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You either laugh or cry

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YOU EITHER LAUGH OR CRY

A Thesis

by

LAURA ESPINOZA

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2016

Major Subject: Creative Writing

YOU EITHER LAUGH OR CRY

A Thesis
by
LAURA ESPINOZA

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May 2016

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ABSTRACT

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You Either Laugh or Cry is a collection of bilingual flash non-fiction stories. Through the use of language the writer has employed code switching and humor to retell memories of her of childhood through young adulthood. Although the collection includes various members of the writer's family, the short-shorts mainly focus on the mother-daughter relationship.

DEDICATION

For my family who lives in these stories and my friends that never get tired of hearing me tell them. Thank you for being a part of my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to those that have contributed their time and advice in mentoring me through this journey. Jean Braithwaite, my thesis committee chairperson, thank you for your patience, praise, and the creative freedom you allowed me to have and explore. Thank you for not giving up on me when at times I gave up on myself. Emmy Pérez and Deborah Cole, my committee members, thank you for accepting my invitation to be a part of this project. Professor Pérez I have always appreciated your time and valued your input. Dr. Cole, I admire your kind words and positivity, again thank you.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

You Either Laugh or Cry is a bilingual contribution to the flash nonfiction genre. This collection is a compilation of short-short nonfiction stories although not seen in the traditional sense of the word ‘stories’. These short-shorts have often times been referred to as prose poetry, which I will later explain the association and distinction in more detail. Short-short nonfiction stories also may go by slight variations of the same name like micro nonfiction stories and nano-nonfiction stories, amongst many others. These labels have all been assigned to the genre because they are inclusive of the essential nature of very brief storytelling-like writing. From this point forward individual pieces in this collection will be referred to as a short-short and the use of the word “story” will be used in the context of communicating the idea of a narrative that is found in the short-shorts and does not suggest to follow a traditional sequence of events. Also my use of “story” does not signal a change in the genre I have established for this collection.

In regards to the narrative element in the short-shorts I recognize that because of my experimentation with form and chronological structure the short-shorts can understandably appear to come across to a reader as “confused in some way”, as used by J.R. Rayfield in his article “What is a Story?”, is descriptive of something that refers to itself as narrative but lacks the logical organization of structure. Rayfield claims that upon encountering this confused structure a reader will “intuitively reject” the narrative as a story (Rayfield, 1087). I argue that

this is not always the case. The short-shorts in this collection are purely narrative in their nature and can be called stories regardless of their unusual plot development. I believe if a reader so chooses to he or she will encounter the story that I am trying to tell. The ability to appreciate my “confused” narrative depends on the reader’s willingness to accept the discomfort of breaking away from their own norms and expectations. Rayfield also adds that a story must exhibit “a certain degree of complexity”, but must not be “too simple or too complicated” or again it will be rejected. Although the degree of complexity seems rather subjective to define, I believe that a story can exist even in the smallest degrees of complexity. Julio Ortega, as mentioned by Robert Shapard in his article “The Remarkable Reinvention of Very Short Fiction”, illustrates an explanation of the ways in which a story can exist in something as minimal and basic as a sentence. Ortega as referenced by Shapard:

“The first story ever, I read somewhere, appears on an ancient Egyptian tablet and declares that “John went out on a trip.” How do we know this is a flash fiction and not a document? Because no one during that time period could have left his town on his own will. Moreover, it encapsulates the high rhetoric of sudden fiction: it has a character (I call him “John,” but he has one thousand names); there is a dominant action (the storytelling is fully present); and what is shown or said happens in time. Not less important, it announces the very rule of any story—the breaking of a code. John is an adventurer who stands against authority and decides to leave, to explore, to know”(Shepard, 49).

Lydia Davis, who has garnered much attention and criticism for her very brief and unusual writing style, has argued in regards to her own work “even if the thing is only a line or two, there is always a little fragment of narrative there, or the reader can turn away and imagine a

larger narrative” (Skidelsky). She claims this larger narrative is why she allows herself to be “getting away with calling them stories” (Skidelsky). The larger narrative that I believe Davis refers to can be seen in Ortega’s reaction as he arrives to his own conclusion of John. In the insights given of Ortega situation, we can see how he reflects through his interpretation of the text. He shows us how he has understood John as a man with a story that he has largely imagined and created for himself. It is because of our inferencing skills and creativity that we can break that code of a story and make room for a story to establish itself in our mind, but again this depends on how much work a reader feels he is willing to do for the text.

These larger narratives are not something new that writers have worked with. This specific genre can be referred to as Six Word Memoirs or Six Word Stories. Most famous for writing a six word story is Ernest Hemingway “For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn”. Other writers of this form have also helped shape a new perspective on the traditional sense of the word story. Although I personally do not practice in the six word form or genre I am fascinated with what little a writer can offer a reader and how in spite of the minimal textual support an experience still unravels for a reader and the story develops as far as they wish.

These stories that I write are memories that I have been crafted and shaped into short-shorts and arranged in such a way that I intend for their arrangement to also advance the idea of a larger narrative. In the introduction to the fictional autobioethnography *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, Norma Elia Cantu refers to her book as a “collage of stories” (Cantu, xii). Cantu’s collage presentation of her stories, is one that I too use have used for my collection, and functions similarly to the ways Cantu shows a bigger picture of her stories. This bigger picture is almost like a separate rendition of the short-shorts because collectively the short-shorts

bring in their own piece of information and the reader must then make a separate judgment of what story they tell when they are working together towards telling a larger story.

