.

I looked forward for the nighttime to come. With it, Rolanda would appear when we went to our dorms. She had been in our room the whole day. I wished I could have done what Lucas did everyday and just storm out of the class to go to her, but I knew it would result in staining my case. My case already was hopeless as it is, but better if it didn’t have any incidents like that on it. I didn’t want to make it harder for my case manager.

Finally we were going back to our rooms. We passed by the security monitors’ office. A man was just coming out of it and I caught a glimpse of a big screen with little images all in it, images of us in real time. The hallways, the classrooms, the cafeteria, outside, everything. There was no hiding, and the air in the building suddenly felt scarce. I did not realize until that moment all the eyes that could see me, even behind the walls. Now that I think of it, I realize how like a panopticon it was. I wondered too if they had seen what I had, the ghost girl running around, or the great shadow that lingered....

Rolanda was in bed when we finally arrived back to our dorms. She was all the way covered with the thin purple bed sheets as if she had become part of the small bed itself, motionless. When Laura and I walked in we didn’t know what to say. We walked in reluctantly because it felt like the room was riddled with booby traps that might have made Rolanda explode.

“It’s time to hit the showers. Whoever’s going first, go already,” the youth care worker at our door today said. It was always a woman when we went to our dorm wings.

“I’ll go first.” Laura said, and quietly gathered her clothes from the little armour by the window.

The movements outside in the wing made it impossible for it to be completely quiet, but still it was silent in the room.

“Rolanda...Are you okay?” I finally asked.

Not even a stir.

“Thanks. For what you did out there...” I tried again.

There was a slight movement.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer your questions about what I saw the other nights. Sorry I haven’t been talking much.”

Nothing.

“I did see something,” I looked around. Laura was still in the shower. The youth care worker had already checked up on us, and was not talking to her coworker on the threshold of the dorm. “I saw the little girl. She had a blue dress. I also saw a big shadow. I see either of the two before a kid screams in the night.”

I waited to see if my words could dispel the coldness that hovered on her.

“I can see people’s futures. If I stare into their eyes. I just don’t think I will ever choose to do it again.” There it was. I was no longer talking to Rolanda. I was talking to Benjamin, to

Carmen, to Benito, to Lorena, to the people who never got out alive from that truck. “Because I have seen people die in them and if I see that again, and I fail to change it again...I couldn’t live anymore. I wouldn’t live anymore. I-”

Rolanda finally uncovered herself from the dark world beneath the purple sheets, came into the darker one that was ours. My watery eyes turned into tears when I saw her face. I couldn’t see her face because it was hidden under a busted lip with dried blood and bandages where the scratches had been. I saw myself when I had been bandaged in the convent. I sobbed. Everything came to me as if my skull had been pried open and the world was rushing into it.

“Hey. It’s okay. It’s okay,” Rolanda was suddenly in front of me.

“What’s going on?” the youth care worker said.

Laura finally got out of the shower, didn’t speak from the shock of seeing Rolanda’s face.

“I’m fine.” I forced myself to say, and just walked into the restroom. I had forgotten to get my change of clothes so I had to see them again. They all stared at me while I got my clothes from my wardrobe, more concerned about me than Rolanda now.

I had 15 minutes to get my composure back, but I couldn’t shake off the sadness in seeing Rolanda like that. I wanted her to be happy, wanted to see that smile again. I kept thinking if what I had just said to her was true. Of course it was. I realized how those words seemed unknown when I heard myself say them to Rolanda. I had never even thought of that fear of looking in until then. But of course we know those words that seem random because they have been inside us all along, even my feelings for Rolanda. Of course, I had known.

I closed my eyes in the shower, breathed in the steam, came out again into a quiet room amid the loud hallways with radios blaring and kids talking.

“It’s almost time for us to shut down the lights. Jovencita, you’re next,” the youth care worker told Rolanda.

Maybe she had not seen herself in the mirror all day because when she came back to her bed, she sunk. It was deeper than before, seemed to pull the whole room there. The lights turned off. The youth care worker sat on a stool, made herself comfortable on the usual post. Laura, I could sense she was stiff under so much tension, pressuring from all sides. She was known to be friends with Isela. She was also known to be our friend too.

The dark finds a way of intensifying our worries. When the dark circles you into a tight space, everything seems bigger. Guilt, sadness, love.

I heard her cry right after the youth care worker had checked up on us. First it was muffled, controlled. Then Rolanda just seemed to drown with her own silent cries. It made myself cry, and I’m sure it did Laura too.

It was too much for me. I got up and went to her, touched her shoulder.

“Rolanda, what’s happening?” I asked but began to make my way back to my bed because she suddenly stopped.

As I turned, I sensed the touch of her hand on my own, grabbing it like a lifeline, and she started to sob again. It was those kind of sobs when you seem to be vomiting all the traumas out of your body.

I didn't let go, and she pulled me into the bed. We stayed embraced while we cried, each time more silently than before until there was no noise coming out of us but only tears. I knew I had only a couple of minutes until the youth care worker came back to check up on us.

A minute before she walked in, I was back in my own bed, thinking about what had just happened and pretending to be asleep until I was.

CHAPTER XIX

There was something in the way the lights had turned on the next morning. They seemed to have appeared gentler, slower. My eyes opened slowly. I felt like I had the best sleep in weeks.

“Buenos dias, jovencitas,” Ms. Angelica said, “We’re the first group to go to cafe so who’s going to start with the brooming?”

“I will,” I said and got up to begin again the repetitive cycle of the day, only with different eyes.

Rolanda got up too and we both looked at each other with a smile. Laura said good morning, and began to take out the trash.

“Why so smiley today?” Ms. Angelica asked.

“Just, it’s a new day,” I almost wanted to laugh a little. It was funny that nobody knew what had happened except for us, a real secret in a place where there was supposed to be none.

“That’s the attitude. It’s a new day, a good day, you’ll see.”

“Why will I see,” I asked confused.

“What? That’s just how you say it. It’s an expression,” Ms. Angelica said laughing in between.

That time I did laugh. Ms. Angelica, she was like a big sister for me. Maybe for all of us. She always seemed to relate with every kid, but was also strict with us when she needed to like a good big sister I never had. I liked when she was assigned to our class or our wing. She was my coffee in the morning, my second coffee in the afternoons. She was one of the few we actually respected.

It was hard for Rolanda to go back to class, and let everybody see how Isela had left her. All the while Isela herself roamed happily without a worry in the world, or at least inside the program. Regardless, Rolanda managed to keep going, to pay more attention in class, and we started talking more, wanted to learn English. Rolanda and I practiced speaking English with each other, and left Laura out of the picture. Sometimes it was on purpose because, but most of the time we simply did not notice her when we were both in the room. Laura in turn, got closer with Isela. For a brief, brief moment there was peace in the program.

It grew easier to focus in class because the lectures reminded me of the churches in Sor. I know it reminded the other kids too how the priests lectured on and on, but now it was with lessons of English or math or science. We all had more in common than we thought. I was perhaps the only Mexican kid in the program, but we all had the same cucuys, cadejos and lloronas. Todos huíamos de los mismos demonios. The gangs of Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras. The cartels of Mexico. It was the same. We were all in the same boat. It was not uncommon to find one of us crying because they had killed somebody we knew back home. It reminded us of what waited if we turned back, if we gave up. It pushed us forward to the unknown destinations this system would place us when it spat us out.

I didn't get any news back from Sor. My case manager did locate the phone number of the convent, but I refused to talk to them. They did not try to contact me either. Se me pego eso

de los demás, las ganas de ir hacia adelante y no mirar atrás. I would only speak to whoever would really help me live in the U.S. The convent had done enough. There were various orphanages and people who could adopt kids like me, but after I spoke it always led to nothing fruitful. I was beginning to be like the kids who had spent a long time in the program, begin to get used to seeing kids come and go.

“Mister cuantos días llevo hoy?” That was the common question a new kid asked in the class.

I was in the double digits those days, and I didn’t have to get reminded. Yet with the days that passed by, so did my hidden relationship with Rolanda increase too. It was hard when we were in constant supervision. Our encounters remained in the same time and place because only in our dorms, the black lifeless eyes of the cameras failed to enter. The eyes of the youth care workers were the only eyes that came in to check up on us at night every thirty minutes or so. There were few who did it in less, few who messed up on their supervision and did not care. We were glad when those were assigned to us. It was perhaps twice a month when we were able to be together at night, if only for those blessed thirty minutes. We slept really late, waited to hear the snores of Laura, and even at times the snores of the workers too. It made me look forward to the days because when there was no possibility of us laying in the same bed at night, I knew that later there would. I hoped for that more than finding my sponsor in the U.S.

Rolanda’s face finally healed, and when it did she had finally brought back what I had said that night, a night of acceptance that it had been for me.

“So you really can tell the future?” she had asked me outside by the silver bleachers after vocational classes.

“Yes,” I said knowing all too well where the conversation was going. It was like déjà vu, like the day we had first talked to each other under the sun and on the glaring bleachers, but this time an all new topic.

“Tell me my future then.”

“Why are you acting like you don’t remember what I told you that night? I won’t do that anymore.”

“I do remember. I just...It’s not just something you talk about everyday. It’s interesting.”

“It’s not. It’s sad. Let’s say I saw into your eyes, and I saw that you died. How do you think I could go on knowing that.”

“Okay. Okay. What about the ghost girl and the dark shadow man? You want to talk about that?”

“I saw the ghost girl. I didn’t see any dark shadow man. I did see a big shadow moving even when it was dark.”

“Enserio, voz?”

“Si. Nose que son, pero siempre nos hacen gritar cuando aparecen.”

“...But you haven’t seen them recently right?”

“No. Not since that last time with Isela.

“Fuck that pregnant bitch.”

I didn’t respond. I could understand why Rolanda hated her, but I knew it was wrong of me to hate her. I did, for what she did to Rolanda, but I think the circumstances she had been put

in had caused her to be so evil towards others. Even after the fight I remember she continued her bad spree by making fun of another boy.

He was thirteen, and everybody talked about an incident that he had been involved in. His case had been fast thankfully. The sponsor ready to accept him in the U.S had been his very mother. Byron was another ten year old, and in his two or three weeks he stayed with us, we heard that the first time a youth care worker approached his room, he had pulled down his pants. He said it was what he was told to do since he had been younger. Nobody knows how he had managed to end up in the program, but we were all glad when he went to get reunified with his mom in Wisconsin.

Isela had said, “I wish I had what he had. How was it?” she had asked him in front of everybody.

