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Smart Green Eyes

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[Negotiating Attachment] 1c

February 1991

A beat-up red Hyundai rode along the battered streets of Miraflores Avenue, towards la Trattoria de Ugo Plevisani. A thin pale man with blonde hair stuck to his forehead from the humidity, stood out from the driver's seat and walked towards the passenger side, where a tiny lady sporting a headband and a green-dress with a Peter-Pan neckline fumbled against the passenger door. With two hard tugs and an oily crunch, the thin pale man cracked the door open, and the pair strode to the Italian restaurant with shy grins, tentative stares, and the promise of the unknown painting clouds of pizza fog around them.

The girl peeked at him from behind the thick letters that read pasta, pizza, antipasto, and postre in thick cursive. He looked smart with his thick round glasses, checkered polo, and khaki pants. As a habit she blamed her mathematician's brain for, she counted the amount of people at the restaurant: five other couples, plus the chef and a family of five. They wore casual clothes and laughed in ease within the clay walls of la Trattoria.

The girl swallowed her company's name –Norbert. Sixteen other people accompanied her on her date with Norbert, or *Norberto without the O*, as he had said.

“It was nice of Sarah to introduce us,” Norbert said with a smile.

“Yes,” she echoed, and they both looked in opposite directions.

The lady placed her fallen hairs back on the headband and cleaned the moisture leaking from her hands in her modest green dress. She was reminded of the amount of people it took for them to meet: Norbert was a friend of Moses', who was dating Sarah, who was sisters with Leah, who

was a friend of hers. Plus, Norbert knew Rosa, a family friend of hers, as he had claimed in their introductory phone call.

“So, Yudith, Rosa was telling me that you are very smart, that you work at Scotiabank. That’s impressive.”

The lady nodded and smiled. She was *very* smart, as a matter of fact. Yudith had graduated third in her class at sixteen, gotten into the economics program at Pacifico University –with one of the best grades for the entrance exam in all of Lima’s Metropolitan Area– and with one year left to graduate, she already worked as an intern in Scotiabank’s finance area, as one of the two women to have the honor. Still, she answered:

“Thank you. And you work at your father’s spare cars parts shop, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. I just returned from doing an MBA at Columbia University, and I’m currently overseeing the finances at my dad’s branch offices.”

Smart, Yudith thought. And a family man. If only he was not so pale.

Yudith remembered her ex-boyfriend with his golden-brown complexion, and thought of how white the tall man wearing a chess board as a shirt appeared. He looked like a total Gringo, and his European background was obvious. He was a first generation Peruvian, with parents from Ukraine and Poland arriving in long transatlantic trips to guard themselves from the Holocaust in the Inca Sun. If the rumours were to be believed, her own grandfather had escaped in the same boat as his parents. *That’s why he looks so pale.*

Yudith did not want translucency and sadness. She wanted golden skin, the joy of the Andes, and a love as pure as the one shared by Manco Capac and Mama Ochio. She wanted to make Peru her home, to grow old in these humid and arid lands blessed by the llama’s footsteps—in her eyes, the land of growth and prosperity.

She was about to reply to Norbert's North American adventure, maybe return the compliment with an innocuous "That's impressive," when the owner of the restaurant approached their table.

"Look at this lovely young couple, don't you guys look dashing."

Hugo Plevisani himself, with his glorious curls and thick Italian accent, kissed the lady on her pink-painted cheek, and gave the gentleman a generous hug and a pat on his bony back.

"How long have you been together, lovebirds?"

Norbert coughed and blushed. Yudith noticed how promptly the blood rushed to his face, across his *white pale* flesh.

"This is actually our first date."

The host expelled a glorious laugh and placed each arm around the hunching backs of the *lovely young couple*.

"Say no more, I have the perfect thing for you both," he hunched and whispered, so no youngling would hear him, "pepper can act as the perfect aphrodisiac."

The couple sputtered in the humid night, while the back of Hugo Plevisani distanced itself like a flat oval.

Many nights later, Norbert called, and she claimed an excuse. He kept calling for a second date with no avail. That nightly ritual went on from a few weeks.

My mom says that she did not like him because he was too pale.

February 1993

The party smelled like youth and second changes. Twenty-year-old limeños twirled around the breeze in their best suits and dresses, twinkling like moths in their first cotillion. No

one had spiked the punch –they finally looked *old* enough to hold a glass of pisco in their hands, the cinnamon and lemon that tickled their throat washed away with an egg white smoothed booze.

A pale man with thick round glasses looked at a girl dancing merengue in the middle of the dance floor. He recalled a green headband, aphrodisiac pepper, and various failed calls. She came to the table, grabbed a glass of water, and turned around in a mist of tulle.

“Norbert,” Yudit giggled and twirled towards him. “Have you been dancing a lot?”

Her teeth gleamed like a baby’s dimple. When she was comfortable, her smile glinted like the string of fairy lights at Hugo Plevisani’s Trattoria.

“I have not, but you’re dancing with a grace that could overturn Fujimori himself.”

Maybe it was the pisco, the dancing, or his newly discovered sense of humour, but two years after their failed first date, Norbert did not look so pale after all.

“Do you want to come to my house sometime? You could help me with my master’s application. I don’t have the best English.”

The night was young and so were they.

“It would be my pleasure.”

March 1993

The doorbell rang at twelve sharp.

Jacobo Malamud strutted down the stairs and crunched the grass to the front porch of the red-bricked house he had built himself. A patch of blonde hair dyed black, that would eventually leave a bald tanned spot, stuck to his forehead. The businessman opened the door and assessed the pale man holding a bouquet of red roses.

Growing up helping his dad sell sea-smelling fabrics at the port and having had to pay for his own university degree in civil engineering with tutoring classes, Jacobo was not impressed by much anymore. After using his savings to import spare parts, Chinese automobiles, and bicycles, he had married a red-haired beauty with the soul of an angel and distrusted to the point of using a fake name –Jack Eidelman–for his business deals. With the intuition of Jaime Bayly and the cunning of Abimael Guzman, he admired facts and character, frowning upon grand displays of affection.

He remembered some of his daughter's past suitors: The date arranged by his sister Batcheva, who failed to mention that the gentleman picking Yudith up was forty years old; and the brat that showed up at his door holding a white-striped baby tiger in a leash, after Yudith mentioned that she would only date him if he brought the zoo to her house.

It was not the first time Norbert had stood on his porch, next to the birds-of-paradise, colibri-shaped orange plant Jacobo had cultivated with patience and sweat –like everything else in his life. He was aware that Yudith's application to Pittsburgh was already in the mail due to Norbert's obliging guidance, but moreover, he had already researched every aspect of the young man's life.

A job at BBVA, a close-knit family with a sister already married with three children, and everyone who knew about his parents described them as no less than saints. Jacobo also knew that his dad and Norbert's father had arrived at Lima's gasoline infested waters, in the same Yiddish speaking boat. After the first time Norbert wife Francis invited him to stay for lunch, he had brought a dessert as a gift to the family every time he came to see Yudith. Even his thirteen-year-old daughter –the spitting image of her mother if not for the walking sticks– loved him. Jacobo did not trust anyone, but he trusted himself.

For the first time since his daughter started dating, he shook the hand of the gentleman that stood at his front porch.

The pale man and the headbanded lady ate lunch together at the Blue Farm –a restaurant that served *pollo a la brasa*. The laughs were no longer awkward when Yudith accidentally spilled her orange juice on top of Norbert, while he pinched his chicken so hard that it flew into her lap. Soaked and dirty, Yudith could see each bump in the road from the broken floor of Norbert’s red car. After the contraption finally broke down, the couple pushed the car together towards the gas station, grinning at each other behind the smoke that escaped the motor every couple of minutes.

After Norbert apologized for the inconvenience, Yudith stole a kiss from him. She liked that he was not shallow –she admired that he was a hardworking nerd. Norbert fell in love with her the moment that she volunteered to help push his car.

Psychologists claim that we date people that have values that mirror those of our progenitors. Perhaps that is why she fell for a businessman, and he for an intense saint.

May 1994

“Norbert, she is leaving for her masters, why don’t you find yourself another nice girl?,” asked the pale man’s friends.

Eva, the matriarch of the family, would tell her stories three times a week when her grandchildren came to visit her from Mexico City. Maybe it was a ninety-three-year-old woman’s fading memory. Maybe, she was just proud of having enabled the marriage that would give her another pair of three chubby-cheeked children.

“Mom, they tell me to leave her, but I like Yudith.”

Francis, Yudith's angel-like mother, knew that my Norbert was a good man. She liked him a lot and would always invite him to have lunch. Norbert would go to the 4D ice cream shop to buy some dessert for her. Always strawberries, Francis' favourite flavour. A secret orchestrator, Francis told Yudith, "Don't go do your masters for two years. Go for less," and Yudith changed to an MBA program that was eleven months.

Norbert proposed to Yudith in the coast of Lima, in the sea-smelling pier.

A diamond ring accompanied her to Pittsburgh.

They spent eleven months loving each other through fax.

They explored the city and ate bread on toast for an entire week, when he boarded a plane, and they could hold each other's hand once again.

She bought a white dress with a big bow on the back.

He was happier for ignoring his friend's advice.