To further the conversation of defining the genre for this collection I believe word count should factor in to what is recognized as a short-short. Word count can respectably range between one hundred to eight hundred words. According to publisher guidelines for submissions the exact number of words will vary in terms of what qualifies or can be considered a short-short. Because of the many separate flash nonfiction literary circles, these communities have each adapted their own standard for word count. *Brevity: A Journal for Concise Literary Nonfiction* caps a short at seven hundred and fifty words, a limit imposed by the editor. Dinty W. Moore has shaped this standard by the accord of his own discretion as he has mentioned in interviews. *Hippocampus Literary Journal*, also a venue for flash nonfiction, determined an eight hundred and fifty word maximum. The comparison between venues is to highlight the lack of a set and definite length for short-shorts, but also to show that there is a kind of general consensus amongst the writers, publishers, and readers of the genre. In regards to my collection the word count per short-short ranges from thirty words to six hundred and fifty. I strive to narrow that range as a challenge that I set for myself. Experimenting with word count has enhanced the experience of crafting short-shorts and because of these experiences I have been curious to explore other areas of the flash genres.

While crafting a short-short there is always an awareness of word economy and the awareness of creating within a tight and limited space. This to me is comparable to the ways in which a poet positions herself as she constructs a poem. We both approach words with a careful inspection and a vision for each one as we simultaneously respond to our own emotions that come with some internal urgency to express themselves and can communicate to others. Word

sensitivity or the ability to weigh and filter words is as necessary to a poet as it is to a writer of short-shorts. Perhaps this is the beginning of the relationship that exists between prose poetry and short-shorts. Most recently a professor of mine suggested people have often said that prose poetry and flash fiction are kissing cousins and through that kinship I feel they often get interchanged for each other.

It is worth mentioning that throughout the course of creating this collection, I too at one point addressed the short-shorts as prose poems. In fact I initially labeled this a collection of short stories, which only caused my professors to become rather confused and perhaps a bit concerned because what I was labeling the collection to be did not match the contents in the box. So that is when I swayed towards reclassifying the short-shorts as prose poems. But even that did not seem fitting. This is not to say in any way that these short-shorts do not borrow or exhibit traits of prose poetry, if anything the use of sensory details, imagery, and expressive language in this case both English and Spanish enrich the story and can take credit for that appeal. In my rejection of referring to this collection as prose poems I simply suggest that I do not find it appropriate to hold the short-shorts according to the standards and expectation of what a reader would have for a prose poem. My short-short stories are paragraphs so condensed with dialogue and dialogue tags that this too strays away from the reading expectation a reader might have if they are expecting to be reading prose poetry, and this dialogue is what drives these short-short stories away from a poem.

I do not want to lead a reader to give short-shorts credit for prose poetry or even take away credit if the reader feels the short-shorts lack poetic essentials. At the same time I cannot avoid addressing what has transpired on the page and I had to give my artistic creation an identity and validation. These things that I have called stories must own their own name and a

place to exist. I am happy to say that they have since the beginning of their journey found a name and home in the creative sphere of flash nonfiction short-shorts.

Language

As a bilingual writer I have found that having a Spanish and English vocabulary is an advantage and a supplemental resources that I have available at my disposal. Being bilingual has helped me use language to create better representations of the people in my stories. This has also given the stories a sense of higher authenticity and has added more quality to the overall narrative of the collection. Through my research on bilingual flash nonfiction short-shorts I have come across a very scare amount of analysis that helps explain the role and purpose of language. I did however find that the best way to explain language as used in my collection is through a discourse centered on code-switching in bilingual Chicano poetry.

Guadalupe Valdes Fallis in “Code-Switching in Bilingual Chicano Poetry” suggests that the poet, in my case the writer and will from this point on be substituted for her use of poet, is granted a much larger playing field in terms of choices for creation. A writer “can at any point in the poem choose to foreground in the language, which to him, offers the greatest possibilities” (Fallis, 884). This choice between languages and the implied connection of knowing which of many words and arrangement of words can “offer the greatest possibilities” is something that is special and unique to a bilingual writer. I embrace the ability to roam through different territories of language to advocate for a story that wants to be told. Picking and choosing from two languages allowed me preserve that story as closely and carefully as possible. .

Another advantage Fallis states is that a bilingual writer “does not have to sacrifice the aesthetic potential of either of his codes” (Fallis, 884-885). I considered this an extra form of

freedom because I was able to create the short-shorts without having to compromise the voice and dialogue of the people in these stories. I attribute the success and authenticity of the people to my ability of being able to have worked through both English and Spanish. This advantage served my characters as well because it allowed them to be genuine representations of themselves. I honored their language and forms of speech and kept it in its natural state. This I feel has been the spirit of this collection. I expect this to bring my readers pleasure in listening the different voices and sounds aside from my own narrator voice.

At some point in this discussion it is also important to explain my intention behind the use of code-switching as it is very much a part of what gives a bilingual writer the advantages that it does. Esmeralda Santiago, as quoted by Fallis from an external source, says “Any word that’s in Spanish in my English texts is not there by accident, or because I couldn’t figure out how to translate it, but rather because it has a resonance in Spanish that it does not have in English” (qtd. in Kevane and Heredia, 135). It is critical for this to be understood in regards to my own creative efforts. As the writer I could have easily substituted Spanish words or phrases for something in English, but that in itself would have created an entirely different product. I too recognize through my own awareness and understanding of this “resonance” that it is something that significantly influences the creative processes of a bilingual writer. Our decisions are shaped in accordance to our sensitivity of two languages that we try to work together in harmony for both beauty and purpose.

