

MY CORN MOTHER LIVES IN MARTINEZTOWN

I made sandwiches with lots of mustard and pack them, corn chips, two apples, two protein bars, and two bottles of water in my stars and stripes backpack. My uncle bought it for me. He has a project at the University of New Mexico, and I'm going with him. On campus, we walk to the Duck Pond and sit on the grass to eat baloney sandwiches, my favorite.

"Uncle Johnny, do you like my lunch better than the ones Carlota takes to you?"

"Insache, yours are the best."

Carlota would not like the Duck Pond. She likes to be neat. She wears suits and high heels and very soft leather gloves. I know because I tried them on. She didn't like it. I could tell by the twitch in her nose. But Uncle Johnny laughed when he saw how big they were on my hands. She is very beautiful and tall. I tell Uncle Johnny that I'm a munchkin. He tells me that I'm "exactly perfect." But Carlota doesn't think so, even if she doesn't say it.

Uncle Johnny brought his cardboard masterpiece. It stands taller than I am. The lady wore a blue crown, like the ones worn at Santo Domingo Pueblo. Her black dress covered only one shoulder and she was barefooted. In her right hand, she held a stalk of corn, lifted like a scepter, visible to all. In her left palm, open, but held close to her side, she cradled an arrowhead.

"Cradle," is my new word.

"Her face is so beautiful," I said.

"Insache, this is your mother's Indian and Spanish face. I also see you."

"I'm not beautiful! Flor Gonzales, that's who the boys say is beautiful."

He took my chin in hand. "You have more than beauty, and people will see it."

That's the way Uncle Johnny is. He doesn't know very much about girls or women. I'm sure that I'll like Uncle Johnny's talk, but I brought a book in case I don't.

Uncle Johnny looks so handsome in what he calls his "University Jacket," a tweed coat with suede patches at the elbows. He rearranges the cardboard lady, the one that looks like the Statue of Liberty given to America by the French. The Corn Mother is the lady's name, and my uncle says she's New Mexico's gift to America.

In a seminar class, Uncle Johnny's professor told his students that he would never attempt to teach John Locke to undergraduates. Everyone agreed, but Uncle Johnny. He said that he could teach Locke to middle school students so they could understand. I asked Uncle Johnny if he thought that I could learn about Mr. Locke. He promised that he would explain Locke when I'm in the 8th grade. Anyway, Uncle Johnny has arranged to teach Mr. Locke's ideas to a middle school class touring campus this Saturday.

After we ate, I moved up to a grassy knoll. I wanted to look at the clouds ahead of me. I love them. The August ones are the most beautiful. But my concentration was broken when I heard a very loud voice.

Just below me, this man shouted, "What is this?"

He wore a tweed blazer, like the one my uncle has, but he's older. The philosophy professor, Mr. Kinder, stood next to the statue.

Uncle Johnny came forward. "As you can see, this is self-explanatory."

Mr. Kinder started to laugh, stopped, and then put his hands on his hips. He moved his nose so close to my Uncle's that he almost touched it. He sighed, not the contented kind, and said, "Mr. Carrillo, this is . . . at best, a replica approximating the Statue of Liberty,"

"Right, it is a New Mexico Statute of Liberty."

At first I thought that Mr. Kinder was happy and then he growled, "Shit." Some of my friends say this, but not the way he said it. I couldn't tell if Uncle Johnny heard him, but I knew for sure that he didn't like me to use that word. And Uncle Johnny hadn't even begun to speak to the 8th graders.

I thought of this as a big show-and-tell, a story for all to hear and see. The Professor kept looking around and over his shoulder. College students and professors walked by us on their way to class or the library. Some looked, but mostly they ignored us.

Mr. Kinder pulled off his jacket. He jerked his head in Uncle Johnny's direction and then he pulled his neck back to rest on his shoulders, much like chickens do when they strut. He was weird. Carlota would say that I'm not old enough to make such pronouncements. But, I'm not saying this to anyone or him. I wouldn't talk to the professor, unless Uncle Johnny told me to say, "Hello."