October 1994

The bride and groom sat on chairs, held by the mass of people that danced in circles around them. They celebrated joy, marriage, the reconstruction of the holy temple, the free food, the joy of the parents, and the perpetuation of the faith. Lace ran down her arms while orchids shuffled from the ceiling. They spun until the old pick red car –finally with a floor at its bottoms, so the new family could see Lima from the windows rather than the floor– came to pick them up. A monstrous bow adorned the back, but they were drunk on the party: No fest in Peru ended earlier than at five in the morning, ever since the dictatorship –no one could leave earlier due to the curfew, and the fest went on for that long even after you no longer needed a white flag to leave your house in the evening.

“You have beautiful blue eyes,” she said.

“Thanks for giving me another chance,” he answered.

They rode towards their honeymoon. The pale man and the headbanded lady. The businessman and the saint. The terrible jokester and the gleeful dancer. The groom and the bride. The smart, green-eyed girl traveller, and the blue-eyed patient ice-cream buyer.

“If you get a surprise dog like your father did, I’ll divorce you.”

“Yudith,” he answered, “we can have kids instead.”

“I want five.”

She always forgot that he also studied negotiation.

“How about we settle for three?”

[The Mathematician's Historian, Lyricist, and Engineer] 2c

Bill Clinton's Impeachment

Yudith Malamud intended to work; to travel frontiers as part of Scotiabank's financial team. Yet, the moment that she held her first child's flesh, fresh from the womb and bathed in uterine blood, Yudith grew another heart. As the nurse cut the umbilical cord, Yudith joined her soul to Joseph's – Joseph like the twelfth son of visionary dreams, Joseph meaning whom God will praise away, Joseph in honour of the baby's great grandfather, who survived the Nazis status as a doctor and died of Tuberculosis twelve years after reaching Lima.

The birth occurred during the month of Aquarius and the year of Bill Clinton's impeachment. While the president of the United States argued not to lose his job, Yudith chose to leave hers –she had found a vocation in seeing newborn baby red hair fall and grow into a bald spot, in loving chubby cheeks and wondering who Joseph would become. Perhaps an ambitious and admired politician, definitely an intellectual.

What a beautiful, outlandish combination.

"It matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be," J.K. Rowling

In the turn of the millennium, the month of spring, the International Day of Peace; Yudith Malamud created her middle child.

"Norbert...Norbert," croaked the double of Mother Eve, "call Susy and do the presentation cards for my little girl. Tell her she weights 3.57 kilos."

The pale man laughed. He beamed with health ever since he married the headbanded lady who laid on the bed. He could not believe that after creating life, her first thought was to make a card to advertise the birth of the newborn.

“Who did you cheat with, Yudith?” asked the red-haired woman sitting next to the hospital bed. “Cause’ there is no way that your husband made a girl with black hair.”

Yudith gazed with love at the jokester, with her spilling green eyelids.

Soup hating Mafalda, left-handed naturalist, dream-traveler that scaped her nightmares by napping under her pillow; the daughter would grow in the same spirit as her grandmother: soup avoiding colibri of left-handed idealism.

Two-named, yellow-eyed newborn owl. Named Jennifer, meaning the friend of peace, named Yael like the warrior that killed the Somalite king conqueror who threatened the Hebrews. Her dark hair would fall, blond lashes grow, and she would become a generational double –with the intense character of her mother, the spirit of her grandmother. She was born a red-cheeked dark-haired double.

Lavender bloomed outside the window.

The Twin Towers

The world would never be the same.

Three-year-olds talked, socialized, and began attending school classes. They did not revolt at the texture of sand, or need three ~~different~~ therapists, or get prodded and tested like cartoon rats to reach an Asperger’s diagnosis.

The mothers of five-year-olds did not need to hear that their child would never amount to anything, they did not need to make their child memorize elephant books to learn how to read, or to drag their tongues onto weird shapes so they could learn how to pronounce.

They did not spit *you'll wait and see* to the head of the behavioural therapy guard of Peru's Spanish hospital and find a new psychologist in a new no-name kinder, that believed their child could become more, *maybe not the president but independent and proud*.

The mothers of seven-year-olds did not need to take educational courses for children with special requirements or take their children to bicycle lessons for them to learn spatial awareness or need to visit the zoo weekly to stop their child from crying in indignation.

Eleven-year-olds did not obsessively read newspapers, and memorize historical facts, or recite the nation's capitals, or repeated politicians' jokes in a loop. Their mothers did not have to explain to their little girls that everyone's brain is made of trees –that Joseph's social tree grew very little, and that is why his intelligence tree grows higher each day.

Yet not all mothers had to beg the principals of “normal schools” to give their sons a chance, and smirk in triumph when their son finally caught up with his schoolwork and learned English from scratch in a year. Not every mom got to cheer the loudest when their *unique son that would not amount to anything* at seventeen made valedictorian, or to call their oldest the historian of the family –capable of reciting historical events by the year mentioned.

Not everyone got to feel proud when they succeeded in never crying in front of their child or change their belief that they *would* learn to talk and to read and maybe even one day, graduate.

The world would never be the same.

Fourier's Heat Equation

You can measure how a quality such as heat diffuses through a given region, such as a mother's heart during the birth of her third and last child.

When you *do* decide to use a differential equation such as Fourier's, do not forget to account for other variables:

1. Dependant variable: The fact that part of your heart is already away, present in the birthday party that your two other children are attending. Soon, they will come, point at the newborn, ask *what is that?*, and decide on making a competition for love or a new best friend of their brother, but it will matter not, because your whole heart will be once again reunited in the same space.
2. Independent variable: The fact that you decided to name the child Jonathan, meaning gift of God, Jonathan as the intrepid and loyal best friend of King David, Jonathan the name that everyone told Yudith to gift upon her third child.

Do consider those variables when measuring the spread of heat into a mother's heart and consider that it might be difficult to measure love.

"The sky, at sunset, looked like a carnivorous flower," Roberto Bolaño

If anyone saw her little girl at that moment, no one would believe that blonde chubby-cheeked, patient angel turning four years old tomorrow, tended to solve disputes through her fists. Anxious, pretty, heavy hitter; Yudith should not act surprised that Jennifer had inherited the intense, bellicose character of most woman in the family.

Jennifer claimed –with the fake maturity of any kindergartener–that she just got upset whenever her classmates picked on her. "I'm not beautiful like Ida, or popular like Daniela, my parents were not born at the time of Adan and Eve like Anelle's, and I won't be family with Ariana unless I marry Edgar," she cried while scraping at her nails until they bled. Yudith told

her to let these things slide like oil, but insecurities have the power to grow and eat at your brain like carnivorous flowers.

A woman of action, Yudith thought that a birthday manicure would solve her little girl's nasty habit of picking at her nails or pinching at her classmates.

"I could just eat you," gushed the hairdresser, and the little girl followed her while looking at her mom with horror. "She won't eat you," Yudith mouthed, and the little fighter acquiesced to prop herself in the chair's black cushions. Jennifer's nails looked so damaged, only a small white flower with a green center dot, fit on them. As oranges and blues painted the sky, Jennifer saw the small flower show up in all her nails.

"You are my favorite; you know that right?" said Yudith.

"I hope this flower eats Edgar, so I don't have to marry him anymore," Jennifer giggled.

"I would just love to see all these occurrences of yours written down, you little hellion."

Einstein's Relativity Theory

In one life he might have bought a game of operation and become a doctor. In another, he might have bought a telescope and become an astronaut. The laws of physics dictated that in a parallel universe –perhaps across a black hole– those possibilities might still play out in a game of probabilities. Still, the baby of the family decided to buy a Rubik's cube.

Little, colorful plastic monstrosity; a geometric puzzle with no torsion. Yudith watched her youngest become obsessed, spending midnights trying to figure out the intricacies of the bodega store treasure. The chronometer showcased less time each round: two minutes, fifty seconds, thirty seconds, twelve seconds.

Yudith knew that equations made the way go round, like a math-blessed ozone layer. She herself studied economics and had considered becoming a mathematics teacher. Yet the Rubik's cube consumed Jonathan's life; he carried it around like an amulet, to school, to tennis and soccer class, to his friend's house.

"He'll grow out of it," she thought as she drove her KIA to the school entrance.

He did not, except, perhaps in a parallel life.

Perhaps, in another dimension, a version of Jonathan is dreaming of the stars and of a telescope, knowing that humans are made of stardust. Perhaps, that version of Jonathan sees Rubik cubes when they look up at the sky.

Perhaps, this version of Jonathan is absentmindedly learning about calculus and probability. Perhaps, he is unknowingly preparing himself to become the family's engineer—one in the millions of possible versions that inhabit the universe.

My Plant of Orange-Lime

"Yudith, what are you doing?" asked a red-haired angel.

Little Yudith, the pretend teacher, turned towards her mom. Her teddies sat in a circle surrounding her desk, while Yudith taught them a math lesson. Munching the yellow pencil on her upper lip, Yudith turned around to assess the person who had *dared* to disturb the order of her class.

"I'm practicing."

Francis Malamud walked towards the tidy desk and viewed the scribbles on the chalkboard that crowned Yudith's bed. She moved the notebook that had fallen on the tiny spare chair and sat herself with the grace that her daughter's fake classroom deserved.

“Well, honey, surprise me, much? You didn’t tell me that you were gonna be a teacher.”

“Hmm,” the little girl nodded around her frumpy curls. “I mean, I already tutor my sisters.”

“My little teacher. I thought you liked math, honey.”

Little Yudith and her frumpy her nodded once again.

“I’ll be a math teacher. I really wanna be a mom, and travel the world, and have you with me forever and ever.”

