

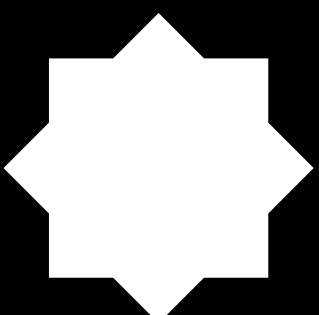


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OXO IMAGE

Anita

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by Isabella
Saporito

PART ONE

I am staring out onto the street where you first learned how to ride your bike, next to Enrique Mota, the son of the grocer. You screamed, “Mami, Mami look I’m flying,” and it was then that you lifted your hands from the handlebars and the bike twisted into a pile of oranges. The oranges puddled (made a pool) around you as your little body fell into a C. I ran to you expecting tears but instead was met with a smile, “Can we go again?” It was then I knew my daughter was strong, my little Yasmina. It was then I knew I couldn’t keep you with me forever. Those were the good days, when your dad still arrived home each night at 7pm, ready to see his girls. The days we were all still together. Sometimes I look back and wonder if you also wish you could return to the time before your father’s death. And just stay there, suspended in those moments. But they are lost, just as you are to me. Stuck in a place beyond my reach. The rain crashed against the hospital window, as a single mother sat in a contorted position on the bed. She was alone, except for the baby growing inside of her. That girl was your grandmother, Mabel. It was a Tuesday in Valencia when my mother named me Anita after the famous singer. She had suffered after my birth. But soon I would become her solace, her family having abandoned her. I never knew my father. He never held me or taught me how to ride a bike. My mother never even mentioned him. Only years down the line, when I turned 17, did I learn about the nature of my conception. It wasn’t immaculate nor was it consensual. I was a product of my mother’s pain, a reminder of her rape. Your conception and birth were quite different. They were done in Love. Eventually your grandmother grew to love me, but I loved you from the moment I saw you.

You were wrapped in a blue polyester blanket with large grey eyes and long fingers. You were beautiful, just like your father. I'd like to imagine you still are. I watched your eyes blink open as you began to shriek in awe of your new senses. They placed you in my arms and since then, I haven't been able to let go. But before your birth, I knew a different life. I remember it was a Thursday when I met him. I was reading the Princess of Cleves, the same book I read to you when you were a child. I traced my fingers along the crisp white pages, retracing where I had left off. There was a boy there in his early 20's; around my age. He was wandering aimlessly around the coffee shop. You could tell he was alone. There was something offsetting about his appearance. Sure enough, he noticed me. Sitting by myself towards the window. I tried to fake aloofness but he knew I could see him even if it wasn't in the way he needed me to. "That's quite a book," I looked up at him, with a confused look as if I didn't know what he was talking about. I could see in his expression that he began to doubt himself and it was then that I responded, "yes, it is quite a book." I looked down and continued reading. I often look back at that day with regret. All he needed was someone to talk to. He stared at me as I read, attempting conversation every few minutes. "My name is Javi, I live upstairs." But his words meant nothing to me. Instead of entertaining him, I moved seats to the bar by the window. It was only later, that I noticed the empty look he had in his eyes. How was I so consumed with myself? How was the whole coffee shop so consumed with themselves? That none of us even cared to notice a young boy with an empty look. His face was like death.

As I write this to you, tears have settled at the rim of my eyelids. Only because I do not wish to revisit what happens next.

An hour later, I sat in the same position by the window. Looking out onto the street in front of the shop. I had just finished my book. It was then, that I noticed a dark figure falling through the air. I looked to see where it landed but couldn't. Then came the screams and the ambulances red lights. I grabbed my book and for the first time I actually looked. It was the boy. His face bloodied by the sidewalk. He was dead. Dead and still alone. My mind raced to only an hour earlier when the boy had tried to speak to me. What if I would've just been there, in the moment? Been kind to him. Now all I could see was his face and his broken body. I passed out from the shock, only to wake up in an ambulance bed. I screamed the boy's name. I think he said it was Javi. "Javi, Javi, Javi." A name that would haunt me. I wonder if he heard me screaming his name; I wonder if he forgives me. Now begins the next phase of my life, one that leads me back to you. After the screaming, they injected me with a tranquilizer. Then I saw him. Those familiar grey eyes against tan skin. His nose wrinkled in discomfort when he pushed the needle into my vein. Then he turned to me with a look of understanding. It was as if he knew my secret. The hospital's walls looked different. I began to notice the emptiness of the white walls; I began to feel life. I fell asleep again, only to wake up to the sounds of my screaming. The dark figure, the crash, the boy's twisted body. The nightmares stayed with me until your birth. And Javi has stayed with me ever since. The day I was to be discharged from the hospital, those grey eyes revisited me. "How are you feeling?" I stared at him, bemused. He had the face of a little kid with a deep husky voice. He explained to that he was an EMT and that this visit was unsolicited. "I'm better, but everything feels different. I'm finally seeing." A look of bewilderment aged his face and then he smiled. A smile that made me feel at ease. Do you remember that smile?

He walked me out of the hospital and as we departed, he asked me for my number. I agreed. “By the way, my name is Andrea by the way.” I laughed as I shook my head in understanding. “I’m Anita.” It took your father exactly a week to call me. And when he did I had finally returned to normal. The nightmares had become more infrequent and instead all I could think about were those grey eyes and that smile. He invited me to me to lunch by the market at San Miguel. We were to meet there at noon. I went into my closet and pulled out a peach dress. It stopped just above my knee. Your grandmother had picked it out for me before she died. I matched it with tan espadrilles and ran out of the door. It was already noon. On my way to the market, I passed by my favorite building and ended up in front of my favorite store, an old picture shop. It was abandoned, but the photos still hung like memories in the windows. Gangs of kids now hung out in front of the shop, using the pictures as the backdrop to their delinquency. Mothers passed by with their children in strollers only to turn their gaze. But once in a while an old man would stop in front of the neglected windows and stares at the pictures for hours. Perhaps it is his admiration that keeps the walls from crumbling. I wonder if he knew I was watching him; whether he noticed me too. It was 15 minutes past noon and I still hadn’t arrived to Market to meet your father.

To be continued...