

Moth

She flew around the empty house, searching for any trace of herself. Panic gripped her as she realized they had given away all of her belongings. It's as if Isla had never inhabited the place, she was so easy to get rid of. She didn't care about her clothes or jewelry. Her only concern was the white shawl, a family heirloom, passed down from mother to daughter. Isla's great-grandmother knitted it to protect her daughter from the cold, and so the shawl made its way through generations of poverty.

The expensive black wood furniture and heavy marble columns stood in utter silence unchanged since Isla first arrived at Don López's mansion fifteen years ago. Back then, she was just a young orphan girl selling fruit on the street. Don López was passing through the market one day and stopped at her stall. He was a tall dark man in a suit; his wrinkled green eyes burned a sheepish smile on Isla's face. He pointed at the tamarillos. Isla nervously stuffed the fruit into a crumpled paper bag.

“Ten pesos,” she said in a quiet voice and timidly handed him the bag. As she was about to pull away, Don López seized her hand in his velvety palm, kissed it, and gave her a generous tip. Isla had never seen so much money before.

For a week, Don López came to Isla's fruit stand and repeated his charming routine. On the last day, he leaned in and whispered in her ear:

“If you come with me, you'll never have to work again.”

She smiled and followed obediently. It seemed too good to be true, but she couldn't risk losing a chance at a better life. They married a month later. Shortly after she became pregnant. After Martina's birth, it was too late to think about her own life again. Every day, she took care of her daughter, coordinated the maids, and kept the mansion in perfect condition. Don López

was traveling for business most of the time. Isla never asked what kind of business, but she had caught a scent of perfume, a strand of long red hair on his shirt, an earring she had never seen before. When she confronted her husband about a lipstick stain on his pants, he snapped at her:

“I took you out of that dirty market and you dare accuse me! Me, Don López! Don't forget how quickly you got here. You could go back to where you belong much faster!”

Later, she found flowers in the vase on her nightstand. It was not an apology or an expression of love. It was another errand that a butler ran for Don López. She never raised her voice again and stayed true to her routine, numbing herself until she felt small, hidden from the world. It wasn't so bad: she always had food on the table, enough money to buy what she wanted, maids and butlers at her service. She got used to it. More importantly, she had little Martina, her beautiful daughter. She became Isla's whole world.

Until one day, Isla woke up and felt so light. The vase with dead flowers towered above her. The room expanded around her. Isla thought she wasn't in the mansion anymore. She tried to get up, but her body didn't listen to her. A maid walked into the room, and Isla tried to ask for help, but the maid looked confused. She swung at Isla. Instinctively, Isla moved out of the way, and then she felt herself fling in the air. The maid swung at her again and again, so Isla could barely dodge the attack. She finally flew all the way to the ceiling and crawled into a tiny hole in the crown molding. She heard the maid curse and leave the room.

She flew down and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She looked at the reflection in horror. A tiny moth was looking back at her with thoughtless insect eyes. Two fluffy antennae sprouted from her close-set eyes. Her thorax and wings were grey and completely covered in fine pollen as if she was an object left in the room to collect dust. Isla thought she looked pathetic. She tried talking, but no sound came out.

Once she stopped feeling sorry for herself, Isla carefully found her way out of the room and roamed the mansion in search of her daughter. She spotted Martina and landed on her shoulder for surely a daughter would recognize her mother who nurtured her for thirteen years. Martina didn't even notice her and kept running around the house. Isla followed her daughter around as fast as she could, not noticing Don López. He swatted Isla, cursing at the annoying moth, and almost killed her, so she never tried that again.

As days passed by, the staff searched for Isla, while she was flying around the house unsuspected. The maids gossiped amongst themselves about the lady of the mansion that ran away with her lover. *No, she took her life, that pobrecita.* Others chimed in, *There would be a body, no? I knew she was a witch, the way she wooed Don López.* Others said, *Ay silly, she was a foreign spy.* Isla turned into a moth but felt like she turned into so many things.

Eventually, the search died down. Or rather, Don López pronounced Isla dead. He was always a man of most convenience. Isla watched her own memorial service, full of people she'd met once before or not at all. They were Don López's coworkers, friends, and family. He was there too, at the center, smiling and laughing as if nothing happened. The smugness was on his face like he knew she was watching from above and didn't care because he knew she was all alone, always alone. Among the hoard of strangers, stood Martina, her little girl in a black dress, her face puffy and red from crying. Martina had always been quiet and reserved. She slipped away into her room. Isla followed her daughter, wanting to protect her.

Isla found solace in Martina's room. She felt close to her daughter, the weight she carried that was once only hers in her pregnant belly, delivered into the world, and now passed onto her daughter. Though Martina was close to her mother, she grew cold and distant as she approached

her teenage years. She wouldn't let her mother into her room anymore. But she couldn't protest the tiny moth.

In her room stood the family wardrobe. Hungry and exhausted, Isla hid in the winter drawer full of coats and sweaters. She feasted in the warm dark space of her new home and watched her daughter through the crack in the cabinet. Isla's heart broke for her daughter. There was no way for her to reassure Martina that she was there, she would always be there.

