

Lilia

Lilia wished the direction of the evening breeze would shift as she diced the small octopus, dropping the chunks into the briny broth already steaming on the fire. But the wind kept its course, and the funk of her village's incinerated waste continued to waft across the courtyard. She plucked a sprig of mint from the cracked clay pot beside the kitchen door and stripped its leaves from the stem then popped them into her mouth. She chewed the herb into a slick pulp, hoping it would lessen her nausea.

Fernando sat in the dirt nearby, rolling a small truck between his bare feet. When he shrieked with laughter Lilia looked up from her work at the fire.

"What do you see, my boy?"

The child pointed at a white hen and her butter-yellow chicks pecking at the dust just beyond Fernando's new rubber ball, abandoned for now beneath the shade tree.

Lilia had not experienced any morning sickness with Fernando. Her pregnancy had gone so smoothly she'd worried something was wrong with the baby until she saw him, counted his fingers and toes, and heard him wail. His head had been bare, unlike the thickly matted scalp of Alejandra at her birth. Lilia's pregnancy with Fernando had been so different from her

first that she should have suspected the child to be a boy, but no. That simple conclusion had escaped her, and instead she'd assumed the child inside her womb to be deformed, and she had not fully felt excitement or love until she'd held him and he'd suckled at her breast. Only then did her tears and prayers of gratitude emerge from somewhere unexpected and deep within her.

But this third pregnancy felt similar to her first, with daily morning vomiting, and the constant taste of bile lingering in her throat. Perhaps this baby, like Lilia's first, would be a girl child. Little Alejandra would be almost four now. Is almost four now. She is almost four, Lilia told herself. Is, not would be.

Lilia prayed daily for Alejandra's well-being and happiness. And on the days she felt her hope waning, at those dark times, she prayed to God to punish her for allowing her faith and optimism to slip. These occasional, doubtful thoughts she did not share with Héctor; she'd learned long ago she must shoulder enough strength for the both of them. Lilia ached to believe that Héctor trusted her again as fully as he ever had, that he understood the depth to which her being had been shaken with the loss of their daughter and the horrible, undeniable guilt that permeated Lilia to her marrow for her part in that loss. She longed to tell him that oftentimes as she passed the village cemetery at the top of the hill she felt it watching her closely, as if she should be there with the dead instead of walking among the living.

For months after Lilia's border crossing and the disappearance of Alejandra, Héctor sneered at the sight of his wife. He tried to hide his contempt by turning away, busying himself in some pointless activity, but she felt his scorn as sure as a slap to her cheek. Even if his countenance had not betrayed his deep disappointment in Lilia, his inability to touch her all but screamed what Lilia interpreted as disgust, perhaps even loath-

ing. They had been the most loving, most affectionate couple in all of Mexico until that unforgettable, life-altering day at the border, when she'd arrived unexpectedly and without their child. Ah, but enough of these thoughts.

She spit the wad of mint into a gnarled hibiscus, its spent orange blossoms littering the ground around it.

Her grandmother had planted the shrub in honor of Lilia's birth, and even now, years after the old woman's passing, when Lilia looked at its large, trumpetlike flowers she thought of her grandmother Crucita, and how, at Christmastime, she would dry the blossoms to make delicious sugared candies for Lilia to suck.

"Papa!" Fernando said, waving to Héctor. "Papa home!"

Héctor, haggard and sun-darkened, brushed the boy's head with his grimy fingertips but did not scoop him up into a big hug as was his usual greeting for Fernando. He tossed a sack on the lone table in the courtyard. "Squash and onions," he said.

"José brought us an octopus this afternoon. I'm making a stew," Lilia said. "I'll roast the squash, too, if you'd like."

Héctor sat in one of the two chairs beside the weathered old table and unlaced his work boots. The breeze rattled the wind chime that hung inside the kitchen window, though Lilia didn't notice the sound until Héctor said, "Can we get rid of that thing?" He jutted his chin toward the jangling.