Remarkably, fights had decreased and because we had been behaving well, the program director decided to make a little party for us. It was to be held outside by the soccer fields, and it was to consist of a black squared speaker blasting out music, but we would be allowed to dance as long as nobody made contact. The day was set. The expectations too.

I even talked about it with Mr. Rodrigo in another of our sessions. Those sessions, they had turned into just me updating him on my feelings in the program. I couldn’t really open up my mind to him and tell him everything. Being completely honest would have meant to lose my only freedom that I held on to at that moment.

I think that somehow he knew I was keeping my real thoughts, my feelings away from him because he gave me a journal, a private one, to write my own thoughts as long as the writing on the pages did not go against program rules, such as no love letter and inappropriate drawings.

Even though it was private, I knew it was not enough for me to write my most inner thoughts. It was like entering a place that seemed alone, but actually had hidden cameras. All those blank inviting pages. It did help though. I think the beginnings of this that I am writing, whatever this is, bloomed from that notebook.

I needed somebody or something to tell me that it was okay to feel the way that I was feeling towards Rolanda. She probably needed too, but I did not know if she had more experience in that than I. The last time I kissed a girl I was unconscious afterwards. Everything in Sor, everything in the convent, everything had been against what I felt towards Rolanda. It would have been easier if I had liked a boy. The television, the movies, the whole world had shown us what that is like, but what of a girl and a girl? A boy and a boy? What were the basics? I smiled every time I saw Rolanda, but when I didn't there was some sort of guilt that came to replace her until I saw her again. Then I remembered the words Lorena told me before I left how God had made me exactly the way I was. I had been born to like Rolanda because there had been nothing that had caused me to feel like that except just growing. If the words of the bible, the words of the convent had never really stuck to me, after hearing Lorena's final words in my head again and again made it almost impossible for me to keep grasping on to them. Why would I be sent to hell for something that I did not choose to do? Something that I had been born with, created with without my choosing. The God that I believed in would not do that.

Even at that moment, and even back at the convent, I had been beginning to realize how I had not been included in those pages, in those walls of the convent. They didn't speak of me, never did. They did not speak for me, never did. They only spoke against me. Me, a lesbian girl then, a lesbian woman now. Above all, a woman.

There were so many things my convent had been ignoring from the bible, why not other things too. So many barbarities that the bible said we needed to do, simple things like sacrifices or even downright abuse. If we choose to follow only certain things then we can choose to unfollow other things. It can't be perfect. We shouldn't limit our knowledge, spiritual, scientific, academic, or philosophical to the confines of one book or one ideology. So, I drifted away.

Something that I will always remember is when I read "And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father: she shall be burnt with fire." Or other things like adultery, cursing parents, that it was ordered to be punishable by death. We did not kill anybody in the convent. That I know of. We didn't do that anywhere, I hope. This, right from the mouth of god. The god of the bible, the one that would send me to hell for liking Rolanda. Yet, *The* god, that one that really nobody really knows, because nobody really knows the truth of the beyond, I don't know what It, They, She, He, would think of us but I'm sure it has something to do with not being burned alive or stoned to death.

I needed to drift away. I could not find the answer either to why I could see into the future of people, only the punishments for any magic or supernatural ability a person had.

Drifting away, though, meant I was again on my own. Another journey apart from the one I was currently going through in the program. Both journeys though, were necessary for me to exist.

I was okay with myself liking Rolanda, but then the fear of getting caught came to me. What were they going to do to us if the program found out? Yet, even that got dispelled later. There is just something that happens after being close to death, living something so terrible. It

makes you realize how little other problems really are, how ridiculous it is to be scared of something, anything, when death has already touched your soul.

Even though I could not write that in the journal Mr. Rodrigo had given me, I wrote on it every chance I got, even during leisure time, even during movie days where groups spent watching whatever cartoon movie the program decided to show us. One of the rooms where they played the movies on the projector imitated a movie theater with old leather sofas facing a projection. Only if the movies were good, would I have left my notebook. I think the only good movies I watched had been in class with Mr. Jacobo.

Almost every Friday, was a free day in the classroom that consisted of a movie that somehow had to do with whatever we were learning. When we were taught about WWII we saw *The Boy with the Striped Pajamas*. When the lesson had to do with art history he showed *Inception*. I had never seen so many movies as I saw in the program. If I ever saw a movie it was with the small tv my mom had gotten, and it only showed whatever the signal from the antenna chose to show. If I would have had the luxury to choose, I would have loved to see the movies Mr. Jacobo showed us. It made me feel like I actually learned something afterwards. It was just not something to kill time, but instead to use it.

“So the journal has helped?” Mr. Rodrigo asked as he was escorting me back to class, his wheels rolling smoothly under the white, mopped floor of the hallway.

“Yes, it has. Thank you for that. I use it every time when things run out,” I said, trying to walk at his pace.

“I know that can happen quickly. I am glad it’s helping you. I am also glad you are learning a lot of English, but shall we continue in Spanish?”

“Yes,” I said gladly because it was difficult to also keep the pace with him in English conversation.

“How is your sleep, Mariana?

“Good I haven’t had any nightmares or anything.”

“Good. Good. I know that was a problem several weeks ago. Keeping yourself focused in class is doing great things for you.”

“It is,” Rolanda’s long curly hair came to my mind, “yes it really is. I just want to get out already.”

“Soon, Mariana. It’s all up to what-”

I saw the dark shadow. He, she, it was at the end of the empty hallway, and I couldn’t see its face or eyes or anything, just a shadow person with an aura of darkness. My eyes kept searching for an explanation, waiting for something to tell me it was all a joke. Then the ghost girl appeared, but this time I realized it had not been a blue dress she had been wearing all along, but a hospital gown and her face seemed to be bleeding exactly like Rolanda’s face had. She was running away from it.

“Mariana! Mariana,” Mr. Rodrigo was saying to me, but I couldn’t breathe.

I was gasping for air. I was in the truck again. I was there gasping for air in the dark oven hearing everybody die again.

That’s when Mr. Rodrigo grabbed my hand and headed to the nearest exit out of the building. Everything came back when we stepped outside.

“Mariana. Focus. You’re in control. Focus on your breathing. Focus,” I heard Mr. Rodrigo’s words slowly come as if from a distance and suddenly above me was no longer a roof, but a bright blue sky with several white clouds seemingly of cotton. I don’t know how we got outside, how he managed to take my hand and roll his wheelchair outside, but he did. I didn’t know, but I know the security monitors did.

The parking lot lay beyond us, and beyond that was the entrance of the black gates that kept us all inside. The parking lot was riddled with white vans used to transport us to dentist appointments or court appointments or anywhere we needed to be transported. I stared at the gate’s entrance, breathed more calmly.

“What happened, Mariana?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t breathe.”

“I saw you staring at the end of the hallway. What did you see?”

“No, I- I didn’t. I just had an anxiety attack.”

The door we had come out of suddenly opened, and I noticed that my eyes were tearing. It was the same man that had introduced us to the program a while back. The tall man with the black perfect lock of beard.

“Mr. Rodrigo? What happened?” he asked.

“She needed to go outside,” Mr. Rodrigo responded.

“Why?”

“I will document the incident. You’ll know then.”

“You can’t just take a minor outside. Why take her outside? Where there is no one.”

“Like I said she needed to go outside, and due to confidentiality I will advise you to stop asking why.”

“It’s just...how do I know if you were not planning on helping her escape or worse?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do not know what you mean.”

They stared at one another as if their words were bullets and each waited to see who would fire first. I understood what they had said, but I do not know what I needed myself say in order to help Mr. Rodrigo. I felt my mouth was shut.

“I couldn’t breathe,” is what I finally said in Spanish.

That broke whatever was going to happen between them.

“Yes. Like I said. Now, Mariana has to go back to class. Could you please escort her back, I have other sessions to attend to,” He then looked at me. “Mariana if you need to talk to me again tell Mr. Jacobo to send me an email.”

Adan walked back to class, but on his way he told somebody else to do it. “I need to check the cameras again, I don’t trust that black guy.” The other worker just nodded his head and finally I got back into the classroom. I know Mr. Rodrigo had just broken some sort of rule, but that final comment even cut me. I wonder what he called me, then. Brown girl?

I remember taking my seat again. William asking how I was, and Rolanda just looking at me. Roscar and Mina in the back of the class talking away, talking about the dance that was going to happen tomorrow. I kept asking myself if I should have done something or something different. Something I have learned is to stop wasting time on the what I should have done. What can I do now to fix what I did? That is the true question. Yet, I was still overthinking in my desk, replaying whatever had happened. The dark shadow person. The ghost girl. I just put my head down on my desk. Closed my eyes. At least inside my head there was still privacy.

“What’s wrong jovencita?” the youth care worker in my class asked me.

“She just didn’t get any sleep,” I heard William saying. Rolanda, I knew she wanted to help too but we sort of distanced ourselves in public to raise any suspicions about us. They gave me five minutes to rest my head a little. In those five minutes, I cried. In those five minutes, I breathed. In those five minutes, I lived.

CHAPTER XX

Mr. Jacobo continued the class after checking up on me briefly. There were 23 other students to take care of so the show needed to go on. I did not want to burden Mr. Rodrigo either any longer. I finally told Rolanda during outside recreation time.

“I saw them again, Rolanda.” Were under a small pavilion because both of us were afraid of the sun. Bright beautiful things can be fearsome too. Bright beautiful things like the sun kills you after hours in a desert, or locked inside a truck.

“The devil?”

“It’s not the devil. I don’t know what it is. I saw la niña too.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“...I believe you, Mariana. I just don’t know how I could help you.”

“I’m just saying. It’s still here.”

“Bueno okay. What is there to do Mariana? We have to focus on just getting out of here.”

I turned the other way, looked at the other kids that were trying to stay entertained in those scorched fields.

“I think I’m almost leaving,” Rolanda finally said. “They told me they might be able to send me to this foster home. That’s the only reason why I haven’t messed Isela’s face up.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Hey, this is why we’re still here remember? We can’t go back.”

“I know,” I said looking at her again. “I know. We might never see each other again.”

Rolanda looked around to see if anybody was paying attention to us before she said, “I left my home because every man in there abused me. What do you want me to do, say no and go back to that?”

“No, Rolanda. No. Again, I’m just saying. I’m just voicing my thoughts. I can’t do that?”

“You know what I mean. Just forget about this place. Forget its problems. Look for what is coming next, don’t get involved here. Don’t get rooted.”