Two of the La Joya Middle School students must have noticed Uncle Johnny was distracted. They left their places and moved like rabbits just out of a dark warren, anxious to frolic in the open air. I'm in the 4th grade, but I never would have left my place in the classroom. You're not supposed to frolic in class.

Frolic is another new word. I collect words. Every day I have a new word, some days two or three. Uncle Johnny suggested that I prepare for a spelling bee, but I told him that right now my focus was to amass a vocabulary cache. I just love school. Another middle school student stood up and ran to the statue. He threw his big bird nose in the air and said, "Saturday. Free day!"

Again the professor roared. "I, for one, expect more from a graduate student in philosophy. How does this commemorate the American and French Revolutions? And what does this have to do with John Locke, Mr. Carrillo?"

Once again he moved in closer to Uncle Johnny. "We already have a Statue of liberty."

My uncle pulled a couple of steps back and stuck his hands in his pockets, not out of defiance, more in frustration.

"What is the purpose of this?" he said in a squeaky mouse voice. "Besides I'm not Native American." The professor's voice had changed, and like a ninja, he then began shifting from foot to foot.

"Agitated." Carlota says this word. She tells me that I must sit still and not squirm when she takes us out to a restaurant. "Children, no one, should behave in an agitated manner in public." She tells me. All the time.

The professor looked unhinged. Uncle Johnny uses this word. He unloosed his tie and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt. Then he paced around the corn mother and around again as if he were studying her, trying to figure her out. He kept moving his mouth as if he were talking to himself.

"Enough of this play. Mr. Carrillo, we can't remain outside. In short, conducting class in the open air is unacceptable. Indoors, we will return to walls." Once again he circled the corn mother. He stopped. "Forward, Mr. Carrillo. Move this lesson into the room I reserved in Mitchell Hall. Where do you expect me to sit? Not on this wet grass."

Professor Kinder's face looked like a pinky, not ripe strawberry.

My Uncle gathered the middle school students and told them to follow him to the classroom.

Professor Kinder led the way. A dust devil rose, a narrow funnel of wind, as often happens in open spaces in Albuquerque. It surrounded the Professor. His freed shirttails floated like white feathers behind him. With one hand, he held onto his red baseball cap, and with the other, he fiercely locked onto the handle of his briefcase. His red tie, looking much like a wattle, slapped his thin humped nose. I guess he was funny, but I felt sad because he didn't believe in the Corn Mother.

My uncle delivered his talk.

"To live and be free to make choices, must be held in our thoughts. Always. In this way, freedom hold weight. It give us a strength of mind and heart to protect what is natural, what is right. John Locke called it 'Life and Liberty.' The Corn Mother is a symbol of this. She should be seen, so all will know that she represents a past, a present, a future. She is a mission of life and liberty."

My Uncle talked about John Locke, who lived in England a long time ago. He wrote on the board. "What is natural for all people?"

Under his sentence, he wrote in big letters "IMPORTANT."

Then he said, "Because a few things are natural for everyone, then they are important."

He asked questions like, "Does someone have the right to take your life, kill you? Does someone have the right to just take your bicycle away from you? Why do people work? Should we be allowed to tell a lie about someone?"

Well, some of it was silly, stuff that we already know, like it's wrong to steal or kill someone, unless they are going to hurt you.

“John Locke believed that we can give our opinion. We do have the right to own our bicycle if we worked for it or our parents gave it to us.” My Uncle’s voice was clear and easy to understand, but he’s always like this.

Then under IMPORTANT he wrote the following words on the chalkboard:

Life

Freedom to believe, to say, to think, to read.

Possessions - to be able to own things and keep them.

Away from the chalkboard, he turned to look at each one of the La Joya students. No one fidgeted. He looked serious, not mad, but stern. He said that when someone tries to take these things away from us, like a government with police, we must tell them that they cannot do it. "The Corn Mother is like the Statute of Liberty. She holds the corn, her food, her possession, her right to eat and live. Then he said, “In the other hand, the Corn Mother holds an arrowhead.” He asked, "What does this mean?"

I got so excited; I said without raising my hand, "The Corn Mother is telling us that we can defend ourselves against people who want to take our food, our life."

