

From Sandra
Cineros's Novel,
Caramelo
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DISCLAIMER, OR I DON'T WANT HER, YOU CAN HAVE HER,
SHE'S TOO *HOCICONA* FOR ME

The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdóñenme*.

To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern: *Eres Mi Vida, Sueño Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Ti, Sólo Tú.*

—Very nice. You've got it all figured out, haven't you?
I shrug, pleased with myself.
—Only you forgot one thing, Ernesto says. —You didn't ask me!
—Not with words exactly. With my body and soul.
—But don't you think we're too young to get married?
—We can be engaged till we're old enough. Lots of people do that.
—Look, don't even. I'm going to get in trouble, Ernesto says.
—Forget about it.
—Don't you want to make us all right in the sight of God? You're the one always complaining I give you religious conflicts.
—God I can handle. It's my ma I worry about.
—Well, don't you want to?

Ernesto chews on the chain of his Virgen de Guadalupe *medalla* and looks at his sneakers. Then I hear him say, —Okay, I guess.

My heart winces, as if I'd let go a well rope, the bucket singing to the bottom. Too late. Ernesto is already on the other side of the screen door, saying hello to Mother, who's ignoring him.

I don't know why, but Mother has to choose today to experiment in the kitchen. The hottest month of the year, on the hottest dog day. Mother isn't a cook. She hardly ever cooks anything but stock Mexican ranch food—*fideo* soup, rice and beans, *carne guisada* stew, flour *torillas*. But once in a while she gets these crazy ideas to create something new, and today is one of those ones.

When Father's truck crunches in the driveway, the house is hotter than ever, even with all the fans going. Mother's project is a foreign recipe she clipped from the pages of the *San Antonio Express-News*—chicken-fried steak—*güero* food. She spent the day preparing exotic items we could just as easily have ordered at the Luby's cafeteria—green beans with almonds, broccoli casserole, candied yams, pecan pie—but Mother swears, —Nothing beats homemade. And now here's Father blowing in like a northern wind across the plains states, swirling everything in his path.

—¡Vieja! My papers! Father says shouting. —Zoila, Lala, Memo, Lolo, everybody, quick! ¡Mis papeles!

—What's happened?

—¡La Migra! Father says, meaning the Immigration. —They came to the shop today, and what do you think? Somebody told them I hire *zile-*

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Someday My Prince Popocatepeth Will Come

—Marry someone who adores you, Mother said once.
Adored, you hear me? Lala, I'm talking to you. Everything else is crap, she said, ransacking the trash for the missing basket from her electric percolator. —Now where the hell did that coffee thingamajig go?

Maybe I'd met that someone who adored me. Could it be Ernesto Calderón was him? I'd had a dream about Ernesto even before I met Ernesto, and when he did appear, it was like I was trying to remember someone I already knew, someone I'd always known, even when I was floating around the Milky Way as milky dust.

Because of Father, I'm used to being adored. If somebody loves me they've got to say corny Mexican things to me, or I can't take them seriously. It makes me dizzy to hear Ernesto tell me, —Baby, if I die who will kiss you? You're my life, my eyes, my soul. I want to swallow you, masturbate you, digest you, shit you.

Is that heavy or what?

So when Ernesto comes around on the very morning Mother's lecturing me on marriage, I don't know what to think. After all, maybe Ernesto Calderón is my *destino*.

—Listen up, Ernesto. You've got to ask my parents for their permission.

—For what?

—To marry me, silly, what else?

gales. Now they want proof I'm a citizen. Zoila, where are my discharge papers? Help me look for my papers!

When the Grandmother died, her photo and the framed Virgen de Guadalupe were moved to the living room next to the dual portrait of Presidents LBJ and Kennedy. That's when we had to stop watching television.

—To honor my mother, *vamos a guardar luto*. No television, no radio, Father had ordered. —We are in mourning.

Then he went into every room and drew all the curtains. He also covered the mirrors because that's the custom on the other side, but when we asked him why, he simply said, —Because it's proper. Maybe we weren't supposed to be thinking about how we look, or maybe he meant to keep Death from looking at us.

We lived without the jabbering of the television and radio for a while, like the house needed time to think, to remember, to think. When we talked we even lowered our voices like if we were in church. But we weren't in church. We were in *luto*.

The mirrors stayed covered for only a few days, but the curtains have been drawn tight ever since. Father's already ripping them open and filling the house with the steel-white Texas light of August. Dust swirls in the air.

—*Buenas tardes, señor*.

—Ernesto! Be of some use and help me look for my shoe box.

Father unlocks the walnut-wood armoire, dumping the contents of the drawers on the bed.

—They're coming back for me after lunch, he goes on. —Mother of the sky, help me!

Ernesto whispers to me, —Why's he looking for a shoe box?

—That's where he keeps all our important papers and stuff. Before Father inherited the walnut-wood armoire, he stashed everything in his underwear drawer. Now he stores them in a shoe box from one of his wing tips. But since we moved, well, who knows where the hell it is?

—But why would someone report you to la Migra, *señor*?

—The envy. People yellow from jealousy. How do I know, Ernesto? This is no time for talk, help me!

—Did you tell them you served in the U.S. Army, Father?

—I told, I told.

Then I imagine Father talking to the INS officers. Father's English has never been good. When he's nervous it comes out folded and creased, worse than in those old books he'd sent away for when he first came to this country and worked for Mister Dick. *How you say?*

—I told about Inchon; Pung-Pion; Fort Bragg; New Cumberland, Pennsylvania; Fort Ord; SS *Haverford Victory*; Peggy Lee, get out of here give me some money too. I even told a story.