“It’s easy for you to say. You’re almost leaving...and what are you trying to say anyways. You want to stop being together?”

“No, Mariana. I’m telling you that it’s not your job to do something about those things you’re seeing. Let them be.”

“I’m not the only one seeing them. Ask Isela. You know what yeah. I’m going to focus on what’s next. You’re not what’s next right? We’re not seeing each other after. So what’s the point right,” I said and walked away.

Sabía que ella tenía razón. Pero al igual que ella, yo también tenía razón. While everybody painted the darkness of the building at night with their thoughts about the dance that

would be the following day, I painted my corner of darkness with bright red thoughts about what I had seen, what I had told Rolanda, what I had gotten Mr. Rodrigo into. I hoped he was not in trouble. They had not come to ask me anything about that incident, so maybe that was a good sign. I couldn't sleep that night. This time it was Rolanda's silence that kept me awake and the dread that something terrible would happen instead of keeping an eye for a window of opportunity to hold Rolanda or to make sure Laura was asleep.

"Beunos dias jovencitas." The lights were on.

In the cafeteria, boys and girls alike were wearing the shirts that were more new either from the program itself or family that sent stuff. There was not one kid who was not wearing gel or something on their hair. William, Laura, everybody, even Rolanda and Isela looked different that day. I put on the same purple shirt, and did the same tight bun from that day that I had been trying to expose what was keeping us awake at night. I had so much stuff on my mind. My case manager did not tell me any news on my case. Mr. Rodrigo had not called me for another session, I think I was scheduled for the next day. Rolanda might leave. The ghost girl could appear at any moment. To top it all off now there was this dance. I just needed to get that day done with. I told myself I would think of what I needed to do the next day.

"Me gusta la música de Nicki Minaj. You think they'll play that at the dance?"

William was asking me during class, but my head was just thinking about what I was going to do the next day. Rolanda was right. We had to focus on getting out of here. Lorena was left in the past, now Rolanda was going to be too.

They put the black rectangular speaker in the small pavilion where the silver bleachers were. They even put somebody to be in charge of the music. It happened after classes, during our

outside recreational time, only this time our time outside was programmed to last 2 hours. They had even given us soda at lunch with carne asada that the directors had cooked outside on a big barbecue pit that was separated from where we were. What really was the occasion for all of this? I didn't know but I have to admit the excitement of everybody got to me too. All the kids would be there, and I was thinking of apologizing with Rolanda amid the music.

Outside there was no cloud shadowing the sun. There was a constant soft cool breeze that made me forget about the horrifying heat. Inside we looked livelier than the silent neighborhood beyond the chain linked fence. Even the youth care workers seemed livelier than usual, laughing amongst themselves and trying to hype the kids up to dance. One of them, the one who I never got his name, the young one with the scar on his eye, was the first one to dance.

"You see, it's alright," he said, putting his hands in the air and shaking his shoulders. We all laughed and after that kids actually got up to dance. There was no contact but boys and girls began to dance together, cumbias mostly.

There were a lot of kids outside, and when the crowd dancing seemed to give privacy to everybody, Rolanda appeared waving at me to come dance. Her black curly hair was curlier than usual, and the aroma of lavender on her stronger than ever. Her brown skin was glowing. I acted like I didn't want to accept her offer, but finally went up to her among the kids dancing.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, the music excluding everyone from our conversation.

"I know you are," she said smiling and moving to her own rhythm and not the music which caused me to laugh.

"Pinches marimachas. Lesbianas," I heard Laura's voice from behind us.

Suddenly Laura and Isela were close to us.

We stopped dancing, but the music and the other kids kept on going.

“What?” I finally managed to say to them both. Laura was right by Isela’s side and there was hate in her eyes that ruined how beautiful she looked that day.

“I know that you sleep with her every night. I’m not stupid,” Laura began to yell on top of the cumbia that was getting faster and faster. “I’m telling everybody.”

Rolanda took a step forward towards Laura and that’s when Isela immediately launched towards her like a rattlesnake. Laura hit me right there and then. I couldn’t focus on anything more than trying to defend myself. I felt my hair being yanked off my scalp. I felt her knuckles on my cheek bones. I punched at her every opportunity I got until we were both separated from the youthcare workers. That’s when I saw what they had created. The music was not playing anymore. The radios were all blaring. Almost all the kids were fighting with each other. I saw somebody push Lucas, the ten year old boy, and he almost went flying. I saw William run to the boy who had done that and tackled him down. Other boys ran to him too. Isela’s friends were trying to gang up on Rolanda. Everybody was fighting. The youthcare workers were screaming and yelling to stop us.

“Take your group of eight and get inside! Get them inside!” That’s what the one holding me was blaring out, but the rest were too busy trying to break the fights off.

“Let me go. I have to help her!” I kept on screaming at them.

I was being forced inside the building, along with other kids. The ones who had not been fighting quickly just went inside and were escorted by other youthcare workers. Inside was as chaotic as the outside.

I managed to get myself off the hold, and went running towards the hallway trying to find another exit to the outside pavilion. The kids inside were hitting the walls, evading the workers, trying to get back outside and help their friends. I stopped when I saw this girl who had gotten to her knees. She broke off all the bracelets of multi colored beads that she had on her wrist, bracelets we had all made in vocational class for each other. All the beads bounced in the hallway, all the kids in the hallway were being told to go to the classrooms.

“Ya no quiero estar aqui!” she was crying to the ceiling, her face red with tears and anger.

I heard the doors of the classrooms close with the kids inside. Finally someone came to talk to the girl with the beads and I ran away towards the wings before they found me.

It was the wing where the dorms of the boys were. The lights were off. The gray sunlight from the windows of the rooms illuminated the blue walls. Everybody was in the Educational wing trying to put the kids in the classrooms or outside trying to get the program under control. Even from here I heard the cries of other kids, trying to go outside or scared of what was going on.

I stood in place because I saw the shadow person right at the end of the wing with its aura of darkness gathering.

“Tu hiciste esto.” I told it and walked forward. With each step I took, my body trembled as I remembered Lorena sending me away. Benjamin. Benito. Carmen. The dead. The kids *hating* each other. Everything imploded in me until I saw my vision blurred with tears.

It walked forward. I kept walking forward. I heard the crack of windows, and a lightbulb burst.

Adan, the security monitor, was behind me calling out to me. I heard himself fall when the fluorescent lights shattered right above him. I didn’t look back. My eyes were trying to find its eyes.

I wanted to damage it, and I didn’t care what it would do to me. I ran towards it.

“No..Yo no.” I heard it whisper.

I got so close to it, but never near it, like infinity until its darkness expanded and then condensed onto the barriers of everything that I could see, until all my vision was all darkness.

CHAPTER XXI

Again in another bed recovering, and once again I did not stay in the darkness. When I woke, the medics of the program were staring at me, all with their blue uniforms. I couldn't remember what happened for a minute, but then everything came back. Rolanda. The dark shadow person.

"Hey. No. Rest, Mariana," one of the nurses said when I was about to stand up. He pushed up his glasses, and his forehead was sweating. One drop slithered itself on his brown skin like a tear.

"What happened?" I finally asked.

"You fainted. How are you feeling? Any pain?"

"No."

"Are you experiencing any-"

"Where's Rolanda?"

That night was filled with serious incident reports. I had been attached to the outside incident and also my own separate one in the dorm wing. I was questioned about what I was doing there in the first place, what had Laura and Isela said, it lasted as much as I could tolerate. I told them I had an anxiety attack, and I stuck to that, regardless of the broken lightbulbs on camera.

I was escorted to a new bedroom. A new one, but all the rooms look the same. All that was new was the absence of Laura and Rolanda. We did not have classes the next day, the next day being a Saturday. Only through leisure activities or the cafeteria would I have had the chance to talk to her, to see what had happened. It was night time, and nobody would tell me what was happening or what had happened. It's like they couldn't talk about it or something.

The next day all the workers were busy, but the program schedule needed to go on, it always needed to go on. I looked at the mirror before being escorted to the cafeteria for breakfast. My lip had a cut and it was swollen. I looked a little beat up. It made me sad, seeing me like this, the remnants of violence, of hate. Then I became angry that the remnants were there, that Laura had managed to leave me with something to remember her hate. I hoped I caused her to remember me too.

The cafeteria was quiet. Usually we were all fighting our own battles in our heads, each at different times, but that morning we had all collectively been through something. We were all seeing the aftermaths, feeling them. I couldn't find her. I looked at all the faces on the tables, even one by one, and I didn't see her.

"Where's Rolanda?" I asked some of the kids on my table. I felt like I was slowly sinking.

"She got transferred to another program," a girl told me.

I pretended like it didn't bother me. I started eating my food, and I noticed I was eating my own tears too as they dropped to my spork. I felt that if somebody would have asked me what was going on I would have burst out crying.

Laura, Isela, Rolanda they had all been transferred to another casa as they called it. Another shelter of Sunrise Doors. I was told even the police had entered the shelter the day I fainted and some kids had gone to the hospital, but most of the workers acted like nothing had happened.

The incident reports were still being filled out, and only the echoes of the day before were what people talked about. I still did not fully realize what had just happened. All I knew was that I was alone again. The girls I knew the most had left. I was there thinking of where they were. Rolanda. I did not even know if she was okay or what. She was transferred. That was all. No last words. No goodbyes. Just like that.

I remember kids would leave letters, as long as they were appropriate, to be read before the classroom after they were gone. It brought closure to us, hearing their written words after they got reunified. That didn't happened with Rolanda and them. It was like how it had happened in the convent with that girl that had kissed me. I never saw them again, and they both left me with the bruises their absence caused.

"You can still find her on Facebook if you look for her when you get out," William had told me in class. That was also something we were allowed to do before we got out of the program. You would know some kid was leaving when he or she was collecting usernames on their notebooks.

William didn't know that I had never even touched a computer in my life, or a cellphone that was my own.

That very week the program director herself and the shift supervisor himself brought a priest after Adan had been fired for running away from the scene after I fainted. I heard it from

others that the priest had roamed the entire program when we were on our outside recreation time. He had splashed holy water upon every corner in an attempt to sanctify and exorcise the building as he went. Nobody asked why he had been called. It just seemed self-explanatory. I know it must have been because of my incident because when we came back inside I heard that he was still walking back and forth in the dorm wing where I confronted the shadow person.

