

A Year's Worth

This was new. Elena *wanted* to cry. Except she couldn't let herself. Not even when mom was gone, and mom was gone a lot lately. Not even then because she knew she wouldn't stop crying. So, she waits, watching from between the large trucks that smell like vinegar and sweet smoke.

Her senses keen, staring at the pickup at the other end of the lot. Straining to hear over the interstate's hum. Smelling the air, feeling the wind. She hears something that makes her spin around.

Nothing.

Only the mirage of a highway: dancing, swirling, muddying colors and lines. Heat waves cover the landscape like a sheet. Behind, endless robin egg veneer. This has been her life for two weeks. Running toward a horizon she'll never catch.

“Mija”

She spins back, her hair sits in space, blinding her. But it's ok, she recognizes the voice. She remembers to breathe. And her body begins to remember the pain. Not the constant ache of hunger, or lactic acid. She looks at her palm. It's bruised and dented from the screwdriver she was squeezing.

And her mind begins to remember.

This is the screwdriver they used to turn the bathroom's broken hot water handle. The screwdriver she used to pry the floor and hide her diary. What they used for just about

anything but what it was designed for. The screwdriver that almost made her dad late every morning as he looked for it, before work.

She wondered what work was like. She tried to picture him, building or fixing something. But it was like a dream, she couldn't render detail. A curtain of heat-wave, muddying colors and lines. Even when the agents show up in her daydream, they're amorphous. Armored, shouting, sowing chaos. Blurring, blending, morphing together until they're gone. And so is her dad.

“Mija. Podemos ir con ellos.”

A white truck intrudes on Elena’s dream; the job site burns away leaving the truck stop around her, and her mom, and her mom’s hand. And it’s pointing at the pickup.

Elena is frozen. Her lip quivers. For a moment, her mother is exasperated, then calm.

“Mija...”

She holds out her hand.

Elena’s vision becomes heat waves.

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Whispers among the adults say the railroads hired private security. The stories that come back sound scarier than *los federales*. So, they walk to the promised land. Or find someone with a truck.

Sioux City – Ciudad Seguro. Their safe haven. The same adults speak in the same somber tones of farms and packing plants who banded together to protect their workers, regardless of citizenship. Except hope never visits Elena. The fear of a new city twists her stomach as much as the fear she feels whenever they're exposed. The fear she feels every time her mom scans the road before shout-whispering 'váminos'. The fear she feels, imaging where her father was – assuming he still was.

Sitting four across in the cab was almost comfortable, save for gear shifting. Despite her wariness, Elena is no match for fatigue. When she comes to, it's still dark, and panic digs its claws into her chest. Instinctively, mom rubs Elena's head.

"Lena, it's ok...está bien...it's ok"

Exhausted in every way, Elena buries her face in her mom's chest and weeps.

It's not the release she wanted.

A slam yanks Elena upright; her mom is ready. It's still nighttime, but the parking lot has enough lighting to see an apartment building. Even dimly lit, she can see how the once white stucco has soured to tints of yellow. The apartment matches this aesthetic.

Elena had never seen all weather carpet. In her corner, unable to sleep, she drags her foot across to hear the sound and feel the tiny tremors run up her leg. A single ray of light finds her left eye. It's morning. She doesn't remember falling asleep, especially with her face pressed against the fake wood paneling. A plate of flautas is passed around; people eat over their bed-space on the floor.

It's cold. Both the chicken and tortilla are tough to chew.

It's the best meal she's had in two weeks.

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Her name is María, like Elena's mom. She's a year older than Elena and from a funny sounding town.

"Where's that?"

"Basically Chicago."

That doesn't help. Elena asks more questions, wanting to know how others fared.

Wanting to know what Chicago was like— before the raids. She wants to know everything will be ok, but she's asking too many questions. This older girl is guarded, like the men Elena has met. She's annoyed with this little kid. Or at least, that's what Elena thinks.

"Espera aquí, con tu prima."

Elena looks at the short, clean-shaven, man. Cousin? She studies María for a reaction. 'I would be her cousin. Her friend'. She's staring. She goes back to matching María's energy. With three days of practice, she's getting good.

They sit on a parking stop block, watching their surroundings. Elena speaks slowly, asks simple questions and takes long pauses. A practiced approach to getting María to open up.

Then:

"What happened to your dad?"

It's too much. Three days was not enough practice. Three years couldn't be enough.

"I don't know."

"You trying to find him?"

First the gut punch, now a blow to her head. The parking lot begins to spin. 'Were we?!'.

Dark at the edges and closing in, Elena feels weak. A bell rings.

"Estamos listo."

The short man exits the pawn shop, followed by Elena's mother.

Once they're alone, she brings up her father. Again.

Her mom stares at nothing.

"We should be looking for him! Maybe if we get caught, they'll take us to where he is!"

"Elena, no! No sabemos si tu papá es-"

"Alive?!"

María winces. She still can't look at her daughter.

Neither one sleeps that night.

There's no work here. The rumor mill starts up again with tales of cities farther west.

And tales of tinted SUV's looking for their next bounty. Mechanical dogs, sniffing, hunting.

Looking for a meal.

