

Sagrado Corazón

By Yasmin Ramirez

Sunday, Ita and I woke up early to go to church, even though mass didn't begin until noon. She never let me eat beforehand because she believed it was better to take the *hostia* on an empty stomach. So, I sat in the center of the bed and watched as she slathered creams, lotions and perfumes on trying to convince myself I wasn't hungry, even as my stomach gurgled.

The radio on the nightstand fuzzily played "Amor Eterno" by Rocío Dúrcal as she laid her pants and blouse still warm from the iron on the bed. I shifted over, careful not to disturb them. Ita hated wrinkles and getting dirty. She got ready for the day the same way she got ready for bed, only in reverse. On Sunday's, she took longer than usual. I couldn't decide if she was getting dressed up for God or for Mamá Lupe, her mom: they both seemed to make her pray more.

She smeared thick Avon sunscreen on her fair face, eye shadow, black liquid eyeliner, and mascara. Her dyed reddish-brown hair wrapped around small metal rollers she'd slept with and wore until she dressed. She did her hair last. She didn't want it to go flat.

The breeze from the early morning kept us cool as it came in from the heavy framed window in her bedroom, propped open with a broken wooden broom handle. I don't know where it came from, the splintered edges worn smooth from the pressure long ago. In the summer, El Paso desert mornings are always cool, but the impending heat hovers like a whisper after the breeze. The oscillating fan on her chest of drawers rotated back and forth shaking its head against the inevitable heat.

Ita sang along to the song as she put on her pantyhose. "*Tú eres la tristeza de mis ojos. Que lloran en silencio por tu amor.*"

I lay quiet on my side, my head propped in my hand, and watched my calves dangle off the side of the bed; my pink and purple high-tops made my feet heavy. She sang, reaching for her bra, and adjusted the weight of the silicone in the right cup making sure the weight was even. As she put her bra on and let herself fall into it she continued to sing, "*Me miro en el espejo y veo en mi rostro. El tiempo que he sufrido por tu adiós.*" She stood in front of the mirror making adjustments, careful the scar on her chest, a reminder of the fight, she won, against breast cancer, didn't peek out from the top of the bra, and that the line of her bust was even. It was one of many scars my grandma had; this one was just visible.

She turned, elbows bent, palms open, fingers curled, grasping at the air, and sang to me when the song reached the chorus. The words echoed out around me as both voices sang, "*Cómo quisiera, ay, que tú vivieras, Que tus ojitos jamás se hubieran cerrado nunca...*" She stretched her arm out to me at the end with an exaggerated vibrato in her voice and movement in her lips on the last word until I started giggling. She kissed her hand and waved to the invisible audience in the room and erupted into laughter.

"¿Qué piensas, Prieta?" she asked, arched brows pulsing up and down.

As quick as she broke into the song, she stopped and turned back toward the mirror. Her reflection stared back at me, her pantyhose pulled high up on her waist, almost meeting the bra line, pointed beige lace bra hiding the scar on her body, and her face, eyes cat-lined, smooth skin glistening. The only indicators of her age were the small stamps of laughter left around her eyes and mouth. And as much as that same laughter had gleamed in her eyes for a second, her critical eye gazed at her own reflection now and made me turn away and look back at my shoes.

By eleven o'clock we were ready to go. She looked into the mirror one last time, dabbed pink lipstick on her lips and gave a kiss to the mirror.

We locked the heavy wooden door and let the screen door slam, *clank, clank*, behind us, as I hopped down the twenty-five concrete stairs to her large gray 1968 Buick Riviera, which she warmed up for at least fifteen minutes before any drive. We sat, windows rolled down, but inside it was searing as we waited for the breeze to move the still air. The sun streamed in through the windshield and made us squint against the light, as tiny drops of sweat bubbled to the surface on the skin above my lip.

The seats of the car itched against my legs, the fabric stiff and powdery with age. The car's overhead lining sagged in places, and I had to pull the seat belt slowly so it would fit me the way it was supposed to. We sat waiting for the stuffy air to escape and the car to warm up. She fiddled with the dial on the radio, trying to find one of the three Spanish stations the car played. At the side of the car the large oak tree gave small shadows of shade, and I shifted against the itchy seat, trying to lessen the sizzling feeling on my scalp. When we finally drove off I welcomed the breeze the car created even though it was still hot.