When asked about the role of Spanish in her work Pat Mora said she was interested in including Spanish because “it is part of my world, it’s part of my mind” (Mermann-Jozwiak,143). I feel her response shows how as a bilingual Mexican-American writer we not only make a conscious decisions to include Spanish alongside English, but that with our

decisions this is also a reflection of a bilingual world that we know. As bilingual writers we include both languages knowingly and share that part of this world with readers. Sometimes this can seem to be an invitation to a reader, but it can also easily create a barrier for others. In these cases the decision is left to each individual bilingual writer as to how accessible he/she wants to be. As for the short-stories in this collection I feel the use of language personalizes these stories as my own and has given me very much freedom to tell a story my way.

Future Goals and Limitations

Throughout the course of this journey that I feel creating this collection has been like, I have learned to work so very close to my short-short stories. I have learned to listen to the way a story wants itself to be told and to nurture that moment. I believe that as I continue to grow as an individual and as a writer my ability to express my stories and vision for them will continue to expand as well. With that said, I do not think all the short-short stories here will forever keep their form and shape. In the future I plan to continue experimenting with form and length and look forward to creating new pieces to this collection, as I feel the collage arrangement of these short-short stories leaves room for more additional work. To this point, what I feel most comfortable with is finally finding an outlet for my creativity and a genre that I can work in and work towards mastering. In relationship to that, a goal of mine is to dig deeper into this genre and associate myself more intimately with other writers of this field and to study their work. I would also like to keep current on literary criticism that keeps the conversation of flash nonfiction going. I also feel that it is just as important to acquaint myself with others that may not fit into the flash genre. Many of the readings that have influenced my understanding and study of a story and dialogue have been through fiction, creative non-fiction in the form of short stories or essays, and poetry.

Another goal for artistic growth that I consider of importance is to better associate myself with other Mexican-American writers and study their different ways of integrating two languages. I want to further understand how other Latino writers create and share stories that belong to our culture. While working to create my short-short stories I found it necessary to always continue wanting to understand myself better through exploring the parts of me that can connect with others who share the stories of our Latin backgrounds. I encourage myself to be open and willing to navigate through the Latino writing community.

To this I also encourage myself to truly establish myself as a writer and grow the strength and courage I need to put myself out there. I believe these little stories of mine will one day soon see that light.

CHAPTER II

YOU EITHER LAUGH OR CRY

Qué Lástima

Every Sunday I'd bring her a plate of fresh fruit and we'd talk about her medications. "These drops are for my glaucoma," she'd say as she tightened the cap on the bottle. Then she picked up a can that she liked to rattle before handing to me.

"A stronger dose?" I asked.

"Si," she replied and took it from my hand to swap it out for a pair of syringes. "*El doctor tambien me enseñó algo.*"

"What?"

She pinched a fold of fat from her stomach. "It's all about the angle of the needle," she said as she took a syringe from my hand and pretended to inject herself with insulin.

To change subjects I'd bring up current events. "Mom, did you hear about that kid somewhere upstate that took a gun to school and killed his classmates and his teacher?" She huffed. "You know why kids are going crazy and killing people," she asked me without leaving time for a response. "Because their parents don't hit them *con el cinto*. You have to discipline them when they're young because if not, look: *crecen y se vuelven locos*. Their parents don't care, *no les importa. Ya vez.*"

The following weekend she asked me, "*¿oiste de el otro niño*, he went to school and started shooting at his classmates *y tambien la maestra?*" She straightened herself up. "Laura, *sabes por qué estan todos locos? Porque los padres los tienen menos de tanto trancazo. Qué lástima,*" she said while she shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head.

No Mas Un Poquito

In the early hours of the morning a cool breeze sweeps through the window in the kitchen and it carries the aroma of coffee and sweet bread throughout the house. “*Quiéres un cafésito con un panesito?*” mom asks while nudging a plate of sweet bread across the table. “*Aqui estan tus favoritas, las empanaditas de calabaza.*” I take one. Then one more.

Noon arrives and the scent in the air is now a combination of *arroz*, beans, tortillas and fajitas. “*Quieres otro plato?*” I want to say no, but I also don’t want to hurt her feelings. “*Si, otro plato de taquitos.*” She smiles and gaily walks back to the stove. From the table I eat my last taco and watch her working her magic, flipping tortillas with her bare hands upon an open flame all while juggling three other burners. Mom returns with a fresh plate of tacos, “*¿Quieres mas arrozito tambien?*” she asks. “No, *estoy bien.*” Mom scrunches her eyebrows looking puzzled and concerned. “*¿Estas enamorada o enferma?*” she asks. I smile and confess I’m not in love. “*Andale, come más, acabo es poquito.*” Before I can say no again, mom quickly brings a spoon full of rice and makes a neat place for it on my plate.

Tía at Bingo

Through the clouds of smoke I watch her set up her shrine. A Buda. A Christ. A cross without a Christ. And a small sachet of her gambler's potpourri. "*No le digas a tu tío, pero alguien me lo dio,*" she says as she points with her eyes at the lady sitting next to her. Tonight, Tía will play two hundred dollars of her disability check and an extra hundred that her daughter, Suzy gave her for Christmas. By the end of the night, Tia makes a five hundred dollar profit. "It's just for fun," she says while rolling her eyes and counting her winnings. "What else can I do if I can't work? *Mira mi mano,*" and shows me her hand with a scar that circles her thumb as it runs down to her palm. "*No puedo hacer nada. I play bingo nomas para pasar el tiempo.*"

Mexican Women Writing Fortune Cookies

If my mom and tías wrote fortune cookie messages they'd say: *te dije*, and the numbers on the back will be the routing number to her bank account because for some reason money will always show her that you love her and *no te olvidaste que tienes una madre*. Eventually the tías will decide to delete the numbers on the back because they'll need more space to continue their advice. They would revamp the cookie strip by adding predictions (because all Mexican women have a spiritual gift for predicting the future) and the other side would be a warning. The front would say: a new love is about to waltz into your life. The back side will read: *pero ten cuidado con los hombres*.