They never played. They just sat on different equipment and talked. Now, they don't even do that. They sit in each other's silence. Silence that is broken with a look.

Elena watches the life drain from María's face. Eyes wide, jaw slack. Elena traces the terrified stare. A black SUV with tinted windows. At once, they jump down from the monkey bars and sprint for the apartment. Shouting can be heard.

Incomprehensible, not because of the chaos, but because she refuses to believe this is happening. Only when she can see the body armor, does Elena come to grips with the gravity of it all.

She darts into the bushes by the dumpster.

“Here!”

“No!”

María silently pleads with Elena. Someone rounds the corner, feet from her new friend. Elena stifles a shriek.

“María?!”

The clean-shaven man – María's father? María looks at him, then back to Elena.

“Come on!”

“Sí. Necesitamos ir al camión!”

The man's outstretched arm reaches for María. María, reaches for Elena.

“Váminos!”

'It's safe here! If they don't find us, they'll leave and we'll be ok!"

María's head darts back and forth.

"If we get to the truck-"

"Then they'll chase the truck! Stay here, please!"

"MARÍA!"

Elena's chest is tight. Her breath is caught in her mouth. Face tingling, senses failing.

Everything blurs. A heat wave corrupts her eyes.

A slam. The truck speeds off. A man in a ski mask rushes to a car, hesitates, then slams the door and walks back to the apartment building.

From around the same corner, three more bodies appear.

"OESTE! OESTE! RÁPIDO!"

One of them is Elena's mother.

"ELENA!"

Blurry vision jostles and shakes. She looks up; her mother's face bounces around the whole of Elena's scope. Slowly, Elena realizes she's being carried.

Her breath comes back to her; details render.

"I'm ok, I can run!"

Her mom hesitates, then lets Elena's legs drop. Without even coming to a full stop, Elena is on her own weight, running alongside her mother. As the world comes back into view, Elena realizes it's just them.

"María?!"

"Allá!"

A steep hill down, covered in brush; at the bottom are train tracks. Winding, curving, mirroring the nearby river. People emerge from the brush, stumbling, clamoring to their feet. They run south along the tracks, away from a tight bend in the river.

Elena strains to see – María?

"Elena!"

Her mom's voice comes from the overgrowth. Elena runs to the edge and side steps down, quickly feeling her way before adding weight. She hears the rustle of her mom ahead of her, but all she can see is tallgrass.

Over the all the noise, a voice:

"VÍCTOR!"

'Víctor...that was- that *is* María's...'. Tightness in her chest and stomach. She forgets to feel out her next step. A sudden lurch brings the ground up instantly. Then sky, then ground, and sky, then dark. A girl's shriek brings her back to reality.

She stumbles out of the mud. Her mother runs back to her. She's at the bottom of the hill, facing the river bend. Some men have splintered off from the masses and are heading north. They're shouting that name, over and over as they scan the water.

“Elena! Váminos!”

Her arm feels like it's going to dislocate, her mom is pulling so hard.

* * *

That was two days ago.

A new truck stop, which could just as well be the last one, or the one before. Elena crouches between rigs. The screwdriver is lost, so she fidgets to keep her hands busy.

The diner's door is her whole world, her focus; so, it's incredible to her that he came, unnoticed.

“Necesitas trabajo?”

Her legs buckle. Even if she could run, she wouldn't know where.

“No debes...uh, ser asustando”

What? Never mind, close enough. She understands. Her eyes dart between him and the door. He follows them.

“In there? We can go in...Podemos ir...”

He's a macabre fascination. Not much older than María. His skin is weathered, his hands rough. He doesn't sound at home in English or Spanish but she understands him nonetheless.

He has a red hat, but...different. It's darker, and worn; dirty. There are no words on it. He's an angel and a devil at once.

Elena backs into the truck. Hard. The quiet growl of a hungry SUV comes to a stop when it parks in front of the door. The boy sees it too.

“Váminos!”

His hand is outstretched.

At once, Elena sees every time her mother has done this. Coaxing her daughter to move.

Then, María.

She squeezes her eyes shut. Not her. Make it go away! Make it a muddy blur! She opens her eyes, worried it will be María. Wanting it to be María. But it's not. It's the soft yet hard features on this gringo child. Her world swims, twisting around this outstretched hand.

This hand.

Elena's resolve takes over. She grabs this hand and like a dream, it guides her. She has control and she doesn't. She looks around at blurry shapes dancing like watercolors in the rain. She's still dizzy when a familiar shape comes into view.

“MAMÁ”

“Elena?”

Time and space snap back, almost knocking Elena down. Her mom lunges to intercept her daughter and this captor.

“We should go, ma’am”

“Está bien, mamá”

He looks at the SUV. Her mom looks back. It’s clear she didn’t see it before. They hurry, following the boy towards a beat-up white pickup. Elena feels a familiar pit in her stomach, but this time she bears down. Her focus narrows. The heat waves vanish.

A dry laugh escapes her lips.

That was a year ago. A year on the farm near Grand Island, where there were no *islas* and it wasn’t *grande*. A year of learning to sleep through the night. To eat slowly. To let your guard down.

A year from when her dad disappeared.

A year of planning how to get him back.