It had been real. Even though I think I destroyed it, I felt terrible. It was as if they were cleaning up a mess I had made, demonstrating that it had all been real. It meant that whatever it had been had indeed existed, and...what if there was more. What if it appeared again? But whether it's a prayer or medicine, we cling our hope to it and believe it is healing the wound unless we see otherwise. I did not see the shadow person ever again, have not to this day. So I do not know what or who did it at the end. Had I killed it and the priest done the overkill? I don't know. Like I said before, there are things we are not meant to know or able to understand when it comes to what lies after.

Things continued. Kids kept on getting sent back. Kids kept getting reunified. Kids kept coming in. I was there. In the middle. Stuck. Even to send me back, they did not know who to send me back to. They did not know who to reunify me with either.

"What has happened Mariana? It's been two weeks since we talked about what's going on with you." Mr. Rodrigo asked me in his office.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Mr. Jacobo tells me you don't do the class work anymore. You don't talk to anybody. It's been reported that you are not eating..."

“Why should I talk to them. They’re going to leave. I’m going to be the one missing them when they do.”

“Yes, but imagine if you would have said that before you met those friends you met here, the ones that got transferred. The opportunity of getting to know them would have been missed.”

“What good did it do to me knowing them.”

“You learned, Mariana. You learned socializing skills that you will need when you get out. To meet new people that will possibly be as good of friends as the ones you had here.”

“They were not my friends, and it looks like I’m never leaving.”

“Nobody stays in this place forever...Probably only us workers.”

He gave a tired smile. I guess they were in a way stuck in the middle like I was, seeing all the kids come in, and get out. Some, even for years, but at least they got out after their shift.

“I hear there is going to be an outing next week. The classes are going to the museum. Please, make sure you go,” Mr. Rodrigo said.

We were not forced to go on these trips. I had already made up my mind that I was not going to go. It was like a tease for my freedom, making me see what I was missing out in the outside world. The less I things I saw, the less things I could lose. I did not want to have that experience. I did not want to lose more.

When I was falling asleep that night I realized that I had been erecting the walls to another detainment within me. Already I was being shut down from the world, and now I had

been beginning to shut myself down from the program. I couldn't help but wonder what that was going to leave me with. Maybe buried deeper, harder to reach the surface of the U.S.

I slept peacefully. The whispers of the youthcareworkers did not bother me. Their radios now a naturalness like a breeze in the night. I was not going to let anybody or anything bury me while I was alive, even if it was I who was holding the shovel.

CHAPTER XXII

“Buenos dias. Me llamo Mariana.” I finally introduced myself to the new girls in my room after I don’t know how long since the incident.

They were younger than me, and had not been even a month in the program. Their solid pink shirts and solid blue sweat pants still had color to them. Mine, had already faded, even my favorite purple shirt. They glanced at me for a little bit and continued making their beds until they finally said good morning.

Everybody was going on the trip except Roscar and Mina who were always getting incident reports so they were not allowed to go. Mina, I heard that she could not go because the day before she had gotten bad news from her case. Her sponsor suddenly got cold feet and had not wanted to accept her. I did not see it for myself, but I heard that she broke down after the news in vocational class. I only saw the after math. All those posters we had done to hang along the hallways for the theme of the month. I think it had been an anti-bullying theme. It was one of her own posters, that I do remember. Mina had spent almost all of the class with Mr. Jacobo splintering glitter around the poster that showed a colorful peace sign. The deal was she would finish the poster, and she would get a completion credit on her work. That was one of the rare times she had been quiet in class, focused on the big red heart she was drawing on the poster to go along with the peace sign.

She not only ripped that out of the wall, but also ripped all others on the hallway too like a tornado destroying everything on her path until she locked herself in the restrooms on fish tank. I heard they had to open the door by force only to find her sobbing on the floor by the toilet.

Roscar had touched a girl inappropriately before the trip. It was said that during one of the vocational classes he had caressed the thigh of a girl named Natalia, small and fairly new to the program. He claimed to not have done it. The cameras supposedly did not catch it. Natalia, she was just changed to another vocational class, days later became reunified with her mother. Yet, that lingering suspicion to whether he did or not, still followed wherever he set foot, and his bad behavior did not help.

He too, like all of us who stayed for a long time, inevitably broke down. He did it while in Mr. Jacobo's class. He simply did not want to stay seated for class that day. The orange cap, he wore twisted aggressively back, and when he stormed out of the class the youth care workers did not have to run far. Roscar just sat right by Mr. Jacobo's classroom and cried. Mr. Jacobo stopped his lecture about how Christopher Colombus had not really discovered the Americas, and how he had abused the natives. I was left with more questions because he had to step out and check up on him. The whole class heard the whole conversation and Roscar's case manager was called on the radio. Mr. Jacobo returned to give class, but I kept listening to the words from the case manager talking to Roscar, a tall young man with big black eyes and stubble that made him look as if he had not slept.

"I want you to get out too Roscar, but stop behaving bad, stop making problems. Help me help you."

If things were already bad, why make them worse. That's what I got from those words of his case manager. I remembered them when I woke up the day of the field trip. I just needed to keep going, because I knew that things would eventually change. At least, now I could sleep. Things were becoming more clear. I knew where I was. I knew I needed to stay in place to get out, to keep myself together. I needed to look out for myself because nobody was going to do it for me. Even if Mr. Jacobo or Mr. Rodrigo, or my case manager, or a youthcare worker wanted to help me, ultimately they could not fix my life. I had to do that on my own, and it was a difficult realization at that time because it is a burden I had already been carrying, but never had really understood the weight. I looked around me, at all those kids younger than me, carrying that burden too upon their shoulders, not knowing their decisions were impacting them severely. Some, because they really had no idea. Others, because they were children, and big decisions had been reserved to our guardians that for some reason or another were not there at that moment or had never been.

I got with the program. I did what they told me to do. I didn't do what they told me not to do, and I took whatever chance I got to breathe. One of those opportunities was the trip to the museum. We got there with the white vans that were always parked waiting to be used either for dental appointments or court appointments outside of the program, or trips like these. The teachers were riding with us. We all watched through the windows the businesses and franchises along the streets. It looked like a whole new world without the mountains, without the dirt roads. Looking out the window, for the moment made me forget we were detained. I was part of them, part of the other cars in traffic, part of the land, visible.

When we got there we were welcomed by an old white lady with golden curls. She was small, but full of energy. She was smiling, and as I looked around me I thought maybe she was

happy we were here because we were the only people present. The youthcare workers were still present, doing the talking, and we all stayed in line in our groups like actual school kids. We were translated everything she said as she showed us an old Victorian house that apparently was the first hospital ever in the area. I could tell she enjoyed putting her mind to work like a pleasure that only came once in a while, only when people decided to visit this place. She showed us the old tools the doctors used all rusted with time, the old book records, and the old medicine jars. That day it was us. We were the audience, we were the learners, and she, the teacher for as long as that moment lasted.

Her arm with the golden bracelets ringed as she waved us goodbye and thanked us for coming. I looked back again and she was there smiling, waiting for another person to enter the place again like those ancient coin machines waiting for a quarter. La sigo viendo ahí en mi mente. Ahí en ese museo, ella misma parte del museo.

The trip was over, and we entered the vans again. What centered me back was a conversation the girls inside were having while I looked out the window. They seemed concerned. I could tell by the way one of them seemed to have her eyebrows in the shape of a v. So close in consternation.

After I don't know how much time, it all started to repeat itself like a big prank. They talked about the same thing Rolanda, Laura, and I talked about when we first got here. The screams at night. The nightmares. The sleepless nights. The ghost girl.

My heart seemed to go at a faster pace than the van we were in. I kept waiting for the words, something to tell me that the dark shadow still roamed the wings. I kept waiting like somebody who is expecting the bullet of a gun that is aimed right at her.

I kept quiet. The gun never fired. The conversation ended there with the la niñita. La niña con el vestido azul. I could not shake off the feeling that danger was still aimed at me.

Before I could even think about what I had just heard I was reminded of my session with Mr. Rodrigo. I wasn't forced to go, but I thought it would look bad if I rejected to go. As I walked with Mr. Rodrigo to his office I kept thinking what was going on with those girls.

"Is everything okay? Did the trip help?" he asked once in his office.

"Yes. Yes it was nice to see a new place." I said looking at the poster of the universe he had on his wall.

After the usual session questions he stopped facing his computer screen and looked directly at me.

"Mariana, there's one thing you still have not answered after all this time. Did anything bad happen in your journey?"

"Yes."

"..."

"I saw people die inside a truck. I should have died too because I was there with them. I saw a lot of things. I close my eyes sometimes because I don't want to see anymore. I don't want to know, but even if I close my eyes. I've already seen it. It's there in my head forever. I could have saved them. I knew it was going to happen. I knew, Mr. Rodrigo."

I closed my eyes and in my mind the box truck was there locked. I could hear the screams of the people, the noise of their fists banging on the metal, banging on anything to be heard, to be

saved. The truck trembled, swayed back and forth as if it had a million squirming bees. I stood there afraid.

“You didn’t kill them, Mariana,” I heard Mr. Rodrigo saying outside of my mind.

I walked towards it and opened it. Instead of the people, I found swarms of the transparent orbs rushing through me, rushing towards the blaring sun.

It had been a long time since I let myself really cry. I opened my eyes and Mr. Rodrigo was there holding my reality from collapsing. I cried and cried and cried for I don’t know how long. I cried until it felt I had vomited something putrid my soul had eaten. I cried until I was myself again.

I told him I was going to be okay. It felt like an eternity had passed. I breathed like a little kid who had been crying for a long time, the thought made me smile. I apologized, and he reminded me to never say sorry for such things. He congratulated me for my strength instead. He escorted me to class, and I really did mean the words I said, that I was going to be okay. I saw him roll his wheelchair back to his office, and I was thankful he had been my clinician. I was thankful.

CHAPTER XXIII

At night, I waited for somebody to scream, to see for myself what the girls were saying. What made me jump instead was the mechanical shrill scream of the fire alarm. The lights began to flash everywhere, on and off like lightning. The youth care workers did not hesitate to tell us to just wake up and follow them to the exit, all of us in line quickly. I heard several kids crying, especially the new ones, who had no idea what a fire alarm was because there was no such thing where they were from. The sharp alarm and bursting lights triggered God knows what memories.

With the cries, and scared faces, I knew it had not been over whatever had happened with the dark shadow person. We were escorted outside, on to a fresh night. It had been a long time since we had been outside in the night. The program scheduled us to go to sleep at 8, and our evening outside time ended before the sunset. This was a luxury.

Outside was fenced but when I saw up above, all those stars and that yellow moon I knew there could be nothing that could really contain us, not even the casket. I heard the ghost girl when we were all organized in lines outside, as the youth care workers made a headcount.