La Pansa y Las Manos

My mom can read a man's beer belly as if it were a crystal ball. As she concentrates in silence, something awakens within and she is able to tell you about this man. Somehow she can see if he is married and if he's been faithful to his wife. When it seems to get a bit hazy she has trouble making out the ages of the children. "*La pansa y tambien las manos,*" she tells me, "*eso te dice si es un hombre soltero y trabajador.*" I cannot see that or get past the bloat and roundness of his belly.

Government Checks

“It’s because people, *la gente*, they receive a social security check because they claim their children are retarded.” Mom rocks herself on the *mesadora* as she gazes towards an empty space between the mesquite trees to catch a glimpse of the expressway and watch the cars zoom by. She seems mesmerized by the buzzing sound of speed, but continues, “*Pues gracias a Dios que yo nunca dije que ustedes eran retarded.*”

“Mom, that’s not the point,” I say.

Suddenly there’s a brief moment of silence. She looks over at the neighbors’ porch cluttered with about twenty or so little flowers still in the same cheap plastic pots they came in.

“Mom, you know we’re not retarded,” I tell her.

“*Pero todavia, Laura, no lo dije, ni por dinero.*”

In Her Opinion

“*Nadien te quiere cuando no tienes nada que dar,*” Mom says. “It’s the same thing they do to soldiers when they return from war without arms or legs, sometimes not even a face. *Nunca quedan bien,*” she adds.

I sit next to her not knowing what to say.

“They need someone to help them. But no one does. *Si ni a ellos los ayudan, menos a mi,*” she says. I watch her try to get out of bed, but she struggles to lift herself.

“*Ayudame, Laura.*”

I reach out to help her, but she stiffens her body and I let go. “*¿Por qué me dejas caer?*” she asks with a tone of frustration and disappointment. “Mom, I’m trying, but you’re a little too heavy for me,” I confess. “*Entonces dejame, lo puedo hacerlo sola,*” she moans and grabs hold of the headboard. I take a step backwards into a corner and feel helpless watching her squirm in her bed struggling.

“Do you want me to help you?” I ask.

“*No puedes, Laura. Dejame.*”

Blessed

She believed God spoke through the random people we crossed on the street who went out of their way to stop us and say, “*Dios te bendiga.*”

A Jesus Fish

“*Sin dinero pero con mucho cheque,*” she teases herself. “Laura, I need you to reorder checks for me,” she demands and gives me an insert from Sunday’s paper. “There’s one with cute, shabby little angels. What do you think?” she asks.

“They’re called cherubs, Mom.”

“*Si esos.* I also like the one with the serenity prayer and the gold cross. It’s so shiny.”

“We’re not getting you any of those.”

“*Hay* Laura, *por que?*”

“*Puro de dios pero hablan de todos,*” I remind her. “You can’t just pick and choose when you want to be godly.”

She looks down as she pouts then turns away. I give in just a little. “Fine, you can have this one,” and I point to the picture of a simple, white check with a small Jesus Fish in the corner. “That’s as far as I will let you go.”

“*Hay,* Laura. Ok.”

Perdóname Dios

My mother rarely curses, but when she does she always asks for God's forgiveness first:

"Dije, perdóname Dios, pero this lady es una bitch."

The Dentist Appointment I

I am a very impatient driver and also suffer from anxiety when my mother is sitting in the passenger seat taking on the role of a driver's ed instructor. To make things worse I am not a morning person, but I have a dentist appointment in Nuevo Progreso, México. México rolls off the tongue like such a grand and faraway place, but really it's only a forty minute drive from home. Still, I could have used those forty minutes to sleep.

After twenty minutes I find myself taking an unexpected detour. I follow the road signs like a game of connect the dots. I go from this one to that one and wait again for the next one. My mother's questions about directions and her concerns over time happen about every three minutes. "*Vamos a llegar tarde, Laura,*" she reminds me as if I don't already know. I glare at her from the side of my eye and continue driving. She stops talking and plays with her hands or things she finds in her purse.

We continue to drive past miles and miles of farmland on the outskirts of Weslaco. The fields look picturesque with freshly tilled soil and a veil of fog lingering over what seems to be infinite rows. In a sudden moment of calmness I admire the view. Mother breaks the silence. "*La tierra está lista para sembrar,*" she says.

She made me remember the days we spent in the strawberry fields of California and how she'd have to take my brother and I with her even if we were too young to help.

"Si, es verdad," I agree.

The Dentist Appointment II

The dentist appointment is over. I have braces...again. My mouth starts to feel the pressure of my teeth being tied together. I regret not wearing my retainers like the dentist recommended the first time.

As mom and I begin to walk on to the crossover bridge that takes us back in to the United States, I know I should have worn an extra sweater and remembered to bring a pair of gloves. I bow my head to soften the blows of the cold winds slashing my face. I tuck my hands in my jean pockets and find spare change from tips I had forgotten about. As I the rub the change together I hear a muffled choir of women and children wailing coming from down below. I cannot fully see them though, because for aesthetic purposes it seems more tourist friendly to board up the cutout spaces between the cement barriers that line the edges of the bridge. But sometimes you will see through the small cracks in the boards a glimpse of the women and children holding up their makeshift bowls cut from empty milk jugs.

The pain in my mouth grows to a new level of discomfort. As I bite down I grind my molars together even if I know will hurt like hell. But the weather is so cold it seems clenching my teeth is just an involuntary reaction anyway. I continue to warm my hands in my pockets and continue to fiddle with the coins. I think about throwing them down into the beggars' bowls, but I don't and secretly feel guilty.