He didn't seem angry, but continued to ask what they thought. Their answers were like mine. But when Uncle Johnny talked about the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of what is natural, like saying what you believe, and protecting your life and food, and your things. We understood the importance of what he was saying. He told them that the Corn Mother is a reminder of life and liberty, like the Statue of Liberty.

Professor Kinder stood at the back of the room. He didn't sit.

And my uncle didn't talk long, saying the same thing over and over, but each time in a different way. He called it a discussion. I liked this.

"This legacy belongs to all of us." He said this at the end.

We live in Martineztown in a pink adobe with a mansard tin roof. My mother calls it that and she should know because she teaches history. Did.

Uncle Johnny sent my mother to college.

Our house is small and old with a barbed wire fence around our narrow and long yard. We don't have a lawn. No one does in Martineztown, but my mother tended roses and dahlias. She also grew corn, "our legacy" she called it.

Edith, our street, is across from the Sandia Mountains and the Santa Barbara Cemetery. My mother lives there and so do my grandparents. My mother never married my father, so I don't know where he is, and anyway, he never found out about me. Uncle Johnny moved in with us when my mother got sick. Now, he's getting his master's. It's either going to be in history, philosophy, or Spanish, or maybe all three.

"Good," that's what my mother called Uncle Johnny. My grandparents also said it, but the neighbors said it first. Mom called him a "serious thinker with a respectful heart."

Uncle Johnny works part-time as a runner at a law firm. Carlota is one of the partners. He says his job is to put tortillas on the table; whatever that means. He doesn't know how to make tortillas and doesn't like the ones at the store, unless he buys them from the Frontier Restaurant. His girlfriend, Carlota, comes over a lot and takes us out to dinner. She tells Uncle Johnny that they should get married. I guess he likes her.

I grow marigolds in the front yard and corn. Every day I go to the Santa Barbara Cemetery, a place of green grass and hills and pine trees, the part of the cemetery with tall tombstones, statues, and the Candelaria obelisk. Uncle Johnny says there is history at the Santa Barbara

Cemetery, He believes that the new part of the cemetery, Mount Calvary, has no living past but only the even lawns, flat bronze plaques, and the almost anonymous dead. I think it is boring.

I go to the Santa Barbara Cemetery to talk with my mother. I take corn in late summer and place it on her tombstone. She loved corn. We ate corn chips, *posole*, *chicos* in our beans, *elotes*, corn on the cob, and she took me in the summer to the corn dances at the pueblos. My mother said that we had some Cochiti Pueblo Indian in us, but she didn't know how much. It's probably true because her grandparents lived in La Canada de Cochiti, an *Hispano* settlement near the pueblo. And my great grandfather did not have to shave every day; so we are part of the Corn People. Long ago the Pueblos and Hispanos joined to protect themselves from invaders. My uncle sees the Navajos as great warriors and calls them, "Desert Vikings."

I'm named after three great Indian women: Ines, Sacajawea, and Malinche. I guess that's how I got my name, Insache. Friends call me "In" or "Sache," and they say it "Such." I can't make them understand that I don't want a nickname. But Uncle Johnny always calls me by my real name.

At the end of the John Locke lecture, Uncle Johnny picked up his notebook and took my hand. I just love it when he holds my hand.

"Wait, Uncle Johnny, we can't leave the Corn Mother."

"It's not important any more."

"You said it had my mother's face. And mine. I want it."

Uncle Johnny carried the Corn Mother for me.

"Tell me more about the Corn Mother."

Johnny tightens his shoulders. "Insache, it doesn't matter."

"Uncle Johnny! It is my mother!" I pulled my hand away from him. "I don't want her to be dead."

"I miss my sister, your mother." His voice choked. He looked ahead rather than at me. "Insache, the Corn Mother does have your mother's face because that's the way I drew her. In reality, she's everybody's mother."

"You mean she's here to always love me."

He turned to smile at me. "The Corn Mother is a teacher; she reminds us of the gift of love, that life and the right to work and protect ourselves deserves respect."

"But the Corn Mother didn't save my mother's life."

"The Corn Mother represents human power, the one of life and freedom," Uncle Johnny said.

"I want that."

"The Corn Mother belongs to all of us. I wanted to prove to my professor that even a middle school kid could understand John Locke. So, I made this Corn Mother, my idea of a statue of liberty for us in New Mexico."