“Bruja. Puta marimacha.” I heard la niña.

I knew it was her. I felt it was her. Finally, she had come for me.

I don’t know what she wanted from me with those words, but I did flinch. I felt insane. Nobody heard her. The words over and over again, and nobody said anything. I looked at the stars again. I focused on them even though they did not focus on me.

“Everything you touch dies.”

“Tu mama. Tu papa. Rolanda. Laura. Benjamin. Benito. Carmen. Mirta. Lorena. THE PEOPLE IN THE TRUCK.”

She had almost had me. She almost did. The ghost girl had been too late though thanks to Mr. Rodrigo. I felt her fear as I ignored her. Felt her anger when we got all escorted back to the building. Now I knew for sure. It had been her, it, all along. *Al tratar de engañarme, me enseñó que ella era más débil que yo.*

All that light that had been around her had been deceitful. I didn't see how she was doing this to us, feeding our fears, robbing our sleep. I didn't know why she was doing that, but now I could see that she was. I was focused. My eyes sought her now, and she could no longer hide from me. All my attention was on her. Her attempt to break me down in front of the entire program had failed. It was my turn.

My clarity horrified her. She did not appear for the rest of the night, and that whole night I just kept on thinking what was it that she really was. What had the dark shadow person been too? I knew I had destroyed it, and I could not forget the last words it had told me. *No. Yo no.*

Had they been working together? Had the dark shadow person been trying to stop her, warning me that she was the one I was supposed to be defeating? Had I worked for her when I destroyed that entity? I don't know, but I knew that she had been doing what I thought the dark shadow person had been solely up to, and she stopped when I knew that she was. She didn't appear that night, or that week, or that month.

It felt like a break up. There were so many questions I wanted to ask her, but at the same time I knew that the moment I saw her I would do the same as I did to the other. More, because

there had now really been a peace in the program and I did not want her to ruin that. The incident reports, the nightmares, the cries in the night, the fights, all had dwindled except of course for life itself. Cases were still being shut, being opened, being signed off. Kids reunified. Kids coming in. Because we were not allowed to watch the news inside the program, I gathered bits and pieces of what was going on in the outside world from the workers, and the kids who talked to their family members from the phone with their Case Managers. I heard that President Trump was being impeached for something with Russia. I heard that President Juan Orlando sought to stay in power regardless of the election results and corrupt accusations in Honduras. I heard that the President of Mexico was going to give his airplane up for a raffle nationwide. I heard that the company was going to let go of teachers because President Trump did not want education in programs like ours. I heard too that it was getting harder for anybody to cross, even asylum seekers. I heard of shootings in U.S. schools, gangs killing family members in Salvador and Honduras. With those pieces of information, I painted in my mind what the world looked like at the moment in 2019, but regardless of how much information I got, I still could not shake the fact that I had been gone from the world during that year, and nobody had looked for me.

The education remained, turned out getting rid of the teachers could not be done for all the companies as our program because it would directly violate a government agreement for unaccompanied minors who were detained, us. That is when more than ever the workers of the program reminded us that if it had not been them we would have stayed in those jails of immigration with the adults, with no education in the meantime.

More and more the kids left from the program, but more and more the winter arrived to it too. They were leaving faster than they were coming in, and the outside recreation time began to get colder and cloudier. The only trees I saw were beginning to look like giant thorns in the

distance. Blue and gray sweaters of the same material as our sweatpants were given to all of us, and suddenly Christmas did not seem so far away. The ghost stories became simply ghost stories. What we truly worried about was if we were going to have to spend our Christmas inside the program.

I did not worry about that. Christmas with the nuns had been more about chores than actually celebration. I had already accepted that I was going to spend Christmas in the program too. The way my case looked, I knew I was staying a longer time. I had the urge sometimes to look into my case managers eyes, just to know how long we were talking about. Yet, I knew I would only be seeing one of the many possibilities, and that regardless good or bad, it was not fixed. I was done tormenting myself. Sometimes seeing one of the possibilities can be clarifying, but not in such cases.

I had to accept that, for the moment, the program was my home. Maybe suddenly the next day my case could suddenly be accepted, maybe not. Life is about living in the maybes. That is reality. Perhaps having my ability can be to people as a control over my life or others, but no. If anything it gives me an idea but the outcome can always change, always out of control. At that young age, my younger self still did not fully understand this, but I felt it. Now, before I lost my ability, I used that idea as a target in which my hypotheses are constructed around it with surgical precision that results in an effective accuracy. Experience does matter.

So I chose to not see into my case manager's eyes, still did not know what I could do with my ability. I figured it did not matter if I knew the day I was leaving was close or far, I still needed to live through the program's flow until then, needed to accept it as a home whether for the day or for the month. But the 'until then' became just an infinite blank.

I still waited for la niña. Cuando caminaba entre los pasillos, cuando dormía. La esperaba, hasta que el odio se transformó en extrañar.

For some weird reason, I felt lonelier now that the ghost girl was gone, felt like I had to return to my own problems. Now that she was gone, all I had to think about was me, all I had to fix was me. I continued to just focus in learning English whenever Mr. Jacobo had time to help me. His slides, his worksheets were new to the flood of new kids that were coming in, but to me and the others who had stayed long already, it was close to terrifying. How long have I been here that the classes have repeated already? I did not now when or if the ghost girl would return, but the boredom made me want for her to show up. She didn't, maybe that was also on purpose, to let me drown in the repetitiveness.

I think the staff began to notice, or even suffered too under this same monotony because the schedule abruptly got changed when the lead teacher decided to introduce pep rallies to the programs. We did have soccer teams of boys and the girls who competed against other programs in the area and the pep rallies were supposed to be for us to cheer the teams on before they went on to play. Every two weeks on a Friday, the classroom day was divided in half, with pep rallies starting in the morning and held outside in fields by the pavilion where the silver looking benches stood always waiting for us when we finally were escorted outside.

Those new Fridays now consisted of the lead teacher being accompanied by a dj who usually was one of the workers already in the program and a microphone motivating kids from each classroom outside in the pavilion. The classrooms 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 were all seated to see who had the most motivational spirit. There was always a theme, and I remember nobody wanted to participate in the first rallies. Mr. Jacobo would introduce the theme to our class, holding poster boards and construction paper with hopes to see something be created out of

them. Classroom 1 seemed to have gotten the hang of it, earning an undefeated spot at each prep rally. They always had the most elaborate poster boards, the catchiest of cheers. Time after time they were the ones who cheered the loudest, the ones who had more fun with it. It wasn't until it was said that the next class who won would have a free movie day of their choosing, except the movie of course which had to be chosen by the teacher. You add that to the smug comments classroom one said as they passed the rest of the classes, comments about being the best class of the whole program, and that was what suddenly made the rallies more interesting.

"Before I forget, this pep rallie's theme will be superheroes. Just in time for Halloween," Mr. Jacobo said one morning as he connected his laptop to the projector. I was just waiting to see what the documentary he showed every week would be about today.

Roscar had been finally transferred to another program. He had not said goodbye or even told anybody, just left. Pumpkins, cut out shapes of bats, and paper jack o lanterns had sprouted all over the halls after his departure. It told me that Dia de Muertos was fast approaching, a day my mother had kept track of especially when she was alive. It got me thinking of what really were my roots. Had the true me been with my mother and father, or the nuns, or had it been in the program? All of the above? The fact was I was growing in each and every one of those moments in my life. My homes changed constantly. I chose to tell myself that it wasn't that I did not have a home, but more like my home could be anywhere. My home was everywhere and my roots growing, expanding on to wherever the wind was taking me.

Mina was now more quiet in class. I think it was only her and William that remained of the kids that had been in the program when I first got there. Suddenly some of the new girls began to ask Mr. Jacobo that this time they really wanted to make something for the pep rally, but it would have to be after lunch which was when he normally taught English. He did not like

the idea, but the majority of the class wanted to work on it. I could not vote against it, even Mina wanted to create something for the rally. The boys began to talk about which heroes were in the Avengers, who were the villains. The youth care worker began to tell us of Wonderwoman, Batgirl, Scarlet Witch, and Black Widow.

“Okay, but I want to see everybody participating in it,” he said as he suddenly took out rolls of colored paper, paintbrushes, poster boards, and crayons out of nowhere. “Maybe this time Class 3 will finally win,” he said smiling.

For those two weeks it seemed like our class was the behind the scenes of a fashion show or the building of a movie’s character costumes. The desks were not riddled with notebook paper or mechanical pencils but instead measuring tape and glue bottles, glitter, and markers adorned the corners of the class. Some girls were measuring everybody’s backs for the capes and some of the boys were creating paper swords and shields and other accessories. Mina was making Thor’s hammer out of a napkin roll and a box of kleenex. Even though I wanted much more to learn English, I couldn’t help but be fascinated by all the talk going around of superheroes and their arch nemesis. Professor x and magneto. Spiderman and green goblin. Batman and the joker. The Avengers and Thanos. Mariana and la niña ...

I helped with the shields, with the swords, with the capes, with the face paint, with the poster boards, with the paper masks until we finally tried everything on a day before. How we laughed at ourselves with the long paper capes, and crooked superhero masks, but we laughed. All of us laughed that day.

The day of the pep rally Mina raised her hammer high, dropping glitter wherever it went as we were escorted to the pavilion in the morning. Mr. Jacobo could not hide his creased smile.

I was wearing a mixture of all superheroes. I think the majority of our class did too. We carried Captain America's shield with Thor's helmet, batman's mask, or black panther's too and our capes red as Superman. We had gathered every power from every hero, and I swear to you we all were powerful.

The bleachers trembled as we approached them. The rest of the classes were there already, even classroom 1. We were not intimidated by their chants, and costumes with masks that seemed more elaborate than ours because they had been actual cutouts of the superhero masks while ours had all been handmade. All the classes chanted their numbers and rooted for their win. The lead teacher stood there raising her microphone like the statue of liberty, except she had enormous arms and a colorful tattoo that seemed to bulge out. She seemed to be saying something, but I couldn't hear her well with all the screams from the other classes. Mrs. Tora, that was the lead teacher's name, finally quieted everybody down to introduce the boys soccer team, followed by the girls'. The microphone made a screeching noise because her lips almost seemed to touch the black part of it, but it got the crowd going. Overall, I think there were a hundred of us outside that day in the pavilion waiting with anticipation at who would be crowned the winner of the pep rally.