The drive to the church didn't take long, but we arrived early to find a parking space. It took some time and we almost missed a space because we had to drive around the block. As we drove, my Ita said aloud over and over, "¡Que no lo vean Diosito! ¡Que no lo vean!" And it must have worked because when we there the space was waiting for us.

We walked the two blocks to Sagrado Corazón: me in my high-top sneakers and my grandma in her high nude wedges. Her pink polyester pants had a heavy seam down the center and her floral top made me think of spring, and I thought she looked so pretty just to go to church.

We entered the church and my Ita looked around for my great-grandmother, Mamá Lupe. I welcomed the freshness inside the church as sweat trickled down the small of my back. We stopped at the beginning of the red-carpeted aisle, and I dipped my fingers into the large ivory holy water fount. I let my fingers linger, the water cool, trying to absorb the freshness a few moments longer. I crossed myself, the fresh chill on my forehead felt like a sigh of relief. I bowed down in a small curtsy and crossed myself again, then walked down the long aisle separating the pews.

I didn't like coming to church, having to sit still on the hard wooden pews for an hour as the priest spoke. I *really* didn't like when we had to shake hands toward the end of the mass because I didn't like touching strangers' clammy hands. And, the part I disliked most was sitting with Mamá Lupe and her husband, Pablo. She smelled like stale cigarettes, dead flowers, and moth balls. Each time she stared at me through her thick glasses I wanted to look down, away, at anything but her lined face. But I came almost every Sunday with my Ita because my mom worked so much, and this was the one time a week my grandma saw Mamá Lupe. I knew it was important

to her because she took so much longer getting ready than usual, ironing her clothes, lining her eyes, but I didn't understand why. She was always quiet when we left, the car ride home silent as I played with my seat belt and stared out the window.

I learned later that Mamá Lupe was just unhappy and made others feel the same way, whenever she had the chance. There were half stories: Mamá Lupe's parents had left her to be raised by her grandparents; my Ita's Dad had left Mamá Lupe with four children for another woman, Ita was her Dad's favorite, playing guitar for her to sing along to when she was young, and that's why Mamá Lupe was harder on her...the theories went on. The only thing I knew was the way my grandma looked after seeing her, like a wilted flower that hasn't been given enough water.

The calm of church made me feel a little more at ease, my breathing slower, but my hands stayed sweaty, and I rubbed them on my shorts, again and again. Ita found Mamá Lupe's short crop of grey hair among the other heads staring at the pulpit and scooted past the people already sitting. I never knew which way was easier to scoot past, keeping my back toward them made me feel like I was putting my butt in their faces, and facing them I hated to make eye contact, so I'd stare at their legs and act like I was trying hard not to step on their feet, by taking big steps around their shoes. Before we sat, I leaned in and kissed the thin wrinkled skin on Mamá Lupe's cheek, avoiding her hard gaze through large nude-colored plastic framed glasses.

"Hola, Mamá Lupe," I mumbled. "Hola, Pablo." I waved at her husband.

I sat to the right of my grandma, so I wouldn't have to sit next to her and Pablo.

I stared at the white-robed priest in front of the church and half listened to his mass. I looked around the great hall of the church and at all the statues in their alcoves. I stared at the stained-glass windows and tried to understand the story depicted in the red, green, and white shards of glass put together so delicately. The sun streamed in, but the stories diluted its heat. Diosito stood at the front, arms splayed to his sides, his gaze looked up eyes wide, defeated. I looked up and felt the same as my stomach growled.

Toward the end of the mass we stood in line and waited our turn as the priest served communion. My palms got damper the closer we got. I never knew whether to hold my hands out or to stick my tongue out. I thought that if I stuck my tongue out the *hostia* would somehow be purer, but I didn't want the priest to look into my mouth or touch my tongue. I stood next in line and held my moist cupped hands out as the priest said, "Cuerpo de Cristo." I walked away and let the small white circle sit on my tongue till it disintegrated.