Mom and I reach the boundary sign over the Rio Grande. I notice her feet stop as they face an adjacent angle to mine. She pauses for a moment to look at the river, but I stand there quietly without looking up. I continue shivering and clenching my teeth as I listen to the far away cries of hunger.

Sunday I

As we eat our fruit together in her room, we watch t.v. Throughout the show mom fills me in with gossip she's heard about the actors.

“Dicen que ellá se esta divorciando. Que tiene otro.”

I pretend to be listening as I pick at my fruit.

“Are you still watching t.v. with me, Laura?” I know she's not really asking, but instead reminding me to focus or at least appear to be a little more interested. “And this lady,” mom continues, “she's married to the man that used to be married to the woman who...”

I pop a piece of watermelon in to my mouth.

“*Mira,*” mom says as she points to the t.v. with her plastic fork. I look up and all I see is a man with a bowl haircut, painted freckles and dressed like a clown. He attempts running on to the stage.

“Why is he so slow?” I ask her.

“*Esta viejito,*” mom replies, “*como yo*” as she looks down and picks at her fruit.

Sunday II

Sometimes she makes me watch La Voz Kids, a Spanish version of the English singing competition show known as The Voice. Like always, she gives me extra tidbits of information about the judges which I am told are famous celebrities in Mexico and in a few parts of the U.S. Still I know nothing about them and cringe every time I hear the lady with the fake boobs speak through her nose and with a lisp.

“Todavía me estas poniendo atención, Laura,” mom asks.

La Voz Kids

I don't know what the difference is between La Voz Kids and the local McAllen channel broadcasting Fields Elementary's talent show. When my mom flips through the channels she sometimes comes across the reruns of the talent show and quickly becomes frustrated and claims it is boring. "*Todos quieren cantar. Que hagan otra cosa.* Everyone's the same. *No tienen chiste,*" she says as she looks over at me just to make sure I'm still paying attention. "*¿No crees, Laura?*" I simply just nod and try to smile as I've pop a chunk of pineapple in my mouth.

Grandpa's Ghost is Knocking on the Door

My cousins Vanessa and Angie and I sit at King Arthur's roundtable of tías. The topics of conversation are first gossip then sharing memories of our grandpa and grandma. Then things get to the point that they usually do at the table: the level of supernatural and superstitious.

Vanessa chimes in, "I think I hear someone knocking on the door at night." Her eyes widen, "I think it's grandpa."

Things abruptly get quiet. I look at Angie who sits there grinning.

"That'd be awesome if it were grandpa," I say.

Vanessa's mom plays it off, "It's probably the wind making those sounds, Vanessa."

My mom dons a bothered expression as she stares at Vanessa. "*Entonces si es él, abre la puerta. This is his house. Eso no te debe de dar miedo,*" mom blurts out. Then she redirects the conversation to our next topic: more apparitions.

Neighborhood Personalities

Mom and tía Toñia called Doña Rebecca “Ethel” after the character in I Love Lucy because she was always into everyone’s business. Ethel was the unofficial neighborhood watch, but although she watched everything she didn’t always watch out for everybody. Especially, *La Viuda*. According to my mom *La Viuda* and Ethel always hated each other because of a vicious rumor *La Viuda* had allegedly started about Ethel’s husband having an affair with a lady down the street. To this day, Ethel stands her claim that *La Viuda* is a *bruja*.

Then there was Bald Eagle. He earned his nickname because he was balding from the crown of his head. Like everyone else on the block, he too needed a nickname. Of all the people in the world we could have lived next to, Bald Eagle was the man whose cousin was shot by my father in a gunfight back in Mexico. That explained the cedar fence that blocked us from seeing each other, the same one that over time was replaced by a taller wall of cinder blocks.

The direct neighbor across the street was nicknamed Peeping Tom. Peeping Tom’s parents left him the house. According to my mom, the house was built in a hole. “*No vez que se esta undiendo. La hicieron sin aver emparejado la tierra,*” she’d say. Peeping Tom was a strange guy. He carried himself like a playboy, always bringing home raunchy bar women that he’d stay up with while he barbequed and played *corridos*. When he wasn’t entertaining the ladies, he’d spend hours by his front window and door looking out as if he was waiting for someone, but it was rare that someone would stop to visit.

I can’t forget Alex, a.k.a Pimple Face, and his girlfriend Wendy. Her real name was Patty, but my cousins and I thought she looked more like what we imagined a Wendy to be: short, chubby, and always happy. Pimple Face lived in the only two story house on the block. He

had a big family, three brothers and four sisters. They eventually moved out and only came around during holidays. After Pimple Face's father committed suicide in the storage shed behind his house there were years that the house was abandoned. Then finally Pimple Face and his mother moved back. I will never forget that 4th of July when Pimple Face went to check his mailbox and at the same time my brother lit a black cat firecracker, nothing fancy, just a loud boom. As Pimple Face heard the blast he frantically shut the mailbox, jumped back and looked around as if he thought he'd been caught on hidden camera, only to find five, chubby kids out on their front porch eating watermelon and giggling under their breath.

Chubby Kids Stuck in a Tree

As mom comes out to the backyard, the wooden screen door makes a loud slap as it hits the the doorframe. This gives us hope that someone is out here and could hopefully help us get out of this tree.

“Mom, we can’t get down.”

Mom looks up at us from the corner of her eye, but she says nothing. She begins to blindly dig into the bag of clothes pins for yet another one. She is already holding one with her teeth and another one with the hand she is using to place the sleeve of a t-shirt on the *lazo*.

“We’re stuck. Help!” We plea again.

She doesn’t stop what she’s doing or slow down either. It’s a dance from one end of the *lazo* to the other, then on to the next row.

