

A Sip of Benadryl

By Oswaldo Estrada

Sleep tight, she said. And I'll be here when you open your eyes. Be good, Elena. Don't say anything. And don't you cry. Just sit here still. For a little while.

Mami loves to tell the story of how I was so obedient that I fell asleep at her command to cross the border in the back seat of an old Dodge. Pretending to be the third child of a Mexican family with papers. Holding on to my blankee and sucking my thumb.

I don't remember any of this. But I've heard the story so many times that I imagine myself there. Wearing a pink dress and matching hair bows for my pigtails. Afraid, I'm sure, but trusting her completely. It was a warm day. Street vendors walked through the cars waiting in line, selling sombreros, piñatas, lotería cards. Necklaces and cheap alcohol. Small guitars. I was what? Two? Two and a half? Mami always changes this part. And what she never tells anyone is that she gave me Benadryl. That stuff can kill you if you're under five. But she had no other choice. I slept like an angel, she tells her close friends, skipping the part where I could have died.

How long did it take her to walk over to the other side? How many steps did she take? Scared, with her tourist visa in her hand, praying that I wouldn't wake up screaming for her as the Vega family passed the inspection points in San Ysidro and San Clemente? Standing in line with others who entered the country with their blue passports and their green cards? I've heard that people wait in line up to an hour or two on a busy day. She says it didn't take her that long. Or she was too busy praying to San Judas Tadeo. Mami. All skinny and courageous. Dressed up for the occasion in that red summer dress she bought at El Palacio de Hierro. An investment, she reminds me. And a weekender bag with the only nice clothes she was able to get out of the house, when my grandparents rescued us.

She swears she was there when I woke up, paid the Mexican family \$1,500, and kept the rest for our Greyhound tickets to North Carolina.

I know what you're thinking. Why would anyone cross the entire country to come all the way here, right? In a bus. Believe me, I've asked Mami a million times. I would have stayed, I don't know, in California, where most people look like us. Or in Nevada... New Mexico, if you want. Texas, for God's sake... But no. Mami had to come all the way here. Because her brother knew of someone in Carrboro who could give her work and a place to live. That's what she says anyway. I think she wanted to get as far away as possible from the border, knowing that her visa would expire in a few months. Or that my father could find us if we stayed anywhere near Mexico.

So here I am. Sixteen years later. Enrolled in your first-year seminar. I've been good all this time. Got A's in high school. Did some community work. Fed the homeless on Thanksgiving Day. Did everything they tell you to do to get yourself admitted. You want us to write a cultural autobiography, describing our background, the path that has brought us to college. And I just want to close my eyes and fall sleep in the back seat of that old Dodge.

Mami says we're lucky to be here. That she'd do it again. For me. And for her. That she'd clean houses eight, ten hours a day. Even if those chemicals have destroyed her lungs.

I know we're lucky. We stayed together through thick and thin. Didn't end up in a cage, waiting for my turn to be deported. But my heart stops when I see a police car in the corner of

Jones Ferry Road, right across from the Guadalupana store. I never make a fuss if I'm mistreated when I ask for the restroom. When I'm told that I don't have a reservation, even if I do. Or if somebody gives me a nasty look for speaking my language. Don't say anything, Mami tells me, time and again. Just walk away.

I'm used to being quiet, and now you want us to participate. To share our thoughts, our feelings. To debate. But I can't help it.

Americans love to protest. About tuition and classes. About animal rights. Certain monuments. I don't care if I'm arrested, they say. All proud. Unafraid. But we can't. We have to keep a low profile. Go unnoticed, Mami warns me. Meanwhile, gringos tell their children to become politicians and surgeons. Scientists or the next president of the United States.

I'm Elena López, professor. But I could be Mariela Hernández. Orfelinda García. Jenny Méndez. I sit in the back, away from the door, and hardly ever talk. I can't watch movies that portray domestic violence. They remind me that my life would be different if Mami and I hadn't had to escape from that. She wants me to become a teacher or a nurse. But I'd like to become a lawyer to help people like me. People whose nights would be insufferable without a sip of Benadryl.

* This story was written for the event, "Writers for Migrant Justice." The author read it for the first time in Greensboro, North Carolina, at Scuppernon Books on September 4, 2019.