—A story?

—How on our first trip to Tokyo we had to turn back to the Honolulu hospital when those *güeros* broke their arms and legs. You know how they like to sunbathe. They lay out on the deck, but then, what do you think? Out of nowhere the sea turned wild on us. I swear to you. A big wave came and rocked the boat like a hammock. A whole shipload of soldiers tumbled off the deck and wound up with broken arms and legs, and because of this we had to turn back. Ha, ha! What do you think la Migra said then? "We don't need stories, we need papers." Can you believe it! We don't need stories, we need papers! They even asked about your brothers, Lala. Thanks to God they were born on this side.

We turn the house upside down, but we can't find Father's shoe box. All the while Ernesto is pecking at Father, trying to find a way in to talk about him and me, but Father keeps saying, —Later, later. Father's desperate. We find drawers stuffed with old bills, letters, class photos, drape rings, homemade birthday cards, food coupons, rubber bands, Wilson's rabies tags, but no shoe box. Father always prides himself on being organized. In his shop, every tool, every bolt of fabric, every box of tacks is in place, a scrap swept away before it hits the floor. It drives everyone nuts. But at home, Mother's chaos rules.

—All I ask for is *one* drawer for myself, is that too much? *One* little drawer and everyone sticks their hands in here. Zoila, how many times have I told you, don't touch my things!!!

—I'm not the only one who lives here, Mother wails. —Always, always blaming me, I'm sick and tired . . .

—Sick and tired, Father parrots in English. —Sick and tired . . . disgusted!

Everything has happened so fast after the Little Grandfather's death, after the Grandmother's stroke, after packing up and leaving one city for another, and then another, burying the Grandmother, giving away her

things, the quarrels, the arguments, the not speaking, the shouting, and slowly life settling down for us to begin all over again. And now this.

—My things, my things, Father says, pulling his hair and jumping up and down like a kid having a tantrum. —They're coming back after lunch!!! And he whips back the drapes in each room, opens closets and dresser drawers, pokes under the bed.

—You're nuts, Mother says. —You act like they're going to deport you. I'll call the INS and see what's what.

Mother gets on the phone, and starts talking her English English, the English she speaks with *los güeros*, nasally and whiny with the syllables stretched out long like wet laundry on the clothesline. —*Uh. huh. Yesssss. Mmm-hhhmm. That's right.* But after a while she hangs up because they put her on hold for too long.

—Now? Ernesto asks, meaning, Should I ask him now?

—No, Ernesto, wait!

Lolo and Memo have their lawn-mowing business to worry about. With the heat, they only do hard work in the early morning or after dusk. They save the hottest part of the day for the public pool. Only Lolo is home when Father appears, and when the shoe box doesn't turn up right away, he starts worrying he'll miss his appointment at the pool.

—So your friends are more important than your father? Father says. —This is an emergency. Lolo and Ernesto, please—go look for Memo. Bring him home now!

That's how it was we're all home when the shoe box turns up.

—Here it is, Mother says, disgusted.

—But where was it?

—In the *ropero*, she says. —The walnut-wood armoire.

—But who put it there? I looked in there.

—Your mother. How do I know? It was there.

Ernesto is plucking my elbow and twitching his eyebrows. —Not now, Ernesto, I whisper.

It isn't enough, though, that the box is found. We all have to climb in the van and accompany Father to his workshop on Nogalitos Street, even Ernesto. —Five minutes, Father says. —I promise. But after what seems like forever, when it seems Father has hauled us all to witness nothing, the INS drive up in those famous green vans. There are two officers, and what's really sad is one of them is Mexican.

—Now you see, I no lie, Father says, waving his papers. One dated

the 23rd of November, 1949, said he was honorably discharged from the Armed Forces, and the other says:

Private Inocencio Reyes ASN 33984365 has successfully completed the Special Training Course conducted by this Unit and is graduated this twenty-first day of June 1945 at New Cumberland.

But the one Father is proudest of is signed by the president.

—This one, Lala, you read to everybody, Father says.

—Do I have to?

—Read! Father orders.

REYES CASTILLO, INOCENCIO

To you who answered the call of your country and served in its Armed Forces to bring about the total defeat of the enemy, I extend the heartfelt thanks of a grateful Nation. As one of the Nation's finest, you undertook the most severe task one can be called upon to perform. Because you demonstrated the fortitude, resourcefulness and calm judgment necessary to carry out that task, we now look to you for leadership and example in further exalting our country in peace.

[signed] Harry Truman
The White House

The INS officers simply shrug and mumble, —Sorry. But sometimes it's too late for I'm sorry. Father is shaking. Instead of —No problem, my friend—which is Father's usual reply to anyone who apologizes, Father runs after them as they're getting in their van and spits, —You . . . *char-gos.* For you I serving this country. For what, eh? Son of a mother!

And because he can't summon the words for what he really wants to say, he says, —Get outta here . . . Make me sick! Then he turns around and comes back in the shop, pretending he's looking for something in the stack of fabric bolts.

We drive back home in silence, the *chicharras* droning in the pecan trees, the heat a wavy haze that rises from the asphalt like a mirage. Father looks straight ahead like a man cut out of cardboard.

When we pull up the driveway, I send Ernesto home and tell him to