"You don't like it?" she said, sensing something other than the gentle clanking of the shells as the source of his irritation.

During their courtship and early marriage, prior to their time in *el norte*, Héctor wore his emotions like a banner; he'd been so easy to read. His imaginings and zest for life had drawn her to him when they were in school. Even when she'd been but fifteen years old and Héctor sixteen, they'd sit under the stars beside the bay speaking of their future, of the children they'd have, and of the life they imagined together. Lilia would have

been content to live out her days in Puerto Isadore, but Héctor had held bigger aspirations and an imagination like no one else she'd ever met. He'd been silly and jovial as a schoolboy then, laughing and joking and dreaming what others might call impossible dreams. Lilia had believed in him and in his vision for their future.

"We'll go to *el norte* one day, Lilia," he'd said. "I'll go first and find work, and I'll save enough money to bring you to me."

She knew such days of innocence and pure delight would never return, yet she refused to give up on the notion of their happiness.

He lifted the other boot and began untying its laces. Without looking at her he said, "No, Lilia. I don't like the wind chime. I've never liked it."

She wiped her hands across her faded yellow apron before detaching the chime's string from the rusted hook above the open window.

She set the wind chime on the table beside the bag of squash and onions, then hoisted Fernando to her hip.

"That boy's too big to be a hip child," Héctor said, bringing a hand to his temple.

"What's wrong, Héctor?" She squeezed Fernando when he gripped her shoulder, eager to remain in his mother's arms.

Héctor slapped both hands on his thighs and sat up straight, inhaling a long, slow breath.

"Guess who I saw today, Lilia," he said, staring at her, his eyes dark, troubled.

She eased Fernando to the ground, afraid her legs would fail her under the added weight and the news coming toward her. A strange flickering played in her chest, and the ever-present bile thickened in her throat.

"Tell me."

"Emanuel," he said.

She slipped into the chair across from Héctor, her palms flat on the table between them. “Are you certain you saw him? Did you speak to him?”

Héctor brought his hands behind his head, interlocking his fingers and tilting his face toward the clouds mounding in the western sky. “I know who I saw,” he said.

“Did you talk? What did he say, Héctor? Where did you see him? Oh, my God. Tell me everything.”

“I don’t have much to tell. No, we didn’t speak. I saw him, but he didn’t see me.”

“Are you sure the person you saw was Emanuel? Where was he?”

“He was boarding the bus to Escondido. I know it was Emanuel. I’ve looked for that *pendejo* every day for years, Lilia. The man I saw was Emanuel.”

“This is good news, Héctor. We’ll find him!” She reached for him and took his hands in hers and brought them to her lips, tears brimming her eyes.

Héctor exhaled, and for the first time since his arrival from work, he seemed to relax, to soften, though the worry lines, long etched into his brow and temples, remained, a constant reminder to the world, to Lilia, of his grief.

“All the emotions, you know?” he said. “Just when I begin to put him and our past behind us . . .” He shook his head. “I hate him, but we need him.”

Héctor stood and scooped Fernando into his arms. “Your stew smells good, Lilia.”

She returned to the pot and stirred its contents with a long wooden spoon, her thoughts far away from the fire or this courtyard. She closed her eyes and inhaled sharply, her mind not on the briny scent of her cooking but lost in the memory of the lavender-scented head of her firstborn child.

Héctor

Héctor lay in bed listening to the predawn awakening of his village as he imagined for the countless time what he would say if he were face-to-face with Emanuel. But as always, something in his mind would not allow the thoughts to get beyond Emanuel's eyes, and self-loathing brimmed within Héctor for his inability to conquer his foe even in his imagination.

In Héctor's envisioning of their chance meeting, he would encounter Emanuel someplace familiar, like the market or *la farmacia*. Héctor would always approach the vendor with goods in hand for purchase, mundane everyday items like matches or gum or a can of juice. The person in line in front of him would be a man in fancy clothes and spotless boots, and as the man turned, Héctor would recognize Emanuel's profile and would speak Emanuel's name. Emanuel would turn to face Héctor, less than a meter between them.