She continued on with a speech about how we were the real superheroes, withstanding, persevering, continuing on with our journey for a better future.

"Let's hear it for the best house, Sunrise Doors of the Rio Grande Valley!" She raised her hand as if to physically raise the spirits and everybody cheered on. I saw Mr. Jacobo, who did not cheer, but simply smiled. He was standing outside the pavilion on the grass along with other workers establishing a perimeter around us.

Games continued with a volunteer from each class such as tug of war and limbo. Then finally there was the moment everybody was waiting for, even Mr. Rodrigo had wheeled himself out along with other clinicians and case managers to see for themselves. Mrs. Tora explained that the rules quickly, whichever class cheered the loudest and had more spirit won.

“Let’s hear it classroom 8!” a loud cheer erupted.

“Classroom 7” until it was finally our turn. “Classroom 3!” and the whole world seemed to burst and with the same force classroom 1 replied when she called them.

“It’s between classroom 3 and classroom 1,” she decided. “For the last time, let’s hear it classroom 1!” Their undefeated cheer seemed to slap our ears until they rang.

“Now, classroom 3!”

As I helped with my screams and clapping I turned to see Mr. Jacobo. He was the only one cheering us on from afar, finally clapping. I saw Mr. Rodrigo’s smile holding tight to his wheels.

Classroom 1 had been the loudest.

“The winner is classroom 3!”

I think it had been more to change it up, or maybe we really did have more spirit, but our class won. We won. I won.

Todo había sido un juego, pero gané...y me gusto.

CHAPTER XXIV

I wanted to keep on winning, take that feeling on to my real life problems. That is why once Halloween was ended with a version of trick or treating from classroom to classroom and offices to offices, once even Mina finally left and the Christmas trees sprouted on the halls, I had decided I would look into my case manager's eyes.

The Christmas lights suddenly appeared festooned on the walls one day. The red stockings, the candy canes, and Santa Claus images conquered away the Halloween and Thanksgiving decorations. This time, finally the cold was here to stay. If it was not humid or windy, we felt it when they took us out for P.E. or outside recreation during the day. We felt it on the walls at night, and that feeling of nostalgia was the cold's partner, flowing alongside it like a DNA strand through the program.

William and I were now the only ones in our class with the triple digits next to our name. Yet, I knew that there was a boy who had more time in the program than any other. That is because, over a year, he had transferred from program to program because of his troubled behavior. So technically he was the kid with the most numbers of days being detained.

I told myself when December arrived that I would let Christmas pass, let God take over and have my case approved whenever it may be. After Christmas though, the very day after Christmas, I told myself too that then it would be up to me to speed things up and help in my own fate too. Either my Christmas present would be waking up to a miracle, or I would allow myself to try to make that miracle. The coin was in the air, and I would wait until it fell.

“Be patient.”

“You’re almost there.”

“Have faith.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

After Christmas, those words the workers had told me would have real value to me. In the meantime, I was glad to see the little kids in our program get toys that had been donated from churches in the city. I helped decorate. I helped the new kids adapt, what not to say, what not to do. I kept learning English. I kept talking to Mr. Rodrigo. I helped Mr. Jacobo in class grading papers. Slowly I was resurfacing from wherever I had buried myself, a layer out until I was totally free. Rolanda, I just hoped she was happy. The dark shadow person never appeared again. La niña, tampoco. I let things be.

The week before Christmas arrived like a bird colliding on the transparency of a window glass, and those who had not left finally accepted the fact that they were going to spend their Christmas and maybe even New Year’s at the program. Something had to give. The week before Christmas all we did was watch movies in class, played bingo, and did everything that made the place warmer. The day before Christmas we were given little bags of gifts with mittens and toy-like watches. Mr. Jacobo was still there, and Mr. Rodrigo too. A lot of the workers were still there and I couldn’t help but realize how they too had accepted the fact to spend part of their Christmas at the program. I just wondered if they had done it by choice.

If the movies were the chimneys that were around the program then the small bags were the little orbs of fires on our hands to deviate us from the cold urge to just want to run and go to our families, to their parties, to their humble Christmas trees. A girl in my class did not care if

she had never seen the family her dad now had in the U.S. She just wanted to get reunified with him and spend Christmas with them, regardless if her dad was close to a stranger. Another boy was strongly considering accepting the voluntary deportation in order to spend New Year's with his grandmother back in Honduras.

. I had long ago resigned all of that with the nuns, where we had also received small utilities as gifts under a Christmas tree that did not feel like one's own too. Christmas had stopped being Christmas for me a long time ago, but I felt their pains in their hearts like a stomach ache. I told them we just had to make it through these days, these hardest days, and the time would go back to feeling the same, without the nostalgia. We would soon see how important it had been to keep going in those tough days and not give up. Not on ourselves. Not on our hope. I told them that we just had to wait and see, and as I told them I told myself.

I know we all heard the fireworks out our windows bursting in the night sky on Christmas eve. The flashes of red, of green, of brilliant white seemed almost to push the curtains away. The program schedule told us it was time to sleep, but our minds told us to dream with our eyes wide opened.

The first Monday after Christmas came and my case manager came to pick me up from the educational hall. I guess it is time to introduce Mrs. Adela. She was the tallest woman I had ever seen in my life. Her black hair were two cascades on either side of her pale face. I don't know if it's because I feel bad writing about her that made me forget to talk about her or is it just that I ignored her until that time, until I was the one managing my case.

She told me that there was no good news, that my case still remained the same and reminded me of how my birthday was coming at the end of July. She reminded me that the

moment I turned 18 I was not going to be able to stay in the program, possibly be transferred back to immigration since Sunrise Doors was only a shelter for minors. I was fixated on the wallpaper on her computer, a picture of her in front of the leaning tower of pisa, smiling and jovial. Then my eyes met hers, and I stared until I was no longer in the office.

CHAPTER XXV

It was like trying to swim into various directions while there was one constant current flowing mercilessly towards one direction. I saw face masks on people's faces everywhere in the program, and empty halls. Then I remembered why I was there. I was there to see my future, not hers. Then just focusing on that, I finally found myself through her eyes. I was sitting across her in her office and in the computer screen I saw BCFS Human Resources. The further ahead the messier it gets so I stopped right there and then.

"What does BCFS Human Resources mean?" I asked abruptly back to where we were.

"...sorry I blanked out," she said reorienting herself, "What?"

"What does it mean? BCFS Human Resources?"

"Are you trying to tell me you want to go there? It would be more waiting, Mariana. They're going to do the same thing I am doing here, finding you a sponsor. Except I'm trying with the nuns from your convent to help us find somebody."

"They won't help. Lorena was the only one who could have done something and I don't think she's there anymore."

"BCFS does let you be in their program until twenty. That does make sense. If you wait here, you'll turn 18 and probably get deported back. You want to keep waiting then but over there?"

"Yes. I'm not going back."

I don't know if that meant that I had been headed towards that direction either way, but I did know for sure that I had sped the time it was going to take for Mrs. Adela to realize that option. Maybe I saw a possibility and I made it true.

She already had a lot of complaints from other kids on how slow she moved her cases as compared to the other workers who continued to get cases done at a faster rate. Throughout the next course of events I manipulated her towards the direction I saw would be the best for my case. I saw too why she had been slacking so much when I stared into her eyes again and again. I saw a man screaming at her inside her home, then saw through her eyes how she kissed another man in another place only to return to the one that slept with her. I told you it can get addicting to see.

2019 was over and 2020 arrived with its fresh batch of days. I kept waiting for the little ghost girl to come out in the hallways, kept my eyes and ears for any rumors of her presence. It was like one of my daily chores and responsibilities in the program. Make my bed, attend class, learn English, participate in vocational classes, talk to Mr. Rodrigo, help with my case, and listen to any signs of la niña . It fit into the routines I had set in place to maintain myself sane. Mr. Rodrigo's sessions had consisted now of trying to figure out what I thought exactly happened that day when I had fainted after destroying the dark shadow man. It seemed like he wanted me to talk about it without abruptly saying it. Everybody seemed to have forgotten or better yet, ran away from that day. I think all they saw had been me standing in front of a hallway staring into the darkness at the end of it. The fluorescent lights shattering unexpectedly. Coincidence. Trauma from the riot outside caused me to faint. Except, if you had seen it through my eyes, there lay the story I told before, and I think Mr. Rodrigo was pursuing that idea. He did not

pressure it because I had already fed everybody and him the version they readily believe. Except, I forgot Mr. Rodrigo just wasn't everybody.

I think I was just waiting for La Niña to come out again. I would have told him if she had because the truth was I would have been too scared to do it alone. Whatever it was, if she ran away, or was hiding it meant it was still scared. If it came back, I'm sure there would be a reason, one that would not favor me. Yet, in my ears landed traces of a different rumor when suddenly the amount of new kids in the program began to decline. First the program began to abruptly have their medical department tell us all on the importance of washing our hands. That's around the time when finally somebody mentioned a new virus was killing people in China. Then just like that all workers began to wear a face mask, all appearing like surgeons about to give surgery on us. It was not much of a surprise to me when I had already seen it in my case manager's eyes, but seeing it through my own was stunning. Were we the virus? Was that what the masks were for?

It wasn't until our teachers explained to us how the masks were being used to protect us because they could actually be the ones carrying the virus. I had never had the urge of watching the news before that time. I only depended on whatever answer the workers chose to give. Yet, all correlated in saying that it was from China and that it had not reached the area where we lived. It calmed me for a little, but it was like being calm while you felt the heat of a fire approaching. I knew it was. I didn't have to look into their eyes to see the way they no longer shook hands with each other, the way they separated themselves. I saw fear again, only this time it was not with the kids but in the adults.

The kids began to leave at a faster rate, but there was nobody coming in. Even the kid who had been transferring from one program to the next had been reunified to an uncle or cousin.

Slowly they were all going to leave, and William and I just looked at each other as the tides kept moving. Not only were the kids leaving, but workers also began to stop showing up. The medical department finally made a presentation on each class, introducing information about the new Coronavirus 19. Through a powerpoint like Mr. Jacobo's daily lectures, they explained to us how the symptoms included coughing, fever, fatigue, and body ache. It made sense that the people who were not working had all coughed at one point. Right when they said that I remember one boy had started coughing.

"It's nothing," he said and we all laughed nervously.

CHAPTER XXVI

It had been William who first decided to wear a mask among us.