“How about we keep on reading, honey? I brought your favorite book, *My Plant of Orange-Lime*.”

Yudith sat next to her soft plush teddies and her mom, holding the certainty that every moment with her was made of an infinite amount of forevers.

[Spiritual Colibri] 3d

“The common thread in my life is success. I married the love of my life, had three beautiful children, and succeeded when moving to another country. My life has been perfect except for this one tragedy, but you cannot grow while wearing rose-colored glasses (Malamud, 2022).

Memories jump around like the rhythm of a tambourine or the swish of a hula hoop. They smell like orange juice for breakfast, and sound like the sway of the wind inside a tree house, within the garden of a red brick home. They feel like the ledges of Swarovski crystals and look like beads in reading glasses. They taste like strawberries and condensed milk.

You eventually stop wondering why you touch your necklaces with such zeal; why your mom, Yudith, forbids you from wearing yellow t-shirts and refuses to allow artificial plants inside the house. You eventually stop wondering why red wigs are beautiful, why colibris are spiritual birds, or why the month of May reminds you of stardust.

The day that my grandmother came over to read *My Plant of Orange-Lime*, she gifted me a tiny chained golden necklace. We read together every weekend, while my parents went out to grab dinner. She always read my dusty, illustrated collection of Grimm fairytales, but today she wanted to read *the most especial little book*, one she had read to my aunts and my mother when they were my age.

She kneeled to my height, caressed away my bundle of blonde hair, secured the necklace around my collarbones, and placed a mute kiss over my forehead. I turned around, swayed my tiny arms into a hug, and said:

“I have a secret for you; you are my favorite grandmother.”

My mom got off the phone and called her over. I clutched at her hand and pulled, refusing to let her go. She had *promised* to spend all afternoon with me. Abuelita Francis would teach me how to hula hoop and read me her favourite book. Last year, at an event in Joseph’s school, she won the hula hooping competition. These excuses did not sway my mom, who claimed, “adult time” and shut the door.

When my grandmother left the room two hours later, her eyes looked moist. She peppered my forehead with kisses and claimed that we would read and hula hoop another day; she would even teach me the names of *all* the plants in her garden.

My mom locked herself inside her room and packed a suitcase. I did not see them, or my grandfather, for another month. Whenever I asked my dad where they left, he said Houston. When I asked why, he said that Abuelita Francis had not been feeling well, and she required *extra* treatment. When I asked what bothered her, he said breast Cancer. When I asked what breasts were, he pointed at my chest.

My family was never into sugar-coating and happy lies.

I spent each weekend during that month sleeping at my Aunt Yoselyn’s tree house. My grandfather had built her tree house inside my grandmother’s beautiful organic garden, full of birds of paradise flowers. Within the red brick house, on top of the big oak, my aunt slept and worked. She housed a big plush penguin, lots of ABBA records, and would tell me stories about the time she met Alan Garcia at a wedding.

Since I was born, I had milk chocolate and elderberry yogurt for breakfast every day. Instead, I insisted on drinking a glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee, just like mom and

Abuelita Francis always did. Aunt Yoselyn acquiesced on the juice and not on the coffee, arguing that the last thing my mom needed, was to have her little girl turn into a caffeine addict.

I do not remember when I saw my grandmother next. My cousin's grandmother, Aunt Juanita, began accompanying my other grandmother, Abuelita Eva, to the school events. Plus, mom had a colorful array of excuses, and "it's your last year of kindergarten, you got to get ready, love, cause' next year you are getting into primary school and that means you will finally become a *big girl*."

My mom talked about entering first grade like the end of an era –maybe of my childhood. Time passed like an invisible companion, until New Year's came along, and we went to toast at my grandparents' house. We all sat holding a glass of champagne: my parents, aunts, brothers, grandfather, and me. I saw bubbles pop in the golden liquid, while my family made small talk. A vacant chair sat next to my grandfather. The silence stretched and the bubbles pop, pop, *popped*. The sweet boozed burned my throat, and Abuelo Jacobo told us to come see the game with him. It was Peru versus Brazil, an impossible match to win.

When we made way towards the living room, he pointed towards the stairs.

My grandparent's room was bathed in darkness and solitude. A red wig sat next to the television, while my grandmother laid in the hospital bed: Bald, green-eyed, and beautiful like an angel. She kept the chain around her neck, yet her delicate metal glasses, propped with a chain of rosed beads, stood in the arm rest.

"Who do you think will win, Francis?" asked my dad.

"Brazil," croaked Abuelita Francis, and we all laughed. *We play like never before; we lose like always* –the Peruvian's soccer lemma.

I caressed the red wig. The strands felt plastic, dried up, *fake*. My grandmother allowed no plastic, dried up, *fake* things to enter her home. As a biologist, she treasured plants, and her garden was full of beaming grass and proud birds of paradise flowers that bloomed like colibris, prepared to take flight. Red roses bathed in morning dew decorated metal vases around each corner of the living room. Next to her window lay Abuelita Francis' bonsai tree, adorned with a small pond surrounded by a miniature bridge, in which a miniature couple surrounded by miniature *real* flowers walked towards a miniature swing. The scene lay inside a glass bay and overlooked grandmother's garden, in which her golden Labrador played amidst the brush wood.

"Why is there a wig here?" I asked my dad.

"Your grandmother cut her hair and made it into a wig, before it fell," he answered. "It itches her scalp though, so she prefers not to use it when she isn't out of the house."

Out of the house in a wheelchair. Out of the house, strapped to cables, on top of an operation cable. Out of the house as the ailment spread from her breasts to her bones. Out of the house, gifting her granddaughter a necklace, or cutting off her curls, or out in a field, observing the butterflies, as she did when she was young, just married, and studying moist-kissed leaves for her biology degree. Out of the house, watching colibris fly by as the living embodiment of her treasured birds of paradise flowers.

I cannot remember if that night I ate strawberries with condensed milk, my grandmother's favourite dessert. When she had guests *inside* the house, she stacked towers of strawberries and merengue, mantling the layers with condensed milk. When it was just us, she would rinse the red strawberries, place them in a bowl, and sprinkle a bit of condensed milk on top. She would caress my forehead with a kiss, murmur "I love you," and sit beside me to enjoy the saccharine concoction. I remember that my grandmother looked beautiful with a bald head,

protruding bones, and cables around her face, rather than her beaded-string glasses –a bonsai tree and a fake red wig beside her, overlooking birds of paradise. I remember I loved *her*.

Left-handed idealist. Soup-hating Mafalda. Biologist flower-angel. Spiritual colibri.

We headed to a New Year's Party and lit up sparkles with the skillet heat. The fire sizzled like a thousand exploding stars. The flame blazed down and under, but always turned off before it burnt my hand. Smoke swirled around me and bathed my face. The burning fog hid the loud party, while I danced with sparkles into the summer. The salsa music, the fire skillet, the children lighting sparkles, the champagne bubbles that *pop popped* in my throat, the imaginary aftertaste of strawberries and condensed milk; they all blurred into the red sparkles that never managed to burn my hand. A memory fickle like the beginning of summer, or the end of childhood.

July burned my blanket, during Lima's breezy winter. Rays of sun filtered through my window, as an outside force yanked my door open. My mom stood panting at the room's entrance, with her blonde hair ruffled by the humidity. With her moist, smart green eyes and her mouth gaping for words, she sat in my burning blanket and reached for me.

"Am I later for school?" I slurred, still sleepy.

"Your grandmother has died."

My body launched towards my mom like a sobbing bullet. My knees stood on top of her lap and my hands grasped at neck. Our sobs merged in a sorrowful chant. Inhale, gasp, exhale, let your throat vibrate. *Argghhhhhh*. I wiped my salty tears in my mother's blouse and coughed away the slimy mucus that slid from my nose and merged with my tears, inside my tongue. My mom held me and stared at the spectacle; *numb*.

"How do you know? When did she die?"

"Last night," answered my mom. "When I went with dad to see her."

I felt a sudden anger. No one had invited me to see Abuelita Francis one last time.

I imagined the scene: My aunts and mother, my grandfather, my dad, a doctor, and my grandmother laying on a mat on the floor, wearing a white robe like an angel. The transparent joy of being with her a second longer. *A big girl, attending first grade.* No one lied and said that my grandmother had travelled to a better place, like death had a paradisaic beach with turquoise crystal waves, butterfly fields rather than sand, and orange-lime trees.

“What will be done with the body?”

“The funeral is today.” No coffin. *From dust you come and to dust you shall return.*

They considered me too young to witness death, but old enough to hear about it, like my mom needed to tell me about a distant red acquaintance that would eventually become my friend. She placed me to sleep, locked the house doors to let death leave us for a little longer, and headed to the funeral, taking the red acquaintance with her. She also carried a small purple orchid; a coveted, unattainable flower that signified love and strength. Maybe Mom wanted to feel hugged by its meaning.

Abuelita Francis deserved an orchid.

I dreamt that I ran in an unknown city, scared to death due to the darkness and the hollow *thud* of my toes against the pavement. I sought refuge from the burning city lights inside a cinema. As the film wrapped up, I turned around and saw my beautiful grandmother sitting beside me. Her red hair caressed the top of her head, moist and alive like a plant –no longer plastic and *fake*. I dried my humid eyelids.

“Where have you been, Honey?” said Abuelita Francis. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“I got lost,” I replied. “I thought I would never see you again.”