I pulled my Uncle's hand back and stopped. "The University should have a statue of the Corn Mother. "Do it! Don't give up."

In the evening, Uncle Johnny and Carlota went out to dinner. I didn't want to go. Carlota gets this funny look on her face when she sees me eat, even though I chew with my mouth closed. I put my elbows on the table. I try to remember not to, but then I forget. Marisol, who is sixteen and the babysitter, comes over and makes macaroni and cheese out of the box, just the way I like it.

When they returned, I heard Uncle Johnny talking with Carlota. I got out of bed to sit in the dark hallway so I could listen to them.

"Well, I've lost my credit for Philosophy 500."

"Credit? What did you do?" Carlota asked.

"We were to give a presentation of John Locke's natural rights of life, liberty, and property. I thought of the Statue of Liberty, a symbol on the East Coast."

My uncle continued, telling her that Kinder did not like the idea of a Corn Mother and saw no connection with the same values of the Statue of Liberty. He felt certain that his professor was embarrassed by his presentation of a cardboard Corn Mother.

Carlota lifted her chest and put her hands on her hips, and slightly moved her head forward. She looked a foot taller. "What?" asked Carlota.

My uncle explained that he tried with his cardboard Corn Mother to prove to his professor that even a mid-schooler could understand natural rights.

"You sacrificed your credit for this silly idea? I need a glass of wine."

Carlota walked to the refrigerator. She likes white wine, *Pino Grigio*. She says it in a very pretty way. She started to tell my uncle that the school board planned to shut down my school, Monte Vista Elementary.

She closed the fridge door. "No wine? No wine!"

Uncle Johnny, who likes to please Carlota, said he would go to the store to buy her some.

He left, saying, "Carlota, that is a neighborhood school. It's been around for over a hundred years."

As Uncle Johnny walked out the door, Carlota said, "It takes too much money to run for such a small number of students. The Board hired me to give them legal advice."

After Uncle Johnny left, I jumped out of the hallway. "I don't want my school closed."

"You're a little girl and you just don't understand."

"What do you understand?"

"You should be in bed."

"First, I want you to tell me."

"All right. But you should know ahead of time that Johnny isn't going to be pleased with you." She put her shoes on and then she was really tall. "Very simply, it's about money. It doesn't make sense to keep two schools open, when one will work."

"But you don't have children in school. You don't have anyone at Monte Vista. Why do you care?"

With one red fingernail she tapped the tip of my nose. "You get your education there."

"You don't care." I was yelling and I didn't mean to. "If you liked me, you would know how important the school is to me and my friends."

Again, Carlota lifted her red fingernail, but this time to tap the top of my chest. It didn't hurt, but it did. "I know you. I know what is best for you," Carlota said.

"No you don't. You're just mean."

"I'm practical. And now, I have been much too indulgent. Go to bed."

"No. I won't."

"You are a self-willed little brat. Go to your room!"

I knew that she did not want Uncle Johnny to find us arguing, and neither did I. And I was afraid that I was going to cry. But I would sooner give away my backpack than cry in front of her. "

I stamped my foot. "You're dumb." Fearful that my uncle would come in and hear me, I turned away and ran back to my room.

When I heard Uncle Johnny come back into the house, I moved into the dark hallway.

"Johnny, your niece attacked me. She called me dumb. Little does she understand about my profession and responsibilities. She's a child and cannot comprehend complex issues, like the budgetary reasons for the closing of a school."

She poured herself a glass of wine and lifted it as if to toast my uncle. "And she's sneaky. She hides in the hallway and listens to people's conversations. She lives in fantasy and exaggerates. Johnny, she lies. This is not character building. She called me names. You have been lax in your discipline of In."

I don't like being called 'In' and Carlota knows, but does it anyway. Adults should respect children. Carlota makes me sound dumb and evil. I'm not.

"Insache has strong opinions, but she loves school. She calls it, 'her school.' For a long time I've known that she sits in the hallway where she can hear and occasionally take a peek around the corner."

"You're defending her? She shrieked at me."

"I won't accept her being rude." He stood. "Carlota, it's her school. It was her mother's school. She needs continuity. We all do." He slumped back into his chair.

