

Beside a Mango Tree

By Adriana González

My father works for a company that grows and transports mangoes. He is away from his wife and his sons during the week and he sleeps in a hotel bed in the city of Oxnard, California. He works for a company that sells and transports a fruit—a fruit encased in leather, a misshaped seed at its center and he doesn't make that much money selling and transporting mangoes but he is able to stand up straight.

I call my father every day. I walk; my lips crack and my boots shift through snow and I talk to him as he walks. He walks around the hotel parking lot and complains of the heat and his tendency to sweat when it is only seventy degrees outside. But he walks to feel better, to straighten his spine and to be healthy again.

He asks me about the houses I have considered buying. He discourages me from paying over two hundred dollars a month in assessment fees. He wants me to look for a single family home, preferably under one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, preferably a detached, singular unit with a garden and a porch.

I tell him I have noticed that I am attracted to crown molding. I say that I find myself dismissing any property with hollow walls, tiled entrances and rooms with naked edges. I don't tell him that when I walk through these homes, the ones with the crown molding, I imagine myself on a step-stool. I am holding a small bowl mixed with vinegar and water and I am reaching up, wiping away cobwebs and dust and breathing in the cleanliness of a well-maintained and unchanging room. I am not sure what I mean by unchanging—just that I consider crown molding to be a framed picture – bordered and protected from time and weathering. These images, I have come to realize, are pictures I intend to see through. I want nothing more than to have a home and I don't buy dresses and I steal cheese from the grocery store sometimes because I am always thinking about money.

There is always too much money, and not enough, and there are mangoes.

I was twelve years old when I walked dogs for two months so that I could afford to buy a new sweater. There was a sixth grade camp fieldtrip, and we were going to the mountains, and we were promised that there would be snow. I went door to door, explained to my neighbors that I was providing a dog walking service. Those who agreed handed me various colorful leashes despite the fact I brought my own. And I walked dogs for two months so that I could afford my mountain clothes. It was a secret from my parents—dog walking required me to leave my cul-de-sac and wander to gated communities, but my parents were gone, and my brothers were small and my sister looked after them on my afternoons out. I was twelve years old and I walked alone with colorful leashes gripped in my palms and I counted my steps up every driveway and along the sidewalks. Out of necessity, out of nervousness, I counted. I counted numbers, ones and twos and threes and then I would return the dogs and count the dollars in my pockets. I counted three dollars for every big dog, one dollar and fifty cents for every small dog and five dollars from the nice man, whose name I can't remember with a beagle named Thomas.

My father took me to the Lake Elsinore outlets when I asked him if we could buy a sweater for the

mountains. And so he took me there, one afternoon, when he was not with his lawyers, when my mother was working, to buy a sweater. I walked around the outlet, attracted to the walls of waterproof coats, and bright, sequined boots, but found myself at the clearance rack. I held the yellow tags in my hands, and read the prices in my head. I read the numbers; I thought about what twenty percent off meant and how the additional ten dollars off at the register would bring down the total of my sweater to thirty-four dollars. I had fifty.

My father reached in his pocket and I said *I got it, dad*. I thought of my father's face of defeat when I dressed for the mountains. There was no snow on my six grade field trip.

Corn meal is the first ingredient listed in my cat's dry food. Twice a day I pour a generous amount of the artificial, ground product into her bright green bowl and she shoves her face into it so deep her back arches. She weaves through my legs, rubbing her grey coat on me. But soon after, she climbs on my curtains, and knocks over the water on my nightstand, and digs her face at the window. She digs her face so hard that her nose becomes raw and chapped.

I took my cat home for the holidays, and apologized for the ruined curtains, and the knocked over water glasses. *You're giving her junk food*, my mother insisted. *See*, she held the bag to my face, her finger on the list of ingredients. My mother bought my cat real food, good, expensive food and my cat slept through the night and her nose healed.

My cat slept with me in my parents' bed in-between my mother and me. My mother asked me to sleep beside her because my father is in Oxnard and none of it feels the same. She asked me to comb through her hair, but it didn't feel the same. When I was younger, she would plead, *please play with my hair*. It would always put her to sleep, it helped her relax and put her to sleep when her husband was with the lawyers.