I wondered why God tasted like paper.

After church we all went to eat at a local restaurant, The Acapulco, a small diner with a jukebox in the corner that always played, "All My Exes Live in Texas." By the time we arrived my stomach was a knot. God had done nothing to subdue my hunger. I ate my caldo de res. I put extra chile in my soup. The spice overtook the heat of the soup so that it stung my lips with each slurp. Mamá Lupe and Ita's conversation became muted as I listened to the music and stared at the

waitress with a large red bouffant who alternated between taking orders and talking to the hair-netted cook in the kitchen.

Mamá Lupe and my grandma did all the talking. Pablo rarely spoke on any occasion, and I worried he'd choose lunch after church to speak to me, but he didn't. I was invisible, but I didn't mind. Ita patted my leg every so often. I didn't have anything to say to Mamá Lupe, and I don't think she did either. When I did try to say something she lectured me about speaking in English instead of Spanish because Pablo didn't understand, or on the correct way in which I was to address her, "usted instead of tú." When she asked me, "¿Cómo está tu mamá?" I took longer chewing so my grandma had to answer for me. The next time she asked something I pretended to forget the words in Spanish. She gave up talking to me, even though she spoke English.

After each lunch my grandma and I left them with goodbyes and dry kisses on their wrinkled cheeks. We walked to our car silent except for the clicks of our shoes against the pavement. Ita grew more and more quiet after Mamá Lupe's, "Adios *Alicia*," with a tone I didn't understand, but made me look down at my shoes like when I was in trouble with my mom and she scolded me.

Years later, when Mamá Lupe died, my grandma was the only one of two of her children in El Paso. She had a stroke while waiting in the car for her husband to buy some milk, and instead of taking her to the hospital Pablo drove home and called my grandma. He hadn't known what to do. My grandma sat by her bedside holding her hand and talking, hoping she'd wake up.

"Mamá aquí estoy, la hija que nunca quisiste."

Mamá Lupe hadn't woken up, but tears escaped from her closed eyes. We believe that although she couldn't speak, she still knew my grandma was there, knew she was the only one who had ever been there. Mamá Lupe never regained her mobility or her ability to speak. She died a few days later in the hospital. My grandma cried for days.

By that time I was eleven and understood when I saw her shrink into herself.

"¿Qué quieres hacer, Prieta? ¿A la casa?" she asked.

"Mom's coming to get me today, isn't she? After work?"

"Sí, pero hasta más tarde. ¿Quieres una banana split? Vamos a Thirty-one flavors?"

I never refused a visit to Baskin Robbins.

"Sí, Ita, sí. Una banana split!"

She turned the volume down on the radio when we got to the car. We drove without saying much, and although I felt relieved it was just the two of us again, I stayed quiet. I looked out the open window as we left a now near empty downtown and headed towards Baskin Robbins in the Five Points area. The small usually crowded center of the city became a ghost town on late Sunday

afternoons because everything closed early. I stared at the empty streets and let the warm breeze muss the stray hair from my braid into my face until we got there.

We walked in, and I could almost taste the cool ice-cream-scented air. We ordered and sat in the empty ice cream parlor. The heat had begun to let up a little, but the sunlight still streamed in through the windows. We were in our own snow globe, just the two of us, sitting inside the glass walls, eating our banana splits.

“Is your banana split good, Ita?” I asked, my mouth sticky from the vanilla ice cream.

“Yes, Prieta.”

She took a big spoon of ice cream in her mouth and opened her mouth wide, a gooey mess of chocolate sauce and ice cream.

“Mmmm!”

“Ita!” I laughed at her, opened my mouth, but some of the ice creamed dribbled out.

She laughed at me and said, “Okay, ya, ya. Te vas a ensuciar.” She pushed a napkin towards me.

By the time we were done we got home just in time for my mom to pick me up. She honked, and I ran down the stairs. They both watched, my grandma in her pink pants and floral shirt standing on the porch, and my mom in her navy blue uniform, duty belt, and aviator sunglasses looking up from her brown Blazer. My grandma waved as we drove off. She looked like a small pink flower, petals waving in the breeze, and I waved back until I could no longer see her.