Like mother, like daughter, Martina didn't speak much. She preferred writing. Having retreated into her room, Martina sat at her desk and started writing letters to her mother. Isla watched Martina scribble away, paper after paper covered in black ink. A heavy pile rose around her little girl made up of weightless sheets of paper. As time went by, Isla watched Martina shrink amid the papers, a hidden gem. Martina was beautiful, she glowed in the light of her wax candle. She wrote until her arms felt too weak to hold a pen. She left herself on the page. Sometimes, she read the letters out loud.

Mama, I miss you. I miss you hugging me and kissing me. I miss your soft hands and sad eyes. I miss the smell of your perfume and the shape of your smile. I miss when you were here, in the house. I miss you, and I wish I knew what happened to you, but at least I know he can't hurt you now. Papa has been bringing girls into the house, into your bedroom. He doesn't think I know, but I can see the women and hear their high-pitched voices. I want to scream and cry, but then I know he doesn't hurt you anymore. I hate Papa. I hate how he screamed at you and called you names. I hate how he flaunted the women in front of you, I hate how he smiled and grabbed you. I hate that he isn't worried, I hate that he doesn't miss you like I do. I hate how you never said anything. When you were here, why did you let him do it? How could you? No more. I hate him, I hate it here, and I am going away. I will run away. Here, everything reminds me of you,

how much I miss you, and how much I hate the way you were. I will run away. I will run away with Emilio. I will run away to the big city. I will write books and be an author. Emilio said he has family in the city. I will run away with Emilio, and I will never be here again. I miss you, Mama.

Isla wanted to cradle Martina in her arms, her thin moth legs barely supporting her own body. She wanted to calm her down and tell her that she understood. Isla was once a girl with nothing but dreams, selling fruit on the street. She also once thought that someone could come and protect her from her troubles. But it didn't work like that. Nothing was free, and when it came time to pay the price, it was too late.

For several nights, Isla couldn't sleep or fly. She hid in the closet, chewing on wool. Isla thought of all the women that came before her. Isla's great-grandmother, one she was named after, was a strong woman. After losing her family in a war at fourteen, she went to live with her neighbors. The neighbor's wife taught great-grandmother how to be a seamstress. The neighbor though liked to go downstairs at night and slip under great-grandmother's blanket. When the wife found out, she threw the girl out. Great-grandmother didn't lose spirit and used the skills she learned to provide for herself. Unfortunately, great-grandmother passed away before she could teach her daughter how to sew. All that remained of great-grandmother was the white shawl that kept grandmother warm. Having no prospects, Isla's grandmother married the man that sold fruit at the market. They sold fruit together, then the cart went to Isla's mother. Isla's mother tried her best to provide. She ran the fruit stall and kept herself and Isla warm and fed with the little money she got. Isla's mother was kind and so beautiful. Men hit on her every day at the market. Isla once asked her mother what the men wanted. Her mother then told her, *Isla, men are like insects, they go towards radiant things until they get burned.* Isla didn't really

understand what that meant. The mothers before her did whatever they could to give a good life to their daughters, a free life. Though life of poverty was full of struggles, they never desired what wasn't meant for them. When Isla looked down, there they were, Martina's letters on the desk, reminding Isla how much she had failed her daughter.

And then the letters disappeared one morning; she watched Martina frantically search her room, looking for them. Martina weeped and cursed.

Suddenly Don López burst into the room, furious.

"What is this crap, Martina?" He was waving her letters in his right hand.

"That's private!" Martina screamed. She reached for the crumpled pieces of paper.

"Your mother is gone, Martina." He yelled at her and pulled away. "You should focus on your studies and keep your head down. Forget about this stupid running away stuff."

"I hate it here," Martina cried.

"You are a silly little girl, you don't know anything. You have a life people would kill for!"

"I hate it, I hate this mansion, I hate this room..." Martina's eyes watered.

"If you hate it so much, fine! Go on, leave! You won't last a day out there, a little brat like you." Don López spat back angrily.

"Emilio is going to marry me. We are going to have a happy life together." Martina argued.

Don López's eyes lit up in fury like two emeralds in the sun.

"Emilio will forget your name as soon as you spread your legs, little slut." He said.

"I hate you, I hate you," Martina was inconsolable.

Isla watched them fight from the crack in the cabinet. Her heart burned for her daughter.

“Not every man is a cheating pig like you,” Martina cried.

“What did you say” Don López couldn’t believe his ears.

He raised his heavy arm, ready to slap Martina. Isla couldn’t help herself but throw her tiny body forward in an attempt to protect her daughter. Martina flinched when her mother almost flew into her face, and Don López missed.

“Goddamn moth!” he exclaimed and started swatting at Isla. “Where did it come from?”

Martina paused for a second until something clicked in her head. Her eyes darted toward the wool cabinet.

“No!” She screamed. She ran and opened it, her eyes widened in fear as the white shawl soullessly fell to the floor, full of holes. “Mom’s shawl!”

Martina dropped to the ground and clutched the shawl, her only memory of her mother gone. Isla’s heart sank and she lost her focus. Don López swatted at her one last time. The force of the blow threw Isla right into the candle fire, the image of Martina cradling the torn white shawl burned into her mind.