She chuckled. Dark humour jokester. Cinema dweller. Spiritual colibri.

“Don’t worry, honey. I will always be here with you.”

Abuelita Francis pointed up, to the suddenly open ceiling, and at the stars.

When I woke up, I saw my mom staring outside the windows. She had brought a box of the Swarovski crystals that my grandmother used to collect –the flowers and fields and plants and fauna that she loved perched in crystal form, transparent and made of stardust. A pink petalled rose with a bright green stem, blazed at me. A rose such as the one we would bring her next Mother’s Day, a couple of days of that would have been her fifty seventh birthday, two months before the anniversary of her death.

My mother chatted to the grave. “My shoulder hurts since the operation I got done when you were still in chemotherapy,” she said. “You told me never to get an operation after yours didn’t work, but I was tired of seeing you die, and now my shoulder always hurts.”

We placed the rose and two rocks on top of my grandmother’s grave, as signs of love and respect. It was my first time visiting the cemetery.

“Say something to Abuelita Francis,” said my mom.

“I’m in second grade now,” I replied, looking towards the grave. “I still dance ballet, but I haven’t learned to hula hoop, even though I’ve tried, or read *My Plant of Orange-Lime*. I miss you. I love you. I miss you.”

The grave, Mom and I stayed silent. Then, Mom and I left the cemetery, using a different path than the one we had come from, following a religious superstition, for we did not want death to find us, hold us, and follow us home.

As we drove away from Abuelita Francis and towards the Mother's Day lunch that Abuelita Eva had organized, Jonathan and I joked, pinched each other, and picked the movies we would watch together once we made it home.

"Shut up!" yelled Mom. "I said, SHUT UP!"

A hoarse, acute shout.

"Yudith, love, they are just messing around," said my dad.

"No. NO! You don't get to leave the cemetery on Mother's Day, and shout in *my* car."

My dad caressed her palm with his hand and tried to say something.

"You too, Norbert. You all *shut up*. You ungrateful little brats. ALL OF YOU! We are going to your mother's house, for God's sake. Well, my mom, she *is* dead. And I can come to the cemetery and talk to her every week, but she never gets to respond."

She turned towards the backseat, where Jonathan and I sat, pale and mute.

"You all should appreciate me more, you know? Cause' I am alive. You hear that?"

I got consumed by the rage of a spitfire—the same one that pierced my heart, every time someone in my class decided to pick on me— and began to yell.

"Well, it's not our fault. We miss Abuelita Francis, too, but you are acting like a monster. We didn't do anything wrong! STOP BLAMING US."

My mom let go of the steering wheel, grabbed my hand, and squeezed hard. I felt red with anger and shame. Jonathan started yelling and crying beside me.

"Stop it, stop it. STOP IT."

Jonathan sobbed and began pinching at mom's arm, while I pulled at her wrist, trying to get away from her hold. My dad grabbed at the steering wheel, from the passenger's side.

Joseph, who had remained quiet the whole ride, put his head outside the window and began to hyperventilate.

“Yudith, pull the car to the side of the road,” yelled my dad. “I SAID, PULL THE CAR.”

Mom let go of my arm and curbed. The brakes thrust Jonathan and I into the backseat, while Joseph continued to gasp for air through the open window. Dad yanked his seat belt, walked to the driver’s seat, and told my mom to get up. They went into the forest, while the three siblings stayed in the car, balanced between the trees and the highway. Jonathan and I hugged each other and sobbed, while Joseph patted each of us in turn, telling us that everything would be okay.

When they came back from the woods, Jonathan and I clasped each other’s hands hard for support.

My mom sat on the passenger seat and began to sob without control.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s not your fault. I’m sorry.”

That was the first time I ever saw Mom cry.

Her tears flowed once again next January, while we watched a video of Joseph’s second birthday party. We had taken out dusty old cassette tapes from my mother’s dressers, and laid hugging in her bed, while waiting for my dad to come home.

Dad had gotten a new job in an international bank, which sent him on business trips all over Latin America. He never got to visit any of the tourist sites, though, and we always teased him at how he had managed to travel to all the banks and none of the cities in the continent. At the moment, we waited for his return from the banks in Uruguay by munching on pretzels, creasing my mom’s wildflower’s bedsheet, and watching the only movies we would ever star in.

First, we watched the video of an old ballet play, in which I played one of the kittens from *Alice in Wonderland*. My brothers clapped, jumped across the room, and made silly faces, while on the screen, I performed pirouettes and a bouncing step that my friends had dubbed “the bunny.” After recalling the itchy cat ears and the tulle-lined green checkered dress I had been forced to wear, I bowed to my admiring impersonators.

Then, Mom put a video of her wedding. She looked beautiful with her brunette curls pushed back onto a tight bun. The white bow on the back of her flowing princess dress danced with her ballerina arms, which were encased in long-sleeved lace. As she walked towards the white carnation flowers that glinted in the arch where she would marry my dad, we saw a petite redhead figure that wore a long cream satin dress and grinned with mischief on the first row.

“I told her she couldn’t wear white to my wedding,” said my mom. “I swear, that woman’s soul just wandered around, light like oil, not making a big deal out of anything.” She huffed. “Abuelita Francis said that the dress was cream coloured, rather than white.”

Then, we put Joseph’s video. He turned two years old in a Winnie the Pooh-themed feast. He ate in all the scenes: Finger sandwiches in one, birthday cake in another and, at one point, he even snacked on my mother’s fingers. His rosy cheeks, the smile that showed his proud milk teeth, and the yellow Winnie the Pooh t-shirt he wore, distracted the audience from the spit falling out of his mouth.

“She never allowed my sisters or me to wear yellow,” said my mom. “She said that we were already too yellow for that.” My mom hiccupped and rubbed at her eyelashes.

“Are you okay? We can watch something else.”

“—Too blonde, amber cat eyes, and a mustard hue to our skin,” she continued. “We said that we had to avoid looking ducklings, so she didn’t allow us to wear any yellow.”

Her laughs turned to muffles and eventually to sobs. I laid on top of her like a blanket, hiding her from the melancholy that now tinged all her memories of Abuelita Francis, and hugged her, acting as a drain to her tears. I let the vibrations of her chest reverberate upon my heart like the thump of a tambourine. Once the percussion quieted, I went to my mom's closet, and grabbed a piece of the seashell-shaped Gulian chocolates that she gifted my brothers and I every evening before bedtime.

“She would have turned fifty-eight this May.”

I caressed my mother's hair and told her she looked beautiful. My mom had a physical way of showing love to everyone *and* herself. Once again, I embraced her as a child and told her she looked beautiful –that I noticed the blonde tint of her hair, the curls arranged by an iron in her last visit to the hairdressers, and her French styled nails. I knew she needed her soul to stop reaching to her mom's, to get a reminder that here, on earth, she was still loved; that she could find beauty on earth outside missing red tendrils and flailing birds of paradise flowers.

My mom stood in front of the mirror of a dress shop, with a yellow gauze dress draping over her statuesque ballerina pose. Tropical blue and orange flowers traveled the undulations of the fabric.

“You look beautiful,” I told my mom once again, after my grandfather sold the brick red home where she grew up and moved to a small apartment without Swarovski crystals or vases filled with red roses.

I fixed the straps of the training bra that Mom bought me after I turned eleven, while admiring her proud bust. A doctor touched my mom's breasts once a year to make sure they stayed healthy, and I did the same with mine: Small exploring fingers trailing over undeveloped

muscles, trying to find valleys of tumors, or lumps of pain. The yellow imperial dress encased my mom's bust; golden brown and dotted with hazel freckles. Her breasts looked healthy.

"The dress is yellow," I said, accusing her of a crime only we knew about.

"It's mustard," she replied.

Mustard yellow like the pop pop *pop* of champagne. Mustard yellow like the t-shirt of a Brazilian soccer player on a Cancer's patient television, or of a snacky two-year-old that starred in old cassette tapes. Mustard yellow like the flying colibri of a bird of paradise flower, or the book cover of *My Plant of Orange-Lime*. Mustard yellow like a candle lit up in the seventh anniversary of my grandmother's death, because seven is a holy cabbalistic number, and the Dead did not follow us from cemetery into the yellow-mustard sun.

After seven years passed, I still counted the number of times I had witnessed my mother cry. Her tears turned yellow as they soaked in the ink of her mustard flesh. The candle burned like the memory of a fire skillet lighting red sparkles at a New Year's Party, at the end of infancy. The wind moved the turquoise waters of the boat, as the stars greeted the red twilight sky. I told the story of my last childhood dream, to console my mom:

"I dreamed that Abuelita Francis came to visit me, and she said that she cares for me, from the stars. She cares for us."

"From dust you come and to the dust you shall return," said my dad. "That is why we don't bury the dead in a coffin. You know, humans are made from the dust of exploding stars."

From the dust you come and to the dust you shall return. Made from stardust, buried in the dirt, and returned to the stars. A red colibri hidden between a thousand exploding stars.

Hidden like a *big girl* with a real bra, fourteen and unaware of her future in the land of spice. Hidden as the phone call of an incompetent doctor, the night my mother was the first to

find out that Abuelita Francis' operation should not have occurred, that now the Cancer would spread from breasts to her bones and tendons and all corners of her being, but the pouch where she hid her soul. Hidden like a trip to Houston in a wheelchair, and the knowledge that a daughter would soon need to act like a mother to the woman who raised her –she was the first to find out about her mother's illness, the one tragedy of her life, after all. My mother, the new matriarch of the family, who claimed that yellow is mustard, just like Abuelita Francis claimed that cream was white on the day of her daughter's wedding.