“Help! Mom!”

She is seemingly upset now and even from up here you can hear her taking in deeper breaths and can see her chest rising. “*Estoy ocupada,*” she yells up at us, “*en la manera en que se subieron, ahora se abajan.*” She bends over and reaches in to the basket for the last pair of pants to hang.

“Mom!”

As if we were ghosts she walks away pretending to not have seen us. We know we have to do something to help ourselves. “If the way we got up here was climbing, we should do that to get down,” I think. But in desperation we jump down and our little chubby bodies hit the ground. Our cries are a mix of giggles and groans.

Watermelons

Grandpa would let me jump onto the bed of the old Ford pickup truck that slowly drove around the neighborhood selling watermelons early in the summer evenings. As the old blue truck stop I'd hop and grandpa would say pick "the beeeesssst watermelon." And even if I did not know what I was doing I imitated his look when he chose his. The good news he never cared how bitter or sweet the watermelon turned out to be. He would still say, "You picked the beeeesssst one!"

Roses

When my grandmother was alive, the yard was alive with her. There wasn't an empty patch of carpet grass anywhere. The trees were always pruned and the leaves always raked. Grandma's favorite *rosales* were planted alongside the walkway that led up to the porch stairs.

There are times now that my mom and I are out running errands and like always she makes friends with the strangers next to her. Somehow their conversations lead up to talking about roses or their mothers and in a dreamy stare mom says, "*mi mama, cómo adoraba sus rosales.*"

"I'm glad Grandma is not here to see what has happened to her yard," I tell her when we get back into the car. The soil has turned into sand and there are several burned patches of weeds. Plants like Oleanders, the mini palm tree and *los dos pinos* are the only ones that have survived our negligence and the deep South Texas drought.

It is only when it rains that hundreds of little weeds wildly sprout everywhere giving the impression of grass. This is as close we can get to remember what once was, except the weeds will soon get scorched and even they will not survive this desert of a yard.

Mom as Grandma

“Mom, when and if I ever decide to have children, will you take care of them?”

She huffs midway a small laugh, “*apenas me puedo cuidar yo.*”

A Woman of Her Word

When she said you were going to get it: you got it. “*Vas a ver cuando lleguemos a la casa,*” even though I’d fake being asleep in the backseat of the car on the way home, she kept her promise. I was awakened by the fiery lash of a belt.

“*Ven para aca.*” As if I would walk right up to her and turn myself in. “If you want to hit me, then catch me,” I thought. Sure enough after a few laps around the house I’d tire myself out and she’d still be standing there, belt in hand and looking more furious than before.

“*Quiéres dormir calentita?*” she’d ask me. The answer is don’t answer. Don’t say yes or no. Mom was not asking, but giving me a warning that whatever obnoxious thing I was doing better stop. “*Te voy a pegar, no estoy jugando contigo.*” In the blink of an eye, there was the slap of the belt across my thighs.

Home Remedies

She said she always had the luck of having to share a bed with a bed-wetter. My tía Chela, her younger sister used to wet the bed too.

Mom tried every home remedy she knew or was told about: teas, oils, warm massages over my belly, and reminding me she wouldn't mind if I woke her up at three in the morning, “*no tengas miedo, yo te llevo.*” And when all else failed: *el cinto*.

Sometimes the urge to pee would wake me. Then I'd wake her. She'd stumble out of bed and walk me over to the bathroom. She'd turn the lights on and peek in as a way of letting me know the coast was clear. I'd do my business and we'd go back to bed.

Other times, most of the times, there was not a waking urge to pee. We would wake up in soaked bed sheets. Then I'd be surprised by the hot slash of the belt against my thighs.

None of her home remedies ever helped solve the problem, one day I just stopped wetting the bed. I bet she thanks *el cinto*.

A Memory of Being Five

I remember changing into a gown that felt like cheap toilet paper. The type that easily breaks with water and makes a rustling sound when it crumples. The hospital room was cold and dim. Mom was sitting by a table and handed me a small, white paper cup with a rose colored liquid that looked too thick to swallow. “*Ándale, como si fuera agua,*” she said. “*Van a ver dentro de ti, haber si encuentran algo.*” I took the cup from her hands even if I was frightened. I wanted to show her I was brave. I gulped down the chalky, cherry-flavored liquid. Then I was laid on a bed that slowly moved into a revolving tube, my body was tense with fear and pride.

A Memory of Being Four

I would open car doors while my mother drove that big, green, clunky car around town. It first happened at a stop sign in our neighborhood. I don't think I was ever going to get off because I never did. Then this curiosity escalated on to faster roads, but only once on the expressway. I can imagine her panic as she was also just learning to drive. When my father left her she had no choice but to learn to drive the car.

Back in Texas

As a child I lived in a four bedroom house with ten other people. There was always at least three dogs around, but only one of everything else like a bathroom. It wasn't easy living with so many tías and cousins, but there was always someone in your own age group to fight or play with. But even after fights we'd be friends again because we were cousins and you can't uncousin someone. We were also a group of cousins that shared more than just our toys and t.v. We shared the same two last names. Our mothers chose to marry a group of men they met while working in the fields of California. These men were the Espinozas, all cousins. In some time, the three sisters would become pregnant. Soon after that they'd all end up single mothers living back in Texas with their parents. Those cowards ran off to Mexico.

Veladoras

The glow of the *veladoras* illuminated the corner of our bedroom. My brother didn't seem to care and mom would pretend they weren't there. Couldn't she feel the heat coming off of them? As if it weren't bad enough that we didn't have an air conditioner and it was the middle of summer in the Rio Grande Valley. Did she really not notice how the flame charred the wall with its smoke ribbons? Maybe I was the only one that heard the noise of the empty Coca-Cola cans that she used to put them out in the morning. Maybe I was the only one who saw our pictures bound with red thread and placed next to one of my father which were all tucked away between three *veladoras*.

