

Older Eyes

"There is no milk in my breasts for you today," she said to my youngest brother. She cooed and rocked him and kissed his forehead. Tuesday and Friday were his days to eat.

There is a dry dock down by the coast. That's the place where they ship the bananas to the gringos up north. Papá says they like to call themselves "Americans." He says that it makes them feel proud. He says that they are not the only Americans, that there are Central and South Americans, but they forget that. We call them gringos. I don't know what it means.

Papá and I talk about this sometimes when we walk into town for *frijoles*, when we have to get off the road for the big banana truck. He tells me that in the north the people and the cars have separate roads, that you don't have to get out of the way because you have your own street. "Sidewalks, Juan Carlos," he says to me. "We need sidewalks in El Triunfo." When he says this, I am silent.

When I am older, I will see the north like the *padres* of our village because I will have older eyes. Sometimes when they talk about the north they squint their eyes and look out over the ocean. I squint and I squint, but I see nothing.

Last week was *la semana de carne*, the week we eat meat. Every twelve Sundays we have beef and everyone gets to eat a good meal. Papá tells me it's because on Friday and Saturday afternoons, he cuts a rich man's grass with his machete. The man lives up the mountain. It's a long walk for Papá, but we eat well sometimes. I like that week, because I walk into town with him to buy the meat. Sometimes my little brother, José Manuel, goes with us. Not this time.

We walk. Papá tells me that the rich man up the mountain wants to take some children from El Triunfo to the north. He wants to put them in school. They would learn his funny language. They would have jobs and they would eat every-day. Papa says I'm smart. When he says this, I am silent.

My mamá had thirteen children. Five of them never lived past the first few

months and are buried behind our house. I have three sisters and I had four brothers until last month. José Manuel didn't hear the banana truck coming behind him and never stepped out of the way.

Mamá has always been a quiet woman, like a *conejo*, a rabbit. She worked hard and moved fast, but she was very quiet. They say that you will never hear a rabbit make a sound until it is wounded, then you will never forget the noise of its pain. I can still hear my Mamá weeping when we buried José Manuel. Five days later, she ran into the ocean. The last person to see her was a fisherman, two miles out. We really need sidewalks in El Triunfo.

Papá says I am smart, and maybe I should go with the rich man. He says it is very hard to live now and he would like to know that I was eating and getting smarter. We stop outside the store and instead of going in, he lifts me up on his shoulders. We walk a few feet to the sand of the beach. We are one man, tall and strong. I feel the hot wind blow against my dark skin and I squint my eyes. Papá is tired today. Maybe I can see it for him.

The house was up a dirt road and then through the swamp on a makeshift walking path. The swamp was polluted with pesticide, oil and sewage all the way to the house. Five starving dogs roamed around the yard of packed dirt. There was a rusted barrel for a wash tub. Beside the tub were piles of ragged, filthy clothes, some already clean, even though you could not tell. There were seven children with dirty clothes, faces, hands and feet. They could have been poster children for Amnesty International. Their names were different, and I did not know them, but the place had not changed in twenty years. The mother was probably forty or under, but she looked sixty and she stood in the mud house that had no doors. There were flies on everything and everyone. I was sick. I was crying. I was home.

This was the same house in which I was born.

I looked down at my expensive hiking boots and ran my fingers through my clean head of thick black hair. A child stepped in front of me. He wore torn red soccer shorts and a smile. "Buenos Días, Señor Gringo," he giggled. When he said this, I was silent.