Hidden as the will of the dead.

For the night of her death, Abuelita Francis heard my mother, the new matriarch, say:

“She will not make it.”

My Aunt Yoselyn travelled from Trujillo to Lima, to see her mother one more time, before her bones finished decomposing and joined the stars. The doctors claimed she would die in three hours, yet Abuelita Francis held on to life until the red dew of the morning light, to see her daughter one last time. Hidden like the miniature figures on the Bonsai tree that sat on the windowpane, the moment that my grandmother died.

Stardust shapeshifter. Afterlife receiver. Mantle-passing matriarch. Spiritual Colibri.

“Abuelita Francis waited to say goodbye to your aunt, before she passed away,” said my mom to me. As the first to know the tragedy, it fell on the new matriarch to tell of its completion.

That night, as my mom stared outside the window, a hummingbird came to visit her. The hummingbird traveled from a red brick home to a dome of orchids and red roses, to a valley full of lilies, where a young adult girl with pale skin and hazel freckles on top of a proud healthy bosom, sat reading *The Little Prince*, while smelling ripe lavender seeds.

The same hummingbird flew around me, its blue wings like the transparent ledges of Swarovski crystals, and red specks like a wig, burnt sparkles, and red brick home.

I read, "If someone loves a flower of which just one example exists among all the millions and millions of stars, that's enough to make him happy when he looks at the stars."

Birds of paradise flowers bloomed in the month of May, and I touched my necklace while approaching my mom, who laid in a felt blanket looking at the first exploding star that lit up the blazing sunset.

"You missed it, Mom; I saw a hummingbird."

"Oh, Abuelita Francis came to visit you," she answered. We believe in the will of the dead and on a thousand exploding stars.

Sunset life chaser. Left-handed idealist. Cinema dweller. Stardust shapeshifter.

Spiritual colibri.

[Soul Lilac Leaves] 4b

The golden angel of Independence soars above Reforma Avenue, surrounded by the fallen lilac petals of Jacaranda trees. The main avenue in Mexico City smells like pollution, fear, spice, and remnants of the Revolution. Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent God protects the dried-up lake where the Aztecs built the city.

My family arrived in a metal machine with wings and a gliding cobra shape. Unlike the Aztecs, who their capital of Tenochtitlan in the cornland, where an eagle sat atop a cactus devouring a serpent; we settled in Mexico City due to my father's job. Trading Lima's moist breeze for Mexico City's tropical dry heat and rainy diluvium, I dragged my suitcase to an empty wooden apartment and helped my mom fill our pantry with the spicy meals found in Costco—a place I had never visited before and a symbol of our new Suburban reality.

During our first weekend in Mexico City, Jonathan, my mom, and I visited the movie theater at local mall in the Interlomas district, to watch the newly released *Inside Out* movie. Joseph had stayed behind in Lima to finish high school, and my dad spent the day meeting his new colleagues in an office building that neared Reforma avenue.

Back in Lima, movies got to the theaters one year after their release date. With its gigantic shopping malls, eternal highways, and proximity to North America, Mexico City

appeared to us like a first-world country. A spice-sprinkled first world country, with narcos, tamarindo-flavored vodka, and no one I loved in sight.

I wanted to return to my colorful third-world town.

My mom did not care about my reservations regarding the pollution, and the spice that permeated all the food, and even the police's blowing past red traffic lights, and the perpetual rain, and el Chapo's multiple jail breaks, and the *Spanglish* in our conversations, and the *I miss my friends*, and the wey-filled dialect, *and and and*. My mom bought two movie tickets and a box of popcorn for Jonathan and me to share, told us to "stop bitching cause' I don't eat litchi," said she needed a break from our complaining, and went to the hair salon to get a break from us.

While popcorn flied into my mouth and, in the screen, Joy ran after the illuminated memory spheres, bubbles bathed my mom's scalp. Years later, I found out that Mom escaped to the hairdresser because she missed her family and did not want Jonathan and I to see her cry. A hairdresser of painted crimson rouge led my mom to a plush leather seat and blow dried her moist tears away.

"Where are you from, Blondie?" asked the hairdresser, as she straightened Mom's hair.

The hairdresser's hair strands looked frizzy like my mom's, yet her skin eyes did not leak salt, and her skin did not turn wrinkled due to the dry weather.

"I am from Peru," answered my mom.

The hairdresser stared at the salt-leaking eyes of a woman who missed her family and friends, with a skin used to humidity, and no idea of how to speak the land of spice's local dialect. My mom cried, thinking of her dream to grown old alongside her pale husband in the land of the Incas. She shared my inhabitations regarding Mexico City, yet she felt the need to show strength and guide our family in the sacrifices needed for us to have good life. I had a hard time adapting to my new school. My classmates bullied me due to my accent and asked if I used to live in the ruined temples of Machu Picchu. Unbeknown to us, my mom felt the need to remain strong in the face of our challenges; to show courage and cry in private.

My mom believed that people needed to travel alongside their income, to build their houses next to the job that secured their livelihood, and to work hard because gold costs and God only helps those who first help themselves. Hence, when my dad's job at an international bank decided to relocate our family from Peru to Mexico, she immediately decided to trade's Lima's quinoa trees for Mexico City's nopal cactuses as her main source of nutrition.

As the matriarch, my mom acted as the family's general. She held a crystal ball in her hand and could see the outcomes of the future. She believed that husbands were the head of the families, and wives were the necks – expert paupers glinting the gauze of reality. Hence, it fell as her responsibility to lead us in along the dried-up lake where the Spaniards pulverized ancient Aztec temples, and where Porfirio Diaz planted lilac Jacaranda trees. And so my mom spent her first months in Mexico, reminding Jonathan and I that the freezing Russian mountains and the

miniature rain-soaked Panama had been alternative options to Mexico City –to appreciate the smell of cotija cheese and sweet-flavoured corn– and hid in the hairdresser to cry in private, accompanied only by the fruity acetone smell of nail polish and an inquisitive hairdresser.

“Oh, my gringuita linda, I thought you were Colombian,” said the hairdresser, while applying vanilla-perfumed lacquer to my mother’s hair.

“I’ve got another Peruvian customer, Blondie,” the hairdresser continued. “You’d love her. Let me introduce you, how about that, Gorgeous? Name’s Elsa like the Disney Princess from that movie that came out last year.”

“I don’t want anyone new; I don’t want anyone new,” chanted my mom.

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Elsa and my mom sat in the blue cobblestones of *Azul Historico*, a restaurant on the San Angel district that stood next to a cathedral built out of red sun-dried bricks, and the San Angel market, where every Saturday morning local vendors gathered to sell colorful wooden dotted sculptures called alebrijes, bundles of orange cempasuchil flowers, and crocheted pillowcases weaved in the style of the Oaxacan state.

My mom had met Elsa in a pottery class organized by the Peruvian embassy, for the immigrant wives of bankers and diplomats who had been displaced from their home country. My mom felt soothed by Elsa’s dulcet tones, her outspoken and brutal way of speaking that characterized Peruvians and Mexicans ran away from, the honest vulnerability of her struggles,

and the cultivated stories of her travels. Born in Lima, Elsa had married a Portuguese-Nigerian diplomat and moved to Tokyo, where her son married a petite Japanese woman and had a baby girl named Cereza. Elsa had returned to Latin America four years before our move, when the Nigerian consulate appointed her husband to work at their Mexico City embassy.

When they met, Elsa said to my mom:

“My hairdresser said that I should meet a white Peruvian woman who looks Colombian and has been crying at the salon over her family. Is that you, Yudith?”

My mom then laughed at the coincidences of life, and how God gifts you angels, yet she eventually learned that Elsa hid a third eye between her eyebrows. Whenever they shared a cup of afternoon coffee at Elsa’s house, their chats got interrupted by the neighbour’s constant knocks. They wanted to ask when their sons would marry, if they had to prepare for a sickness, and where they should travel for the most fortune. When my mom inquired about the visits, Elsa answered, “I’m a bit of a psychic” and returned to her sunset coffee cup.

A skeptic, my mom thought that her friend needed an urgent visit to the asylum, yet she decided to prod further, mainly out of curiosity.

“Well, then,” she said. “Tell me something about my life.”

“Your mom died when you were very young,” replied Elsa. “She came to visit you the night after we met, to ask me to tell you to remind to call your father, Jacobo. She doesn’t want him to feel lonely now that you moved to Mexico.”

My mom did not recall telling Elsa about Abuelita's Francis death, or even Abuelo Jacobo's name. Yet, she thought that she might have slipped something while she cried at the hairdresser's and let it pass.

On another occasion, my mom saw Elsa quite agitated during a brunch with their other friend, Mercedes. While Elsa drove her back to our apartment, my mom inquired about the issue.

"Mercedes' husband is cheating on her –I saw it in one of my visions–, but I don't know if it's wise to tell her. Maybe she should find out on her own when the time comes."

"I wouldn't worry Mercedes over your imaginary visions," said my mom.

At that moment, surrounded by the cobblestone blue walls of *Azul Historico*, the pair waited for my mom's friend Jacky, who Elsa had never heard about before.