Héctor wanted to imagine punching him in the face, feeling the crunch of bone beneath his bare knuckles, and as Emanuel's blood began to flow Héctor would ask him a series of questions that would lead to Alejandra's whereabouts and her safe return home.

Héctor would think these thoughts as he worked the fields every day, as he ate his meals, as he played at the sea's edge with

Fernando. But when he lay in the dark solitude of his room each morning before work, after Lilia had risen to stoke the fire and prepare breakfast, his mind's eye would play out the imagined meeting. Héctor wanted his illusory self to cause Emanuel deep pain, the kind that scarred a body and a soul, to break him in an irreparable way as Emanuel's actions had done to Héctor and Lilia and their family. Instead, in Héctor's quiet daydreams, when Emanuel turned to him, his glare weakened Héctor, rendered him as useless as ditch water.

Héctor longed to play out the punch, the crushing blow of fist to face, but he could not. Instead, when the two would lock eyes, Emanuel's were the eyes of a god, powerful, mocking, and all knowing. He would stare at Héctor, a slow, wicked smile spreading across his face until Héctor had to look away, divert his eyes to his own shit-caked boots, and when he finally found the strength to lift his eyes, Emanuel would be gone, along with any information he held about Alejandra.

Even in his daydreams Héctor had no ability to protect his family, and that secret knowledge haunted him, vexed him like a dull thorn wedged deep beneath a toenail, its silent infection seeping into his veins.

Héctor smelled the wood smoke from the breakfast fire, and he rose from bed, resigned that he would begin every day for the rest of his life just like this until either his daughter was reunited with him and Lilia or he knew with certainty that she was dead.

A time had existed when Héctor dreamed of his potential, of the possibilities the wide, mysterious, promising world held for him, and for anyone willing to pursue his dreams, for anyone with the hope of something better, something more, even if he could not name what possibilities existed. Héctor had been that boy, that young man, but no more. In his youth he'd seen other

boys, older boys, sniffing glue, their way of coping, of escape. And he'd seen the men who, after the workday, took to their bottles in the dark shadows of their village. He'd not be them. He'd never be them, he'd told himself from his earliest days.

Not many years ago, Héctor had believed that working his whole life for just a few pesos a day seemed like settling, like an admission his potential and abilities were limited. He'd dreamed of providing more for his loved ones than his family had been able to provide for him as a boy, and he'd longed to see what more he could accomplish, even if that meant leaving the place of his birth. Now his soul—at one time filled with optimism and the belief that he could do anything with hard work, hope, and determination—had hardened and become calloused by cynicism and exhaustion. How differently he now arose from his bed each day, how different his slumbering dreams had become since his return from *el norte* just over three years ago. Seeing Emanuel yesterday had ripped his wounded spirit anew.

Lilia sat outside on a blue crate, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. “Good morning, love. You were restless last night,” she said without rising from her seat.

He bent to her and kissed her mouth. She tasted like warm cinnamon. “You weren’t,” he said, pouring a cup of coffee from the pot on the fire.

She shrugged. “I guess Fernando wears me out. I didn’t know how active a two-year-old could be. But, oh, I do love that busy little boy,” she said, smiling. “Yes, I slept hard last night.”

Her comment about a two-year-old brought his mind to Alejandra, just as nearly everything did. Alejandra would have been nearly two when Fernando was born, and he wondered how she would have reacted to the arrival of a brother.

“I’ve been thinking about Emanuel. I’m sure you have, too. When I saw him . . .” He paused, shaking his head. “I should’ve

felt hope, you know? Like you did when I told you I'd seen him. Instead I felt rage." He sipped his coffee and rubbed Lilia's shoulder with his free hand.

"We'll find him," he continued. "We must. And then we'll find Alejandra. Emanuel's the only person who can provide us clues to what happened to our girl."