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to stay more time here if I get sick,” he had told me one morning in class. It was true he was apparently leaving within a month to an organization like the one I was going to where it was most likely he would become adopted. We were no longer able to play soccer which was the sport everybody liked to play during P.E. Distance was now actually measured and beginning to be implemented by taping laminated shapes of footprints on the hallway. Each print was six feet apart and it was set there to remind us how distant we had to walk in line. I decided to ask for a mask too just like William, and soon all the kids were wearing masks too.

While we got more distant, the classes began to shrink. Slowly, then rapidly the number of us decreased until it was just ten of us left in the whole program. One class for all of us, and three of the teachers got sent to work from home, whatever that was supposed to mean. The constant chatter of conversations throughout the halls had suddenly stopped, and it all seemed normal. There is something about the program that makes it easy for anything to be normal. Anything new that was implemented on to the schedule, after a week or so, was the new normal and our normal changed every week. Was the normal outside in the world changed too? The workers kept telling us about everybody being on lockdown and having curfews. It seemed we were not the only ones anymore being isolated from the rest of the world.

It was just William and I by the end of my stay in the program. After the remaining 8 kids had left, the remaining 2 teachers left. It was only Mr. Jacobo, William, and I in one class. I was surprised he was still there, considering all the talk about the virus seemed to say that it was hitting old people really hard. Yet, he was there every morning with the same calm old eyes. Mr. Rodrigo was in the program too, although our sessions were through the camera of a laptop, even though his office was right down the hall. The halls were more or less empty. We only saw youthcare workers when they woke us up. For the rest of the day they were off maintaining the building disinfected. Ms. Angela was there, pushing a cart with all sorts of disinfectants and a white rag that became sort of a uniform along with her smile that still kept me smiling.

The director ordered for some lights on the hallway be turned off because nobody was using them. It resulted in some parts of the building being completely in the dark, except for the education hallway and the wings where William's dorm and mine were.

"It's kind of scary isn't it?" William had asked me.

"Not really. For the first time we have the rooms all to ourselves," I said thinking that of all the things only I could see, the orbs where what remained, always have.

We became close friends William and I. Being forced to be together, I think, forced us to open up to each other even though we were six feet apart all throughout the day. Before the virus we used to have somebody come and cut our hair every two weeks. Now there was nobody coming in, nobody had come in for months to cut hair. William's hair was getting so long he had tied it into a ponytail. It bobbed from side to side every time we did Mr. Jacobo's worksheet as if he was listening to music through invisible earphones. I had not seen him this happy, ever.

"I like the pony tail," I told him in class one day, Mr. Jacobo on his laptop.

“Yeah? This is nothing I used to have longer hair before.”

“Really?”

“It used to be like yours. My tia cut it all off when I was asleep,” his smile faded away, and he looked at Mr. Jacobo clicking away in his laptop, then looked at me. “She just was just never okay with who I was.”

“We’re okay with who you are. Focus on your work, William.” Mr. Jacobo said, and we both laughed at how Mr. Jacobo always pretended to be strict but we knew that he only got mad when he failed to see respect amongst us, which used to happen ever so long ago it seemed.

I talked to William later during our outside recreation time as I sat there on the benches seeing the empty soccer field, and basketball court of cement. A monarch butterfly stood on my black sneakers that every kid in the program used to have. My long black shorts moving by the wind. My hair moving to the direction the butterfly flew away to, upward, freedom. William appeared in front of me, adjusting his face mask. That is where we got around to the story about his hair, and how he used to dress in girls’ clothing and wear dresses and how he was fascinated with makeup. It had all been him trying to match who we was in the inside. He ran away because his aunt did not want him in her house, and hence began his journey.

I could eventually tell how long time was passing by the length of his hair that kept growing and growing and so did his confidence. It reminded me of when I used to read the bible with the nuns, about that story of Samson whose only weakness was in cutting his hair. Except, William had no intention of being a killer or hurting anybody for that matter. He had been hurt.

I told him about the people in the truck. I even told him about my ability. I did not tell him though of the dark shadow man or the disappeared ghost girl for fear that by speaking about

them out loud would manifest them. Together we learned as much English as possible, helped each other by conversing only in English along with Mr. Jacobo in class. One of the last classes was about entrepreneurship and business. Through the slides he told us about Vanderbilt, Carnegie, and Rockefeller.

“Is there a pattern you see here?” he asked the class through the blue facemask. The class that was now just of William and I, but he presented as if he was in town hall or university.

“They’re all immigrants,” I said.

“Yes, Mariana. Both of you remember that. Throughout history, the people who made America were immigrants like you. The colonists, the entrepreneurs. You two remember that when you get out of here and somebody tells you that you don’t belong here.”

Our cases got approved around the same time, only he left first. We both knew it was coming, but still it hurt to say goodbye.

I got an incident report when I said goodbye to him on the last day. I had disobeyed the covid-19 rules and gave him a hug during outside recreation time while the youthcareworkers called me to stop.

“I hope you become the girl you always wanted to be,” I told him and he hugged me tighter. It was the first hug in close to a year that I had received and we did not want to let go. But, of course, we did. Of course, we did not see each other ever again, and I still hope in those words.

CHAPTER XVII

Next morning, William was not there in class, but he had left some words across the wide board with a marker. He thanked Mr. Jacobo, Mr. Rordrigo, and all the youth care workers that told him not to give up, and he wrote that I in turn should not give up. I never have.

The last days, Mr. Rodrigo and my case manager kept giving me information about the public school I was going to go to in Virginia while in BCFS. They gave me all sorts of useful information like where the hospitals were, the churches, the Mexican embassy. My case had gotten approved. I had qualified for a passport, and asylum status. I was able to speak and understand English by the end of it all, not fluently but enough to get by.

There were no more kids, and the workers were the only ones I talked to. It was like I had become one of them. When they spoke English they made sure to include me now that they knew I understood and could reply. They all said goodbye to me on my last day, made almost a long line to do so. I didn't leave a note. I didn't leave anything. I wanted to make sure Mr. Rodrigo and Mr. Jacobo, Ms. Angela, Mrs. Adela, everybody received my words personally. Those words all included a thank you. It was part of their job not to get attached to us, part of me not get attached to them. Our goodbye's where brief, but brought whatever closure we could possibly have.

Of all the people that could have been there with me at that moment in time, in that program, I am glad it had been them. I more or less saw what was to come through one last look of my case manager's eyes, and I walked forward. I packed my things, and before I knew it I was

being escorted to the airport with a youthcareworker. I was glad because the complicated process of boarding was all taken care of because of him. It felt like a piece of the program had transcended on to the outer world with the youthcareworker being there, and everybody still wearing those blue surgical masks.

Before I boarded the plane I looked through his eyes to see if everything was going to be okay, and even then I gripped the side arms of my seat as I felt the wheels of the plane lose touch with the ground. I would have never thought that in my life I would see the ground from so high in the air, the clouds so close to my face. For almost a whole year, all that I knew were the walls of a building, its hallways. Looking through the window of the plane, the whole expanse of the world seemed to rush at me and my eyes began to tear up at the sight of it all.

I was adopted by an old white man with round red glasses that framed his big green eyes. He was bald, except for the gray hair on the sides. He was a retired journalist and claimed to be still an activist. An old man, with an even older heart that had forgotten its own youth. After BCFS I was finally moved to his home, where it seemed that all the lighting was natural sunlight. He always had every window of the house opened, and the old books and newspapers that were scattered everywhere always shined as much as the bright wooden décor.

It was around the time Biden had won the presidency, after the whole voter fraud accusations had finally been put to rest. President Trump had finally conceded after he could no longer contest the election results, after his followers stopped attempting to storm the vote-count centers. When I saw Kamala next to Biden on TV I knew that I wanted to be like her. It reminded me of what was possible here in the U.S., the possibility of great change, and I looked forward more than ever to start making something of myself.

The first thing the man who adopted me gave to me was a steaming green cup of coffee. He had even offered me a cigarette, but I refused which he liked. He brought a revitalizing energy into my life ever since, and also never stopped giving me coffee until the day I moved out.

His name was James Ambs, or Don Ambs as I called him. He took complete guardianship, and helped me become a citizen, but more importantly for me, helped me navigate the new institution I was to be part of for one year; high school. It first began online through a laptop like when I spoke to Mr. Rodrigo in the program before I left because of the pandemic. After close to the end of the school year I finally went physically to a real American school. Not much after, I graduated with the GED, but the world really never returned to how it was before I joined the program. When I came out, the world was not the same one I knew. Even after the vaccine, I never saw the world I had belonged to before my journey had begun. People no longer shook hands, a lingering distance stayed in place, and people wearing facemasks never again seemed like an oddity.

We were in his patio when, amid his garden of small looking trees, Don Ambs told me about how his wife's dying wish. Clouds were beginning to hide the sun, and the words came to him along with the shadows. Her dying wish had been to adopt a child from the programs like Sunrise Doors and BCFS because she had worked there all her life as a case manager. They were unable to have children, had resigned themselves to that fact, but when Mrs. Ana Ambs got leukemia they got around the idea of adoption. He said it had been three years before I had been adopted, that he could never get himself to do it right after she died.

"If we lie to ourselves, we become another enemy, our own worst enemy. Staying true, we become our own ally, maybe even the greatest one. The decision is ours, Mariana," he had

told me in one of our usual coffee talks that took place in the small round table where we ate by the window. He always ended them with something like that after reading the newspaper, and then would leave out to his patio to enjoy the morning without an explanation. I would go off to school, or off to work, or both. They impressed me first when I was younger. As I grew his words became less and less mysterious. Those are one of the countless words of him that I remember right now as I am writing it down.

It felt I had come from another world when I lived with him. He tried to inform himself of as much as he could from Mexico at first, but he could never cook the guisados and tortillas and all that food I did not know I was going to leave behind. It wasn't until I really got confident in the house that I began to add my seasonings to the food myself. I was intimidated at first to suggest that his food was not the best. It was a culture thing. It just sometimes seemed illogical to defy anything an elder said out of respect. So I didn't begin to cook for the both of us until I was ready to critique his cooking. Then, he learned about my mole, tamales, salsas, my own tortillas de maiz, de harina, atole, y el huazontle and he began to cook for both of us again.

I did not realize until after months how lonely Don Ambs was. I asked about his family once, and he had told me that all he had left were two brothers who he did not talk to or their families.

"They're not people that would like us, Mariana," he had told me.