Another Peruvian, Jacky strutted with her long inky hair, clear turquoise eyes, and kind disposition into the restaurant, telling Elsa how lovely it was to meet her for the first time. Once the introductions had been made, and the social niceties had been met, my mom excused herself to the bathroom. When she returned, my mom saw Elsa consoling a crying Jacky, who bolted and ran to the restroom, once my mom returned to their table.

"What did you say to her?" asked my mom, angry.

"I just told Jacky that her dad came to visit me. He apologized for dying when she was young, leaving her no money and two sisters to care for, at the age of twenty. He wanted me to tell Jacky how proud he is of her."

My mom gaped and fell shut. Elsa and Jacky had never met before, and she had never talked to one about the other. Moreover, Jacky had never told my mom about her father's death. Jacky did not even mention why her father was not around, and Yudith had assumed that he had remained behind in Peru. She did not know he had died. There was no way for Elsa to know.

Mom never teased Elsa about her visions again.

A few months later, Mercedes left her husband for cheating on her.

After hearing the gossip, my mom made way to Elsa's house, and said:

“Never tell me about my future, even if it's good. I don't want to know.”

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Tangled blonde hair and a string of curses.

My mom and I discussed my future in our war room, the Starbucks tables at Carlos Slim Avenue. That night, a mix of mucus and tears dried over my pillow. I had spent my lunch break avoiding my classmates and reading *City of Beasts* by Isabel Allende. I missed my home back in Peru and hated these accented people who found double meanings in all the words I spoke.

I did not care about classmates that collected pairs of Adidas sneakers as currency, or that claimed that I had lesbian tendencies when I refused to tell them if I had a crush on someone. I did not care for school administrators that ridiculed my friend in front of the rest of the class, saying that she smoked pot and that her boyfriend sold drugs because he looked like a hippie, or

about teachers who confiscated my phone when I intended to call the number the school prefect had given me for when I needed the key to the elevator, after I sprained my right ankle.

To escape all that I did *not* care about, I planned to apply to an international university, which had a high school program. The university, known as the *Tecnologico de Monterrey* institute, had three campuses all around the city, and the one closest to our house had no space to accept any more applications. The ride to campus *Ciudad de Mexico* and campus *Estado de Mexico* took two and three hours with traffic, respectively.

“I talked to the school,” began my mom, “and they said that you have a higher chance of getting a spot at campus *Santa Fe*, if you first accepted to another campus, and transfer.”

I nodded, dribbled the word *transfer* on a napkin, and sipped on my caramel macchiato.

“What if I get accepted but I don’t get to transfer?”

“Then that school isn’t for you. You won’t survive the workload *and* commuting four hours a day. It’s just not doable.”

The wall next to the bathrooms and the baristas had flying parrots and tropical palm trees painted on it. Next to the espresso machine and the glass container of coffee grains, a poster read “coffee exported from the Peruvian jungle.”

“Maybe God has it out for me,” I said.

“Don’t spit to the sky, because it’ll spit back at you.”

I laughed, drew a surrealist eye with one single tear, and sipped on more coffee.

“Did you know this coffee was imported from Peru, just like us?”

“—so, this is what will happen,” interrupted my mom. “You’ll prepare for your application and take the text at campus *Ciudad de Mexico*. When you get accepted, you’ll apply for a transfer. If the transfer pans out you’ll change schools, and if it doesn’t you won’t.”

“But...”

Mom placed her palm on my wrist, and with her other hand wrote “Jennifer graduates at *Tecnologico de Monterrey campus Santa Fe*.” She smiled.

“Can I share my life philosophy with you?”

I nodded.

“When you want something, you got to do everything in your power to make it happen. God will only help you if you show them that you’re also helping yourself. If you put in the effort, at something doesn’t pan out, it’s because it wasn’t meant for you, but that only works if you *did* put in the effort. Heaven has its price.”

When I got the transfer to campus *Santa Fe*, I felt glad that Mom stopped me from spitting at the sky. She and I gathered for our second war council at the Sanborns found in the roundabout between the *Hueytlaco* highway and *Laureles* avenue. This time, waitresses dressed in dresses typical to the state of Jalisco served as coffee of Mexican grains.

“Well, you finally got accepted,” said my general, “and now it’s time to figure out how you’ll survive the next few months. I refuse to see my daughter cry.”

I scratched away my tears and pulled my hair into a ponytail, like I did each time I got ready to work. Like the style I wore in Peru, before I had to emulate the hairstyles at the girls at my new school to fit in.

“I went with your father to a conference the other day, and they made us do an exercise. We had to tell the person we came with, two qualities we liked about them, and use the ones we got to face our struggles.”

I remembered a phrase I read from *City of Beasts* during my lunch break: “In the Chinese language, do you know what the characters for ‘crisis’ are? ‘Danger’ plus ‘opportunity.’” My mom continued:

“So, I’ll tell you yours: You are honest and creative. I want you to take those two qualities to confront these assholes who won’t leave you alone. Use your creativity to find the best insults, and your honesty to hit them where it hurts.”

I grinned at my general in the war council, ready to take on her orders.

“Remember the meaning of your religious name, Yael. Names have reincarnating qualities, and yours makes you a warrior.” She paused. “I’m giving you free reign. They’ll never see it coming.”

When my mom and I my dad visited Europe on their honeymoon, their train passed by Germany. As mom looked at the field's tulips, my mom recognized that her soul had already lived there. As she connected to a past life, my mom felt the embrace of death and sadness, and knew that her past soul's reincarnation had lived and died in that field.

At a new year's dinner, a religious lady told the story of her visit to an apartment in Amsterdam. As she traversed the corridors, a deeper sense of déjà vu engulfed her, until she reached the bathroom that housed an ivory white porcelain bathtub at the end of the hall. She then knew that her soul had already lived there; that her past life had bathed in that bath and walked down those corridors.

The Aztecs built a mask of turquoise and nacre crystal to represent their most sacred deity, the winged serpent Qutzatcoatl, who lorded over life, the winds, fecundity and rebirth. After sacrificing the king's life, he held on earth for his people, he transformed into the morning and giver of life. In the Aztec mythology, the dead may turn into living creatures as birds and butterflies.

When I moved to Mexico City and reading under an archway of birds of paradise flowers, I saw a colibri. Then, my mom told me that a colibri came to visit her everyday after Abuelita Francis died. In the land of the Aztecs, I could see my grandmother not only as a thousand exploding stars, but as ~~the reincarnation of~~ a bird.

The ferry cruised from the Statue of Independence to Ellis Island. After I graduated from the international high school at campus *Santa Fe*, my mom and I took a trip to New York. Manhattan housed an endless row of soaring skyscrapers that made even the vast expanse of Mexico City look like a soaring colorful third world town. I would always remember Mexico City as the place where I smelled lavender and collected cempasuchil –colorful, spicy, and clear blue as the grey skies of Lima never looked.

Ellis Island also had a vast garden and a clear sky, but my soul sank as it neared the gardens and shrank in the face of a building that countless immigrants had trembled on. I felt a profound sense of dread and sadness; my *anima* asking me not to relive the pains of my past life for one more time. I shook and cry, yet sadness never washed over me. More than any feeling of physical reaction, my soul had recognized the place.

“Mom, I don’t feel so well. I recognize this place but not in a visual sense. I just know I have been here before. My soul has been here before.”

My mom grabbed my hand and made me follow her on the tour.

“Maybe we were here together, love,” Mom said. “Maybe then, you were my mom, and I was your daughter, and we needed to be here so I could take care of you today, just as you took care of me then.”

I grabbed and to my mother’s palm and walked alongside her in hallways both familiar and unknown. I felt the breath of God give life onto my soul’s memories and knew then that my

past counterpart had been an immigrant who walked along my mom's soul as we then did. Souls reincarnate in groups, after all. I died an immigrant in a past life and lived an immigrant in this one. My spirit connected to God as never before and I knew my soul soared and cried for *whoever* I had been.

I recognized, then, my soul as one of the revolving spirits in a succession of lives.

Writing these lines feels unholy.

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The spirit of God moved over the surface of the water.

As I stared at the endless expanse of turquoise waters of the Santo Domingo Sea, sunset rays bathed my eyelids, the wind tickled my skin, and the sands moved singing in the rhythm of the waves. I would travel to Canada soon, searching along the journey of my soul –an immigrant soul. A soul that yearned for compassion, belonging, and an endless deep blue sea. I felt completion; my body of fire laid atop the water, like a spitfire on a mantle of deliverance and healing.

The Aztecs associated the day of water with Xiuhtecuhtli –the God of fire. Water like my grandmother, fire like my mom. I felt at ease leaving behind the Jacaranda trees lilac petals that smelled like lavender perfumed. Water bathed my traitorous spitfire body, and I felt at ease.

It was the beginning of the end. Or, perhaps, the end of the beginning.

[Spitfire] 5c

We floated within turquoise waves, on the sand-weaved water of a windless sea. Aunt Yoselyn's blonde reddish wet hair strands glided from her ponytail onto the surface. A tight green scrunchie wrapped around my mom's brunette frizzy curls. Drops of humidity glistened on their faces, while the sun danced around their backs. I submerged within the waves until the sea salt kissed my lips and my blonde strands swam in front of my eyelids. I blew bubbles from my nose and kicked the water up towards the red-light of the sunshine.

They mumbled about a woman nicknamed "milky lollipop," for her pale face and sweet smile. That woman had found her mother laying in the foot of her closet, searching money between her scattered heels, shouting that my mom had stolen money from her.