Carlota circled the room at least twice, stopped, and pointed the red fingernail at Uncle Johnny. "Nobody cares about John Locke. You want to influence people's thinking. You want discourse and the whole democratic process. I say it's not going to happen. Forget the masses and self-government. Fight it out in the courts for individual rights. Slap a fine on the bastards. Forget the philosophy, the ideology. It's all Populist guano." Carlota said.

I heard Carlota, but she never made much sense to me. "Bastards"-- that was a new word. I could see her suit walking around the room and her arm pointing her red fingernails at Uncle Johnny, who leaned his head on one hand.

"Look, I've got to look in on Insache."

"In that case I'm going home."

I heard my Uncle sigh as he got to his feet.

"Johnny, take responsibility."

I ran to my room to get in bed. But if my uncle came in, I didn't hear him.

For parents' night, the fourth grade is performing on stage in the cafeteria. We are raising money to fight the closing of the school. Television and radio stations will come. I volunteered to do a solo.

On the day of the presentation, I packed an extra lunch, because I needed to stay after school to prepare for my history presentation. We're doing performances based on what we learned in our school to show parents and television that we are getting a good education. I want to surprise Uncle Johnny, so I didn't ask him for help. I snuck in a white sheet to school. Mr. Santillanes, my teacher, helped me cut a pattern for my long, white gown. Mr. Santillanes is a good teacher, but he doesn't know how to sew, so we stapled my dress. Then I walked to the Sanchez grocery store, "Manuel's Market," around the corner from my school and bought yellow, red, green, and blue ribbons, Corn Mother and Statue of Liberty colors. I wanted to buy a Butterfinger. It was my mother's favorite candy bar, but I had only seventy-five cents.

We glued the ribbons around the hem of my dress. When it was all done, I told Mr. Santillanes, "I want a French braid for my hair. My mother always French-Braided my hair for special things."

"Insache, I'll brush your hair, but I don't know how to do a French Braid," Mr. Santillanes said.

"Are you sure? I just can't be on stage without the right 'do.' "

"Okay, okay. My wife is coming tonight. She'll braid your hair and put ribbons in it."

I gave him a big smile. I didn't want him to think that I was ungrateful. But he should know how to work with girls. He's a teacher.

Mr. Santillanes helped me write some words for me to say.

"This is our continuity, the good of the past meeting the present, a belief that we must defend how we live and to speak our opinions. And the mission continues. Each generation picks up the torch as does the Statue of Liberty and the Corn Mother."

I held up the cornstalk and showed the arrowhead. "We believe in life and liberty, and we will fight to protect these rights." The Corn Mother that Uncle Johnny made stood behind me.

Then I added my own ending.

I moved my arms as if I were a whooping crane, a *grulla*, and stomped my feet like I had seen in the Pueblo dances at Cochiti. The audience stood and clapped. I ran off the stage.

"Would my mother be proud of me?"

"Yes. Insache, you follow in the footsteps of guides and interpreters Ines, Sacajawea, and Malinche, all mothers of the *mestizo*."

"Where's Carlota?"

"I didn't ask her." He turned to face me. "Insache?" He held my face in both his hands.
"You and I are family. Always."

"Till do us part at death."

"And even after I die, I will be with you."

I hugged his waist.

When I pulled away, he added, "I will be with you until the end. And even when you are old, you will hear me say, 'Always be kind and before you go to bed brush your teeth. And, never, never be a *babosa*.'" "

I stared up at him and put my hands on my waist the way my mother used to do when I said something dumb, "You're so silly."

Then I stepped back and wrinkled up my nose. "Even, if some of my teeth have fallen out?"

"Until you are old and can't wipe away your *mocos*, and even after that, I will be with you.

We laughed so loud.

Uncle Johnny took my hand. He was taking me to Monica's restaurant in Old Town.

"*Natillas* and *bizcochitos*. Mmmmmmmmm," I whooped.

But I needed to ask. "Do you love her? Carlota?"

"Yes. I want to love her, someone my age."

He stopped and with both hands at his side, opened up his palms. "Nothing is certain. We need to find out if she wants to loves us."