It's not the same for obvious reasons. Time has passed, and it has been ten years since I bought my mountain sweater and things start over. My father is learning how to work again, to work for someone else. He is learning what it feels like to no longer be his own boss and he is trying so very hard to stand up straight. I was hoping that my home would feel like a home, a bordered painting. But I have just realized that since I was ten, it has not felt this way. I have realized that I buy cheap cat food because I hate spending money. The money that I do have, I intend to buy a house with because my father wants me to buy a house for myself.

My father owned one hundred and fifty charter buses. Each bus was purchased at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. He employed six hundred employees and operated in six western states. My father's buses traveled around nineteen million miles a year, and brought in thirty-three million dollars in ticket sales. My father was born in Mexico. My father was born in the kitchen of an adobe house. My grandmother gave birth to my father in her kitchen. My father owned one hundred and fifty charter buses and was the owner of a business that was worth forty million dollars and he was indicted by the United States government on December tenth, two thousand and one and was charged for smuggling illegal aliens across the Mexican border. My father grew beside a mango tree.

But these are just numbers. Spelled out, these numbers suddenly breathe and are alive and it angers me that I have now given numbers significance. I write down the number forty million and I can see my father. I see his lips folding when I ask him how much his company was worth. His head sinks and all he says is, *it's terrible, isn't it? That it's all gone?*

This is where I begin. I need to help my father stand up straight. Because on December tenth, two thousand and one, I walked into my home and it wasn't the same. The floor was patterned with fitted coats and tailored slacks; hundreds of dollars threaded into each pocket and folded hem. The INS agents came to my home and they threw my father all over the ceramic tile. My mother's couches, three thousand dollar couches stabbed and bleeding cotton—flower patterns ripped and severed. The INS agents sifted through the sugar and the salt in the pantry and they ripped up the floorboards because they were looking for money. My mother threw herself on the floor, pulled at her hair and sobbed, *my home, my home*. And I knelt with her, my father's suits beneath us and it was then that my idea of home was forever contaminated.

My father was dying this summer. His back was misplaced, burning and taut because it has been burning and taut for ten years now. My father was born in Mexico. He sunk his feet into the earth, and he was barefoot for most of his childhood and he then, he had a thriving business and he was a millionaire and on December tenth, two thousand and one, it was agreed it would be best if he returned to being barefoot.

Is it safe to blame someone for my anxiety, for my distorted concept of a home, for the fact that I steal cheese because I am afraid that one day, I will have no money? *No*. I say *no* in a heavy voice, *no* carries the most weight because I believe it when I say it is not okay. It is not okay to blame the government for indicting my father and for taking away all one hundred and fifty busses, and for dissolving a company worth forty million dollars, and for painting embarrassment on my father's face when I pulled out my crinkled dollars and my pennies to pay for my sweater that he could not afford.

Because when I buy the cheap cat food and when I shove blocks of cheese into my pockets I realize that the less expensive turned out to be expensive. I could blame the government, and the greedy men who believed that my father did not deserve expensive suits, but once that is done, once the numbers are spelled out, money is the victor.

I could blame the greedy men for instilling an anxiety in me concerning money. I could blame them for dissolving my father's company and fueling conversations about my mother having to return to work and how much the caregiver would cost because my grandmother was bedridden.

I could blame the greedy men for launching my grandmother into a deep depression, exploding her aneurism and chaining her to a bed that was unmoving and cold. I could do all of these things, and I do. My idea of home needs to detach itself from the bad men. But this is where I begin and this is what needs to be stated.

My father works for a company that grows and transports mangos. He brings them home to my mother who piles them in the basin of her sink. A dull knife cannot properly slit the skin of a mango. A mango must be turned on its misshaped sides, flipped, pinned down to the cutting board and flipped again to ensure nothing is wasted. We don't waste any part of the mango.

My father was born in Mexico beside a mango tree. He now works for a company that grows and

transports mangoes because there is a mentality that a man like my father could not own expensive suits.