It had just been him and his wife. After that, him and I. Over time I only spoke Spanish in my mind. I liked talking with Don Ambs, but it felt like I talked with him more with a mask on when I spoke English than talking in a real version of me, that version of ourselves who we had a conversation in our own heads. Nobody could see me behind the mask unless they understood

what my native tongue said. That is how it was all around me, school, the city. Rarely did I find somebody who spoke Spanish. That's around the time when I finally made a Facebook account, looking for some real connection in what seemed to be a false world. That's when Rolanda crossed my mind again like the monarch butterflies that appear once a year. The idea of her just slowly alighted inside my mind until I tried to search for her. So many new things were happening, so many new places that Rolanda and everything which happened before, just simply got left behind.

Every day after school, every day after work, I got back home and looked for her. It became an obsession. Don Ambs was in his room most of the time in the evenings, but I stayed in the small round table by the window hoping that some how I would get some sort of signal from above that would appear on the laptop and lead me to her. I found first kids who I vaguely remembered being with me in Sunrise Doors. William, Laura , Mina, Roscar, even Isela I found later all to be smiling in the pictures that they posted. Then, I finally accepted that Rolanda was nowhere in the Facebook world, and I still wonder if she is even here in the real world. I don't know what happened to her. I keep asking around, pulled at the strings I can only pull myself in D.C. The only thing I got was that she's somewhere in New York, running some sort of illegal business. If you are reading this Rolanda, please contact me. I know that perhaps you built a web of your own now. It doesn't matter. I need to talk to you. Just know that I never forgot. I hope you didn't either.

I never gave Don Ambs any real problems, only of the adolescent kind. There was only one time when all hell broke loose. It was after I had accepted that Rolanda was nowhere to be found, and that I was probably never going to find her. I had sneaked out of the house to go to a senior party. I thought that maybe if I met the girl I liked at the time who didn't make fun of my

accent or my astonishment with the U.S. I would forget about Rolanda. When I came back drunk, he was waiting, drinking a cup of coffee, smoking a cigarette. He got after me for coming so late, for drinking, and a bunch of other things, but I remember he said, “Mariana, what has gotten into you? Don’t you understand. Those kids will not lose anything if they get into trouble. They will just get a slap on the wrist, but you Mariana, you can lose everything. All they need is an excuse to deport you. Remember that always, Mariana. You have more to lose than all of them.”

“What do you care? You don’t really care,” I said tying my hair, trying to appear less drunk. “You adopted me because you feel guilty of your privilege. Is this what this is? The white man comes to save me? Is this easing your guilt?”

“Mariana, you’re drunk. Don’t be ungrateful.”

“Ungrateful? I’ve gone through a lot of shit without you. Nobody was there. Nobody. You think I need you to keep going?”

“I know you don’t need me. But don’t mistake your tenacity with the reality. The reality is,” he took off his glasses, “you will not get as far without me.”

“Why is that? What do you have?”

“I’m opening the doors that you would have otherwise found shut. Don’t you understand everything is against you, since the moment you got to the U.S. It’s not against me. I’m bringing you in. I can’t think of another way of helping you.”

“But why me? I’m not your fucking final activist act.”

“That is not what this is.”

“O no?”

“No, Mariana.”

“Would you have done it without Mrs. Ambes telling you to adopt me?”

He got another cigarette.

“No,” he said.

“Worry about helping yourself,” I finished staring at his eyes in that drunken state and he did not even notice. “You’re going to die of cancer too.”

I went to my room without explaining. He took it as a judgement against his smoking, but I had seen it. I never told him I did.

We were mad at each other for a week, but in the end I didn’t have anybody else, and he didn’t either. Our loneliness brought us back like the gravitational pull that pulls the Earth and the moon together.

When I was about to go off to college, there was a mixture of pride and joy but also relief and accomplishment in Don Ambs’ eyes as if he had been done with the last task of his life. Still, I no longer wanted to feel like a burden so I said thank you once again to another person in my path, and left off to college after I managed to fill out all those intimidating forms of scholarships and loans.

He couldn’t attend my graduation for my bachelor’s degree in political science because it was too far away from where he lived and his old age had begun to give him bad problems, but he did send me a more than generous amount of money to my bank account with a note saying, “for the rest of your journey. I love you, daughter.”

I ended up doing what I did best, using my ability. I got into the life coaching business and also became a consultant for politics and business which, not surprisingly, run parallel. The direction of them, that's what is not constant. From one favor to another, from the sometimes-blind gratitude of my clients, I moved my own small business to Washington D.C. Mr. Jacobo had been right. The U.S depended on our businesses, had always since the beginning. I didn't build an empire as immense as Carnegie, but a little web it was. The bad thing about a web or even an empire is that any little movement is connected, and perceived. Any mistake. Any weakness. I sacrificed my life for every strand of the web. My web.

CHAPTER XVIII

My forced look upon the past has ended. I am thirty-five again. It has begun to rain harder. The gray sky finally has burst, and seems to be falling. I think of this day a lot. I'm there, finally able to unglue myself from the reflection of my eyes on the window, and I have to catch my breath. I have confronted myself, and I have survived. My mental wounds, all bleeding. I search through the shelves, I think I have a cigarette stashed there somewhere.

I find it like those old emergency fire extinguishers you have to break to take control of an emergency. When I light it up, my hand is trembling. I exhale the smoke and take rapid breaths. As the smoke lingers, I think about how I had forgotten everything. Lorena, mi madre superior, the woman I was so afraid to call mother. The people I was so afraid to call friends. Don Ambs, the closest thing I had to a father, but never admitted. I had gotten lost in the personal gains of others for my own personal gain. I could have stopped a long time ago, had enough for myself, but I kept going for more and more. I got lost in all of those people's futures all to make my tower higher. I had gotten lost, and my life had been put aside. If I had not been living it, who had?

I throw my cigarette not even half finished. I exit my office, and don't take the elevator down. I take off my heels to walk down the stairs as fast as I possibly can. My chest feels an intense pressure. I run towards the green pastures, on to the rain. I feel the cold wet grass, the dirt sticking to my feet. The orbs all seem to make way for me, and there is the little ghost girl. La niña, esta vez en un vestido azul como el mar en verano. She's standing there, watching me run

with the smile of a kid watching an adult do something silly. Nobody is here, except us, the trees and the rain drops all around us.

“Eres tu,” I tell her.

“Si,” she says, still smiling.

“I have to destroy you. You put fear on all those kids. You-”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“What?”

“I did it for the same reason I did it to you just now in that reflection of your window. You were the last of them. You needed to kill that fear before it killed you.”

“You’re a good entity?”

“I’m no more good, no more bad, than the orbs,” she says and holds one on the tip of her small finger. “But I guess in your minds I would be the evil one.”

“And the dark shadow person?”

“The good one,” she flicks off the orb, floats away unaffected by the rain that is pouring harder. “It’s all part of that belief of equilibrium...No perteneces aquí, Mariana. Ahora que lo tienes todo, puedes ayudar a todos.”

“Who are you? What are you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I hatched out of these orbs. I don’t know. I’m just here now, and you are one of the few who can see only me. There are so many others, even here, but for some reason you can only see me. I don’t know why. I don’t know why this form of a girl makes you

see me. Some people just feel the root of fear and that's all. They see it but not us who put it in front of you. The root surfaces, but they don't destroy it. They are consumed by it unfortunately, and consume other people after. I hear it has happened all throughout what you call time. En todas partes. All I know is that humanity holds a great power we don't. The art of making complex decisions, and yours will matter greatly, not because of your ability but because you are of those people who do not contribute to the suffering that already is here, and do the exact opposite. But it starts first with not contributing to your own suffering, then the rest will follow. I'm just energy. I'm like the insects, we just do whatever it is we are supposed to do, unacknowledged by you all in your daily lives."

"So you didn't decide to hide from me in the program when I looked for you? You didn't run off to--"

"No. No, no. I decide to move left or right, but not like your decisions. It was simply not your time, not my time either. They are your fears. I do not give them."

"Did you give me my ability?"

"Maybe it was whatever, whoever, whichever created this chaotic system all around us." I put my hands on my eyes, push them hard until I cannot see anything, trying to go inside my mind. The raindrops are still there when I open my eyes. She is still there too.

"You're not real."

"Technically we're not. You can't prove that I exist. You can't prove that the orbs exist either. Maybe you can for your ability. That's up to you. Decisions, decisions."

It still doesn't make sense to me. I look all around us. The trees like hunchbacks carrying the rain. Still nobody is here. I stare at my brown feet with mud and pieces of grass.

"Start with Don Ambs then make your way to Lorena or the other way around. You don't have to be the witch in the woods, Mariana."

"I won't, but I'm not what you say I am. I never helped anybody."

"You did. At the program, and this whole world is one big program. You're a survivor. Survivors can make other people survive. You've survived. It's time, Mariana."

I look into her eyes. Her pupils disappear. I see her future. It is all a blankness. All in an instant. She's no longer there, but there was a flash of light behind me. I turn to see my office building in flames, and the rain will not stop it. Had it been the cigarette, the lightning, her? I'm glad nobody is there in the building.

I look at my web, my ties, my chains burning in front of me. Let them come if they want. My knowledge, my experience, their secrets will never burn. They'll think I'm done. That everything is destroyed. I am free to actually help. To get out of this maze of making a living that I put myself into.

I will help the kids I once was like, the girl who still lives inside of me. I will turn back now, not just to look but to fix. I let that system keep going. I did not turn back, not even once. I never even tried to help. The policies, the laws, the borders and all these systems are still a monster swallowing people who have crossed on to what they call a Utopia. I've had the power to change it for so long, and I didn't do it.

I need to help those who are suffering. The oppressed. The repressed. The discriminated. The abused. The marginalized, and all I forgot that they still tend to look like me.

I don't know how I am going to do it. Could it be that easy? Could it be like la niña said, as long as I aim to not be a contributor to the suffering of myself, so as to not contribute to the suffering of others around me in the process. Maybe something could happen, something like a butterfly effect.

I'll do the same thing I did to all those politicians and CEOs, but for the people, maybe other politicians and other CEOs, who will not contribute to the suffering in the world, and actually dwindle it like la niña said. I'll do it for the people who were disregarded, stepped on for gains without having any say in it.

But first I'll start with, Don Ambs. I am thinking as I see the rain to calm down that it might be the very day he dies of lung cancer. It is.

I'll then hopefully make my way to my second mom.

Maybe that day I had seen in Lorena's eyes, the day of that golden beach is nearer than I thought. I wonder if she still remembers me.

Finally, I have a purpose.

Las cenizas de mi edificio se están mezclando con la lluvia. El agua y el fuego. Un fuerte viento llega sin aviso, sin invitación. La tierra se mira más verde. Soy libre.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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