Sibling Rivalry

I always felt she loved him more than she loved me because I didn't see as many pictures of me in her room. On her dusty dresser she made a shrine of his pictures, everything from elementary school proofs to his food handler's card. She decorated the shrine with St. Jude figurines, prayer cards, rosaries, and a crucifix. Sometimes they would be surrounded by loose change that she'd collect to later donate at church. Gazing at his shrine brought upon a sense of sadness and silence, making you to behave the way one does at a cemetery. Except he wasn't dead. He was in the room next to hers. What about her sorrow made me feel second place? Why would I feel jealous that she might not weep for me too each time she mentioned my name in her prayers?

We Knew that We Knew

Mom and I never talked about *it* even though we both knew what *it* was. We never used the proper words or used any cute nicknames for *it* either. It was just called “down there”. And you knew where because the first time I didn’t her eyes quickly ran down my body and stopped at a place that made me feel uncomfortable. As her eyes looked back up we both knew that we knew.

Mom never talked to me about getting my period either. So what else would I do but try to hide it. I bled off and on for the first year in middle school. Eventually I ran out of panties. Then I stopped bleeding altogether. We didn’t talk about that either.

We also didn’t talk about boys. But she talked about how much she hated men. “You have to be careful with men,” she said as she’d stare into my eyes. “They only want one thing.” And we both knew what that *thing* was.

Scared

She thought she could scare me in the sort of way she tried to when I was young, claiming that a *viejo*, usually some random old man sitting across the way in a waiting room, was going to take me. Where? I don't know. But it was away from her, my safety. She triggered this kind of fear that I would wholeheartedly believe would really happen. And not only could this happen, but that there was something about my behavior that would make it happen. I always wondered why she would let him take me.

After her parents passed on and her husband walked away from the marriage she was then a single parent with two kids to support. She worked long hours as a cook at hamburger restaurant. Her struggle to keep us afloat scared me.

From time to time she seemed to remind us how alone we were. "Your dad doesn't visit you guys because he has another family." This scared me to the point of sadness which led me to believe I was unlovable. I wanted to be loveable. I wanted to be loved by her, eventually that scared me the most.

Fire Me

I always tried to get fired on weekends. I'd show up at five o'clock for the night shift wearing blue jeans instead of the required black pants. What were they going to do? Send me home? I hoped so. There was usually a rush at five o'clock and so my managers, my tía Toñia and my mom, were swamped in the kitchen. Diana, my younger cousin who also worked at the restaurant was taking orders and so I'd go over to help her, hoping my bosses would notice. "Order out!" they yelled from the kitchen. I'd grab the bag from underneath the heating lamp and place it on a tray ready to be delivered. My aunt walked to her makeshift office at the front corner of the restaurant and as she passed I noticed her looking at my blue jeans. "I know, I know, I'm not wearing my uniform, Tía," I confess. "*Ya se,*" she said. "*Tú mama también sabe,* but she said she wasn't going to let you go home. Who else is going to make the banana splits?"

Onion Ring Art

The peeling and slicing didn't make her cry anymore. In fact, she found a trick. She said if your eyes tear up all you had to do was go into the walk-in freezer and it'll go away.

After slicing the onion she'd pull each ring out from another as if turning socks inside out. I loved watching her do this because she made it look so easy when she'd go faster and never break a single ring.

The stainless steel table in the back of the restaurant was set up with three plastic tubs. One filled with flour, the other with the batter: vanilla ice cream mix, raw eggs, with a bit of salt and pepper. The third tub was pure Keebler cracker meal.

She would pick out a wet ring and shake the water off before tossing them on to the flour pan. After they left the flour, she'd bathe the ring in batter whisked to perfection. Just as the ring was ready to be tossed into the golden grain cracker meal, she ran it through a sieve. "Clumps," she said, "they ruin the presentation." Her accuracy and speed was amazing. She pulled this off every time and only got better through the course of twenty years.

After the Night Shift

I hear your tired footsteps as you drag yourself in through the front door. I listen to the clunks made over creaky floorboards and hear your jacket rubbing up against the wall as you enter the long, narrow hallway. You make your way to your bedroom and I already know when you have arrived because of the creak in the door. It's the door that squeaks the loudest in the house and also makes a small click when you shut it. A few minutes later, after you've changed out of your greasy clothes, you emerge from your room and walk to the kitchen. The smell of the burned corn husk from the tamales seeps under my door. I know you are reheating leftovers for your dinner at 2 a.m. You return to your room again, turn on the t.v. and lower the volume because you don't want to wake me in the next room.

Never

“Mom, I met somebody.”

“I don’t want to meet him,” she replies.

“Who says you’re going to meet him. That could scare him away,” I joke.

“It’s okay,” she whispers seeming to act heartbroken. She turns her face and gives me her back. “*Ni lo quiero conocer*,” she continues to mumble over her shoulder.

“Wait, you know what, mom? I do want you to meet him. When should I invite him over?” I sarcastically ask her.

“*Nunca*”, she says. “Never”, she repeats as she walks away seemingly offended.

Family and Everybody Else

I think I have been walking around in shoes, that although are beautiful, are too small and painful and lately I've been dancing. But you must know that family loves to dance at weddings. Look at that ring! It's so damn glamorous! How many carats? Oh and the dress! What a gorgeous veil! Oh and the attention! All of this attention on me. I love it! I love it! I love him!

But family and everybody else, I don't want to get married.