"—and then the hospital called, because Relah had slipped in the bathtub and had Alzheimer. Her nurse had been stealing from her all this time. Mom was beside herself when she came back from the cruise to find her mom in the hospital. Mom fired the nurse, but she was too nice to make a fuss. Yudith, you did well to put Relah in that nursing home, Mom didn't have the heart."

Mom's mom. Abuelita Francis. Milky Lollipop. Red Exploding Start. Spiritual Colibri.

"Grandmother Relah was such a spitfire," said my mom. "Remember how stubborn she was? Mr. Boris kept asking her out and she always had an excuse at hand. That it was the Peruvian soccer's league game, that she had to import merchandise from Miami, or that her precious daughter was away for the night, and who would look after the three little girls?"

They both laughed. The turquoise waves drew spirals around us, mimicking the shape of the burning sun. Mom pushed up the straps of her green-blue striped bikini and I imitated her movements with my black and white psychedelic bathing suit.

“Mom was the opposite,” said Aunt Yoselyn. “She took everything as a breeze.”

“She sure liked dominant people, leaving Grandmother Relah’s yoke, and breezing straight to Dad’s. She loved for him to make the decisions. Remember how she asked for his opinion on all her floral blouses?”

“Well, I couldn’t have lived like that. Neither could have any of you.”

My two maternal figures appeared imposing under the midday brazen sun; discussing people I had never truly known, situations I could only hear about rather than memories to recover. I last remembered Great-grandmother Relah as a suffering spectrum of gnawed memories. Abuelita Francis’ personality layed outside of my synapses.

“Well, Mom was an angel.” My mom turned towards me. “Abuelita Francis had the lightest personality. We all loved her. I told her everything.”

“She could have never survived by herself,” argued Aunt Yoselyn. “She was timid and relied on your grandfather for everything.”

“And where did you come from? Cause you’ sure don’t have a light personality,” I asked.

Mom and Aunt Yoselyn turned towards me, sharing identical duplicitous smirks.

“Well, we sure know where you came from, fosforito,” Aunt Yoselyn said, “but if you must know, we take after Abuelo Jacobo.”

Mom stared at me, with the sun burning brazen across her tanned skin.

“You actually remind me of Relah, little spitfire.”

“I thought you said I was just like you.”

“That’s right, love. You have my brazen-ass personality. A matchstick just like me, spitfire. *Just like me.*”

The turquoise waves swarmed away the conversation into the glinting walls of a dressing room. A tight and equally glinting golden dress twirled like the waves of the beach under a brazen sun and made me feel like dancing jazz in feathers-covered flapper silks. My mom took me to this boutique for the cheap and beautiful dresses, perfect for the prom dance. As I admired the soft golden fabric reflect on the mirror next to my gold strands, I could only agree with her.

“Well, let’s not waste any more time, Jen. You just found your dress,” said my mom.

“You keep bragging about these prices. Sure, you don’t wanna try anything?” I asked her.

Mom pulled away the bundle of blue, black, and burgundy dresses hunched on the dressing-room’s coach and propped her shoulder on the wall to stretch at her arms.

“That’s okay, love. I already bought something when my friend showed me the place.”

“Oh, what did you buy? Do you have any pictures?” I asked, while reaching for her to help me unzip the golden material.

“I can’t show you.”

I snickered while putting on my soft-cotton bra and underwear.

“You can’t show me? You literally undress in front of me. You tell me each detail of your life, including the colour of your poop.”

Mom reached for her phone, and answered text messages, while I put on my sneakers.

“Well, if you must know, I bought the dress that I’ll wear at your wedding.”

I stretched forward onto my right leg and gaped at my mom.

“I haven’t even had my first boyfriend. I don’t even know how to fucking flirt.”

Smart green eyes glanced at me, and then looked back at the smartphone to keep swiping.

“I believe in the power of words. What you do and say will become your reality.”

I hoped Mom bought a blue dress of turquoise waves or a windy midnight flame.

“—I want to see you married to a man that loves and respects you.” Mom finally glanced at me. “And I expect grandchildren. Your dad only let me have three kids. I wanted five.”

I had expected to live the life my mom had lived: To graduate in Lima, to study liberal arts in la Catolica university —just like she had studied economics at el Pacifico—, and to marry a fellow Peruvian compatriot. I had not expected to become an immigrant in Mexico City or to move by myself to Canada as the first of my family to ever do so, to study writing and user experience design for my undergraduate degree. I did not expect that in the midst of a pandemic, amid the icy Toronto streets, I would meet a Peruvian man nine years my senior.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Mom over the phone, while snowflakes hugged the window and then jumped onto the salt-iced pavement.

Her shoulder hurt ever since she operated it thirteen years ago, when Abuelita Francis had cancer. She now needed help to lift her arm above her head to shampoo her hair. Mom said that emotions reperculated on the body, and while I could not blame myself for her failing muscle flesh, her stomach malfunctioned ever since I moved to Canada.

She said that her shoulder hurt out of fear of seeing her mother die. Mom always regretted not waiting before getting that failed operation. I wondered about the correlation between missing, distance, and the stomach.

“My shoulder hurts and I can’t eat much,” Mom answered. “But that’s fine when I know are eating in my stead.”

“That’s not funny,” I said, while laughing. “You cannot tell, Dad.”

“That his little girl, who just turned twenty, is spending the pandemic making out with a thirty-year-old? Only because I know it won’t last. I know you, love. You just want company while the province is shut down.”

Small town, big hell. We are few and know each other well.

“—he is technically twenty-nine.”

My mom believed that emotions cause the body’s pain and that her mother reincarnated into a colibri. She never said that missing me made polyps flourish in her stomach, yet when the soaring feather-serpent welcomed me back to Mexico City, her stomach pains eased.

“I think my mother got Cancer out of sadness,” she said many months later.

We floated in the bay of Manzanillo. Located four hours outside of Guadalajara; with its brownish sand, gray stills water, and white-light sun, Manzanillo reminded me of the beaches I grew up in, back in Lima’s Asia beaches. As my ankle throbbed and my nerves lit up, I recalled that today, on Friday night, I had to take my weekly dose of dizzying chemotherapy pills. It felt unfair that years after taking care of her ailing mother and months after recovering from her own flesh pains, my mom had to now care for her sick daughter.

My immune sickness attacked muscles sparkling pain signals and inflaming soft tissue, yet the sun on my skin and the waves tickling at my nerves calmed the anger that obfuscated me, while the sea salt kissed away the smells of needles and evaporated the upcoming weeks of medical trials. The hotel had lent my mom a golf cart to allow my unstable ankles to cross the steep hill that separated the huts from the shore. Mom had said that we came to the beach to cure my soul.

“I heard a story about a girl who looked pregnant, for she grew a tumor the size of a watermelon in her belly,” Mom said. “She consulted a lot of doctors, yet nothing worked until

she forgave all the people that had wronged her, one after the other. As she let the resentment go, the tumor lowered to the size of an apple, then that of a grape, and at last the doctors could take it away.”

“Mom, I don’t have a tumor the size of a watermelon, and Abuelita Francis didn’t get cancer because she was sad.”

Mom lowered under the surface and arched her neck to look at the sun. Her frizzy wet hair danced behind her face as a humid halo.

“Maybe, maybe not, but *you* are sick out of anger and carry the stress in your tendons,” she answered.

“So, you are saying it’s my fault that I’m sick. Is that it?”

I clenched my eyes, creased my forehead, and stuck out my lip, showing my teeth.

“Calm down, Spitfire,” Mom said. “You are proving my point. You go through life like *arghhhhh*,” She moved her arms in quick succession to simulate running. “Always reactive, getting heated. Instead, you need to be like this—.” She made a flowing motion with her arms, imitating the flow of the water. “You need to take life with good grace and *tran-qui-li-ty*.” Mom emphasized each syllable and laid back into the waiting aquamarine arms of the Manzanillo Bay.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“You, fosforito, will learn to let go. Forgive anyone that wronged you and forgive your body for not working as you want it to. The universe wants to teach you *patience*. The, you’ll learn peace and *tranquility*.”

I thought Eli could provide *tranquility*. Steadfast and strong; he looked golden and followed the law of minimum effort. Eli liked to save his energy, rather than to hasten through life spending all his spoons at once like the spitfire he had agreed to date.

I pursued the relationship. When I invited him to the park to rent bicycles, he bought me sticky caramel churros and carried me like a backpack down the stairs. After watching me crawl down a grass hill to avoid hurting my oversensitive ankle, we held hands and he drove me to the psychologist. As we discussed feminism in the car, he made me to promise to *never stop talking to him*.

That week my parents traveled to Peru to visit my Abuelos. I invited Eli to my house, and we watched *Life of Brian* while hugging on Jonathan's bed. I argued that since he had paid for the churros, I owed him a Pizza. We made eyes at his sister's, Mijal, birthday party, and when the fatigue hit and nausea followed, he drove me home and said goodbye to me at the elevator. On Monday, he drove me to the pharmacy, and on Thursday, we kissed in his car after sharing sushi and a pitcher of Sangria.

When my mom returned from Lima, Eli and I had been dating for a month, calling each other boyfriend and girlfriend for two weeks, and spent every spare second on top of each other like a pair of amorous koalas.

"You are going way too fast," she said. "And he is Mijal's sister. I'm not sure she likes you dating his brother."

"The only thing Mijal said was to watch my weight around Eli, cause' as a swimmer he got used to eating three thousand calories a day."

