

Coy-oh-teh

I wasn't allowed in that room. Well, the door under the stairwell didn't lead to a room. It led to a basement. The door was dark blue and brown with a giant hand-carved sun right in the center. The sun's smile spanned the length of my arm. Since I wasn't allowed in, I spent as much time around that ball of fire as possible.

I could barely reach the top of the doorframe with the tips of my fingers, but I rubbed my hands along, as far as I could reach, trying to make the sun sing. Sometimes, when my mom wasn't looking, I put my ear up to the door. I told her I heard voices, but she said it was my eclectic 11-year-old imagination.

My mother knew me, really knew me. Her eyes reminded me of cracked sea glass, green and grey with smooth edges. They almost willed me to drown in them, to trust completely and say everything . . . which I did without a second thought. She knew my every opinion, view, and impression. I didn't inherit her alluring eyes though, mine were a boring brown, probably a reflection of my 3% Spanish heritage. I hadn't learned Spanish yet, even though we lived exactly 23 minutes from the border to Mexico. But really, the Latina heritage filled almost every corner of the house. From the bright yellow and adobe orange walls to the whimsical calaveras mounted and hung throughout the yard.

My favorite space was the narrow walkway from the backyard to the front yard. There was a small arch spanning the threshold, but I had to be careful because I could bump into a cactus or run into a thorny mesquite branch.

There was a small door, only about 5 inches square, carved into the fence. Behind it was a little box. We called it a fairy door, and I frequently left notes and got responses. Sometimes, they were too confusing for me to read. It was in my secret space, that I felt like the place I lived in my head and the cosmos could be the same. I could create what I thought was real and I did . . . with my guitar.

I'd played the guitar since I could hold an instrument. I started with a ukulele because it was smaller, but I quickly learned all I felt I could learn and outgrew it. I'd worked on the guitar for about three years and moved into the violin and a little bit of piano. I didn't tell my mother, but piano currently sat at the top of my instruments list because each stroke of my finger created a melody that became a string of music, like words and sentences only I could understand. I used it to talk to myself, to make sense of the world around me. And, sometimes, I used my music to drown out the sounds of the voices I heard in the basement . . . especially when they cried.

My mother told me again and again, "It's not real, my love. It's not real. Don't tell anyone, it's not real."

But I knew better. She woke up early every morning, 5 AM when she thought I wasn't awake and started cooking tortillas that she bought in bulk from Costco. I found it funny because, we never ate tortillas and my mother hated cooking but every morning at 5 AM, she started making food. She thought that because she opened all the windows, I couldn't smell the beans, meat, and butter wafting through the house. But like clockwork, my stomach growled as soon as the heavenly scent floated into my room.

On Sunday mornings, we always went for a long walk, usually to get breakfast at a restaurant called Jimmy's Egg. Like Denny's but a lot better. My mother thought I didn't know we left the house so I wouldn't see the big white church van that pulled in next to the door leading out of the basement. But I did know because one time I faked sick and pretended to be asleep while the white van pulled up on the gravel. I couldn't see anything from my window without moving and my mom sat in the rocking chair across from my bed, reading a book. The book had a strange title, something about wolves. But I sat up, having a "coughing fit". She quickly pulled the green curtains over my window.

There were nights, very rarely, when I heard the sun door open and close for hours on end and I heard crying from both inside and outside the door. I knew my mother had had enough sadness. So I'd grab an instrument, usually my guitar, sneak downstairs, and sit against the basement door while I played. She'd be upstairs, trying to sleep for the hundredth time. I'd never been caught because when the crying finally stopped, my mother slept, too exhausted to hear or listen. In the morning, I'd sneak something sugary out of the cupboard, so my tiredness didn't reveal itself while she made coffee, pretending she had more than three hours of sleep.

I'd guessed we'd hid people in the basement for a long time, but I didn't know why. When I was younger, I had vague memories of the same crying I heard on a weekly basis now. She used to make up other excuses for why I heard things go bump in the night, but I had gotten too old for that. My mother made it even more obvious when she reinforced the sun door last year, making it more soundproof and replacing the lock.

At midnight on my thirteenth birthday, my mother woke me up by shaking me gently.

"I need your help." She grabbed my guitar from where it hung on the wall and beckoned me with her smile. My mother guided me to the basement door and stopped abruptly with her hand on the knob.

"I know you know there are people down here. I've heard you playing music for them. I understand, sweetie, if you don't want to do what I'm about to ask. But I'm really hoping you will."

I sat on the bottom step of the basement stairs, a place I was never allowed and looked on at 7 people, crowded around a small cot. They barely noticed me. My mother sat down next to me, leaning

against the side railing. We waited and watched for a little while. I heard what I assumed were Spanish prayers overlapping all around the cot, but I still could not see the receiver of their desperate pleas. The sound stopped all at once, but it was not silent. There was a hum in the room. I couldn't hear it, but it made my eardrums vibrate and my eyes grow a little wider.

The 5 men and 2 women cleared away from the cot, standing beside it but no longer obstructing my view. In the center laid a frail old woman with such sagging skin I couldn't tell what was cheekbone and what was chin. She barely made an impression in the fabric.

"Is she dying?" I asked my mother.

"Yes," she took in a shallow breath.

"Why?" Even though I didn't know this woman, I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

"She's very old. The journey to get here was too much for her." I looked down at my feet.

"Well, what do they want me to play?"

"Anything. The guitar is her favorite memory from childhood. She can't play anymore but she loves to listen. Her name is Aitana and these are her children." I looked at each of them, most with tears in their eyes.

"Okay, I'll try."

After I'd played for a good thirty minutes, one of the women came towards me, reaching for my hand. I looked over at my mother and she nodded, signaling it was okay. I took the woman's hand and she gently guided me towards the old woman on the cot. I kneeled when I got there. Her eyes were closed, and her breath came in shallow gasps. I didn't really know what to do or how to help so I just stayed, silently.

After a while, she'd been so silent, I thought she fell asleep or . . . died. I started to turn towards my mother to ask her if we should leave. But a hand limply grasped mine, pulling me back to look at her. The woman had green eyes that she'd opened for the first time, but she didn't look at me. It felt more like she looked beyond me. I wondered if she was blind. Her family came in close, all with a hand on her body. It seemed like they were trying to press her soul back in or hold it in place. Sitting by her, that moment felt agonizing, like I should've been able to heal her. My eyes watered steadily, blurring my vision.

Aitana took a breath, the biggest I'd heard her take and let it out with the words "Gracias, coy-oh-teh."

And her eyes closed for the final time.