Family also likes cute things. The baby clothes are soooooo cute! Look at the little shoes! The bows and dresses. We can swap pregnancy stories and share sonogram pictures. Then imagine: when the baby is born we could dress her up in silly costumes or fancy outfits for so-and-so's wedding!

But family and everybody else, I may never be a mother.

Stranger

“No lo conozco, pero a escuchado cosas sobre él y no me gusta.” When mom refuses to change her preconceptions, it keeps her circle the same size. She likes it that way.

The Girl & Her Dog

My co-teacher, Mrs. Gutierrez wanted more than any of my other co-workers for me to get married already. “You need a man,” she’d say. As she laughed I’d always picture her looking like a hefty man sitting behind a bar drinking whiskey and sucking back on a cigar. “A dog can’t love you. You can’t live like that. You need a man. A life. A family. Living by yourself with a dog—*eso no es vida.*”

Irrational Fears

I fear being swallowed up by a giant sinkhole. That one day I am in my garden in and the earth suddenly swallows me up and just like that I am gone forever. I worry about my dog, Amelie and wonder who will feed her? I worry about the people that I love and wonder if they will take me back to McAllen and bury me there. But really, what are the chances that I will get sucked into the ground. I'm not even a much of gardener, although I do own a pair of gardening gloves and some succulents. But this thought shakes me a while longer until I never think of it again.

The Uninvited Scorpion

Because you are a stranger I look you over with suspicion and try to find memorable detail just in case I ever need to remember you for whatever reason. I take notice of your thin, stringy legs. With my eyes I trace the edges of your body, a translucent brown shell. Even without movement you scare me. Even if I am much bigger than you, stronger than you and have my own poisons, you scare me. I am wearing shoes and could kill you with just a little bit of courage, but I realize I can't kill you again.

What's Worse

After unveiling the carcass of the Texas Striped Bark scorpion at the show-and-tell with my first graders, the room is quickly filled with “ewwwwe.” My first graders and I research and find that this certain kind of scorpion is primarily a night creature and in comparison to other scorpion species, they like to socialize more. Great. And because they’re out and about so much, their chances of mating are better. Apparently when mating is about to happen there’s some kind of dance involved amongst the males, a showdown for lady love. I can already imagine how awkward that would be to walk into stumbling in the kitchen for a glass of water late at night. But it gets worse. We also learn that the female goes through an eight month pregnancy then gives birth to live offspring. Her back caves in like a bowl and she becomes a nest for her babies. “Ewwwwel!”

Cabrito

Never make friends with a *cabrito*. Don't pet him softly on his head or let him gaze at you with his marbled eyes and a titled head. If he nudges you with his wet, soft-pink nose asking for affection, do refrain. Because the time will come that your family will hang him by his legs upside down from a tree and slit his throat. The bleating noises will find you from far away, but if you never give him a name, perhaps the echo of his cries won't last too long in your heart before dinnertime.

Dressing for Death

I dressed myself up in a light pink, sleeveless dress with pretty pink tights and white shiny shoes. That day my mother had already been at the funeral home to greet the people at my grandpa's funeral. My brother and I arrived with our tío, Felipe. I remember after he turned the car off he got out and opened the door for me, unbuckled my seatbelt and held my hand as we walked in together. Twenty three years later, I would drive myself there for tío Felipe's rosary, except this time I was appropriately dressed for the occasion, all black.

Twenty-seven Years Later

“You guys are fine. Nothing happened to you. But you know, *dice* Dr. Phil, *que el divorcio les afecta a los niños. Pero* I don’t know, look at you guys. You don’t have problems. You’re alright. I told your brother and he said you have issues. That’s why you’re not married.”

“I’m not married because I choose not be married, Mom. But yes I do have issues. And so does he. He’s almost 30 and still lives at home with *you*. That in itself can really mess someone up too.”

Mom gasps and stares at me. Without a blink, she asks, “you have issues?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then let’s talk about them,” she suggests.

“Are you crazy! I need professional help, but I’m too broke for that so I’ll just keep it to myself.”

“*Hay, Laura, para qué vas a pagar: mejor dime a mi y dame el dinero.*”

The Car

The last time I saw you it was a Sunday and I had taken you the usual plate of fruit. As I pulled up to the driveway I did not see your car, but I decided to go into the house anyway. I instinctively walked down the narrow hallway and went straight to your room. I opened the door and there you were laying on your bed appearing pensive, hugging a pillow and the t.v. played in the background.

“Where’s your car,” I asked. “

“It’s gone,” you whispered under your breath.

“What do you mean it’s gone? Was it stolen?”

“No,” you replied. “*Se lo quitaron a tu hermano*, for crossing people over from Mexico without permission.”

I couldn’t help but feel my rage swelling up inside of me. I wanted to find my brother and beat the shit out of him. How could someone be so heartless and not give a shit?

“I wish they would have taken him,” I said.

“*No digas eso. Gracias a Dios que no le paso nada a el.*”

I'm Tired

Mom doesn't understand why I was so upset at her and felt the need to storm out of the house. She doesn't know that I am past being upset and that I forgive her and accept her decisions. She doesn't know I've moved on to a stage in which I am only experiencing a sense of loneliness and hurt that she has not tried to look for me in over a year. My last words to her were not out of anger or spite, but out of frustration. I could no longer carry them, it was too much weight on my shoulders. They have made me tired, mom. Please just let me sit here and rest instead of secretly waiting up for you.

To: Mom

There is an undoing of a knot then another doing of a knot in my throat. I choke up thinking that we chose to untie ourselves from each other; this without you hurts. This “I miss you” that I cannot say suffocates me. While you pray in the silence of your room, I hope you can hear the I love you that I send.

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