Mijal had actually told me not to hurt her *overtly sensitive* brother, and I teased him without pause about his sister, saying that I should care for the overgrown teddy bear to avoid Mijal from castrating me, as she had done with the rest of her friends.

"We aren't going fast Mom," I said again while getting ready to spend the day with Eli. For our fourth date that week, we would eat Baklavas and Turkish Coffee for breakfast, drive

around the lilac petals of Reforma avenue, and spent the afternoon at a barbecue of his swimming friends.

“Just be careful.” *What flames up, burns fast*, she omitted saying.

It burnt into ashes with a fibromyalgia flare up, in his Miami vacation house. Mijal had invited me to spend the winter break, and, excited at the prospect of breathing uncumbered by a facemask, Eli had dismissed my pleads that if I got Covid, I would be interned at the hospital. I remember that I could not feel heat in my body despite Miami’s scorching breeze. I remember that my knees gave out, that the thermometer read forty degrees Celsius, and that I begged the cab driver to turn on the heater. I remember that in my delirious stupor and my acid flaming pain, I had cried out for a euthanasia. I remember nothing more.

“You acted like a crazy person,” said my mom. “I don’t know if you remember much, but you began shouting and shouting. There was so much rage.”

“Do you think they’ll forgive me?”

After I messaged them to apologize, Eli had sent me a text saying he was angry and disappointed in me, while Mijal told me to fuck off, calling me selfish and berating me for ruining her vacation.

“No,” Mom replied, and within my infection infused fear, I hiccupped mucus and tears.

“I’m the worst piece of shit to ever walked this earth. They open their house to me, help me out when I feel at my lowest, and look how I repay them.” I drowned my face in my pillow and scratch away at the clothes that the fever sweated through during the night. “Did I insult anybody? I don’t remember. Please, tell me I didn’t insult anybody.”

Mom seated next to the bed. She, Dad, Joseph and Abuelo Jacobo had flown to Miami and rented an Airbnb. They came to help me if I had any flare ups. Last time my nerves acted up,

Dad had needed to help me put on clothes and straightened my back, after the pain made me lose my balance in the shower. Mom came to pick me up after Eli's family placed me in a warm bathtub to allow my body to recover heat, after which they packed my suitcase and threw me out of the house like a street dog with rabies. After consoling me, giving me pills to lower my fever, and putting me to bed, the rest of my family did a nose-swab Covid test. All tests came up positive.

"You didn't insult anybody, but you cannot go through life shouting around and making a scene. I don't care if you were delirious, or if you have anger issues. No one will tolerate you this way. You just love your friend group and your boyfriend for this shit. You have to learn to control yourself." Mom pulled my straight muddy hair behind my ear. "I'm telling you this because I love you. I'm sad that this happened to you but stop moping around. Come to the living room, we'll watch the second season of *Emily in Paris*."

I gifted her a sardonic smile. The anger that had filled my heart deflated and left behind a void of regret and self-loathing.

"I *really* don't feel like watching a romantic comedy."

Mom smiled.

"It's about a girl who sleeps with a bunch of guys in Paris and fights with all her friends. I'll promise you'll love it."

While we watched the show, Eli texted me to say that Mijal's passport had gone missing and asked me to search if I could find it within my stuff. When my mom asked me why I was not paying attention to Emily's tumultuous love life, I explained the situation and she began laughing like a maniac

"Karma. Fucking karma. That girl had it coming for insulting you."

After we returned from the failed Miami vacation to Mexico City, I crawled to my mom's room and told her:

"I'm not doing well. I feel like my body, and I are different entities. I miss Eli, I feel like no one else will want me with the anger and the sickness."

Mom draped me over her chest and rubbed my back, careful not to activate any of my pain points. She gave me a forehead kiss and wiped away my tears with a gentle hand.

"Eli was a moron. He didn't treat you with respect when you explained your condition and even gave your grandfather Covid. Also, Mijal is a crappy friend. Insulting you for having a bad reaction to an illness, give me a break." She looked at me, red face and angry. "Don't get me wrong, you had a terrible reaction, but you aren't missing out on anything with that family."

I propped myself unto my elbows and stared at her smart green eyes. After the breakup I had stopped eating and lost six kilos in the span of two weeks. I drank one ensure a day, because my mom said she refused to see me pass out. My doctor said to avoid red wine because it made the gastric acid soar.

"You saved yourself. I wish stopped you from going on that trip, but you'd have yelled at me for not allowing you to have a normal life," Mom continued. Then she pointed at me with an accusing finger. "And you brought that guy into *my* house when you knew I wouldn't found out. I regret this so much."

"I don't," I said as I laid next to mom and. For once, my tears fell with laughter. "I made the relationship happen, *I* went after him, and for a reason that I didn't understand, the guy that all my friends found attractive wanted to be with *me* when I felt at my worst."

I took my mom's palm in mine and looked at her with glinting and defiant smart green eyes.

“He didn’t do *anything* to make the relationship happen,” I continued. “I was responsible for us dating, and also for us breaking up.” I smirked. “And outside of that traumatic telenovela ending, I had a fucking blast.”

“Well, *forsforito*, next time you have to take things slower,” she said.

Mom took the control and put on Netflix, to put on the next episode of *The Astrological Guide for Broken Heart*. We had becoming addicted to watching TV shows about girls who make out with random guys, while fighting with everyone in their life.

“Didn’t you plant a kiss in Dad’s mouth after dating him for a week?” I said. “I’m just passionate, remember?” Mom shoved me and laughed. “Just like you.”

Eli used to say that he could not date someone *just like him*, so he loved my intensity. I wondered about Joe’s excuse, when he behaved just as fervent. Joe and I had a spiritual connection, unlike the one I had shared with Eli. While Eli protested the existence of God, my curiosity regarding the Zodiac, and promised to snap me out of my spiritual superstitions, Joe and I discussed the types of love, destiny within the forces of universe, and how our respective illnesses guided us into a path for thankfulness. Joe told me that since I was born on a Thursday, I had a talent for kindness, and gifted me a sunflower when I recovered enough to swim a hundred laps.

I first met Joe at a party, in which I wore a tightly wrapped purple velvet dress. I remembered how the lights frowned upon his face of protruding bones, that ran along a sternum of tousled black chest hair. On our first date, I began crying when I recalled what happened with Eli, yet the next day Joe drove me to meeting with my rheumatologist, stayed in the waiting room while the doctor put an ultrasound through my legs. We then shared a glass of tea in Casa Tassel, and I realized that I liked Joe more as I spent more time with him. His protruding bones

had a sudden charming quality, and I wished I could take the Chron away from his body, just like I wished I could take away the remains of my recessing rheumatoid arthritis, or my still present fatiguing fibromyalgia.

After I found out that my mother had to go through an operation to remove her uterus, I spent the days at the hospital, reading her poetry and bringing her a mix of plush animals, *get well soon* cards, facemasks, and a dinosaur piñata. Joe came to pick me up to take me and Jonathan out of my mother's bedside and for dinner, for a little while.

"I'll go down," I said after Joe called, saying he was downstairs.

"Wait, Jen, I don't know what to do. I brought something," Joe replied.

"Arepas?" Joe always fed me arepas, one of the things he could eat to avoid draining his stomach, due to his self-destructing anus.

"I brought your mom flowers, for the operation."

I smiled through the phone.

"You should give them to her yourself. I'm sure she'll love them."

Joe coughed and snickered.

"Jen, you said that your mom forbade you from bringing anyone upstairs," Joe said in his raspy Venezuelan accent.

"Well, that mainly applies to the guy that gave Covid to my whole family. I'm sure she'll love for you to come upstairs if you're bringing her flowers."

Mom placed the overflowing bouquet of white gardenias in a vase.

"I really like this Joe," she told me.

Yet two weeks before I returned to Canada, Joe told me that he did not want us to talk anymore if we were not to have a long-distance relationship. I recalled the words of my mom:

“Out of sight, makes the sidepieces thankful. Long distance is for imbeciles.”

When I asked Joe, if there was not a third choice, he answered:

“I don’t think I can be ‘just friends’ with someone, after I’ve spent hours just quietly looking into their eyes.”

“Joe’s only sin was to ask for more than you were willing to give him,” my mom answered when I asked for advice on what to do.

On my first week back in Canada I talked to Joe on the phone. He told me he had found his calling in helping people, and that he felt the happiest he had ever been. I reminded him that we both had a talent for health and said that I felt like problems now seemed flies that I could just swat away. I told Joe that I felt thankful to him for giving me a new perspective and for the fibromyalgia, for allowing me to share more time with my mom before my parents moved to Panama and the family split. I said that I also felt the happiest I had ever been.

Then my phone rang. The caller ID read, *Yudith Mom* with a red heart.

“Listen, I gotta tell you something,” Mom said. “Colibris are birds that only fly low, but a colibri came to visit me on the eight floor of our building. I was stressed about the move, but Abuelita Francis came to visit me, because she knew I needed her.”

“That’s beautiful, Mom. Hope you said hi to her from me.”

“How was your day? Are you happy?” Mom asked.

“I really am. What are you guys up to?” I walked to the fridge and poured myself a glass of white wine, to avoid soaring gastric acids.

“They are just making fun of me. They said that I’m crazy for believing that my mom reincarnated onto a bird. That’s why I wanted to tell you. You’re crazy like me.”

“That’s right Mom,” I replied. “I’m just like you.”