Lilia gripped Héctor's hand on her shoulder and squeezed tight. "The past three years . . ." she began. "Maybe now God knows the timing is right. Maybe now we'll find our girl."

"I've been thinking about our time in *el norte*. In my youth everything was new, you know? I was ready to pluck the world from the vine." He laughed at his foolishness. "I wanted to feel that dew on my fingers, like when you pick the fields at sunrise? What a stupid ass I was." He shook his head. "The yearnings of an innocent boy."

Lilia smiled. "You sound like a withered old man. You're twenty-four years old, Héctor. Do you remember what you asked me the day we were sent back here from America?"

"What?"

"You asked me if I thought it was all worth it, our crossing, our time in America. You asked if it was all a mistake."

He grunted, his mind flashing to their time in America, to thoughts so knotted with memories both pleasant and horrific that unraveling the experience into a concise and sensible recollection seemed impossible. He considered the day Lilia arrived in America, but she'd arrived without Alejandra, and then, months later, the day he and Lilia found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time and were asked by a lawman for papers they could not produce. He looked now at his wife, her gaze gentle, loving, inquisitive.

"And I said I was sure that had we never crossed, just lived out our days here," she continued, "you'd have always won-

dered. Always longed to cross. You would have continued to dream of America.”

“I remember,” he said, knowing her words to be true. Despite all they’d endured and the bone-crushing despair that tinged everything he said or did, Héctor loved Lilia with a fierceness that moved him to take her small hand in his, to press her knuckles to his dry lips and remain like that as she spoke. At times such as this, when her words proved her insight into his soul, he thanked God for her and their life together, regardless of the complexities and tribulations of that life. He knew he’d been hard on her, cruel, he supposed, after Alejandra’s disappearance, but he’d come to understand she’d been even harsher on herself.

“Plenty of time yet for dreaming and for hope,” she said. “Do you recall how intensely you longed to escape this village, this country?”

Héctor thought of the day he’d reached the border. *La línea* had looked nothing like he’d expected. His coyote had driven slowly along, pointing out the ill-prepared fools, many with children, sneaking through holes in the fence. A simple, rusted fence! Nothing more than that separated Héctor and his coyote from *el norte*. Héctor couldn’t believe his eyes. Many at the fence carried only a single jug of water, and Héctor’s smuggler’s words still haunted him. *They will die*, he’d said, with no emotion, adding, *Death in the desert is the cruelest death*. He spoke of withered corpses swinging in the hot, desert wind, of men too ill from the blistering sun to proceed but too far from home to turn back. Parched, disoriented men who hanged themselves by their belts from creosote trees to end their suffering beneath the searing sky. The coyote had assured Héctor he’d not allow Héctor’s bones to bleach in the desert sun, that for the fee Héctor was paying him he’d get Héctor across the border. He’d kept

his promise, delivering Héctor to *el norte* in the sealed undercarriage of a truck. Lilia and Alejandra had never been far from his thoughts then. He was crossing for them, for their family's future.

Héctor looked at Lilia and nodded. "But I'll never know that intensity of hope, of possibility, again. A boy's dreams are powerful when he's inexperienced, Lilia, before he's known fierce disappointment. You and I have known these things. Our experiences have hardened us. The damage can't be undone." He studied her eyes, needing her to understand his well-earned callousness.

"I have hope yet, Héctor. Listen, do you hear that?" She turned toward the window to the room where Fernando was waking, the room long occupied by Fernando's great-grandmother Crucita. The child called softly, "Mama. Mama."

"That's the sound of my hope. Of our hope. If we fail to embrace the promise and potential of that sweet voice, then we fail God. That's what I believe, Héctor."

He pulled her close and hugged her until Fernando's call became a shout, "Mama!"

"Go get your little sound of hope, then," he said, smiling. "Your little god wants his mama."

He kissed her and watched her go inside to retrieve his son, thankful for her steadfastness, her ability to find goodness and promise always, despite all they had endured.