

Don't Ask

A woman with short, greying hair asks Merche to clean ten sardines. It is two o'clock and Merche's husband and son are both already home, waiting for lunch. Merche has just put half a salmon, its flesh plump like a toddler's; two eels, black and slippery; and three flounder into the refrigerator when the woman approaches. Sardines usually sell out fast, but these have been lying on the icy display for two full days, so she is happy to sell them. The woman speaks with a languid South American accent, dropping S's from the ends of words as if they'd been too much to ask of anyone. She wears a coat made of canvas—too young for her—and several silver rings with different colored stones. Merche puts the sardines onto a hanging scale. Almost a kilo. Out of the corner of her eye, Merche can tell that the woman isn't looking, so she pushes the scale with her finger as she turns the dial to face her and gets them to weigh just over a kilo. She tells the woman the price as though she were giving a discount. "Three euros is fine," she says. "Está bien." As she starts to remove the fish from the scale, the woman says, "I'm sorry, but could you clean them?" Merche blows a stream of air through tense lips, but tries to keep her annoyance at bay. Jose and Xan are waiting for her.

As she moves the sardines onto the thick white cutting board, she imagines what she'll do when she gets home in order to make lunch as efficiently as possible. No potatoes today, they'll have rice. It cooks faster. Jose will say, "Rice again?" but he'll shovel it in. She has already covered steaks of hake in a garlic and parsley adobo and they are marinating in a plastic bag. When she gets a minute, right before

leaving, she'll call home and ask one of them to turn on the oven. If it is hot already, everything will go smoothly and she'll have the comida on the table before two forty-five. She sticks her finger into the soft belly of each sardine, sweeps out the organs, makes a macabre pile on the side of the cutting board, the stringy guts the color of blackberries and the translucent scales like bits of mica.

Her finger has just breached the belly of the last sardine when the woman says, "How are your mother and grandmother?" At first she thinks the woman must be talking to someone else. But there is no one else here. She finishes rinsing the fish and slides them onto a Styrofoam tray before turning.

"You know them? My mother and grandmother?" Merche looks dubious, as if the woman is a reporter or a salesperson. When she passes her hand over her hair, Merche can see that she wears rings on every one of her fingers, including her forefinger and thumb, and that the faded remnants of a tattoo, the color of dried peppermint, snakes around her wrist and into the sleeve of her jacket.

Merche feels unsteady and looks down at her tall black boots, covered in fish confetti. Her grandmother used to wear traditional Galician wooden clogs that lifted her tall out of the stinky quagmire that swirls on the floor of the fish stall, but her grandmother also wore dresses. Merche likes to keep the bottoms of her pants clean.

Finally, the woman says, in Galician, "I grew up here. With your mother. We were friends."

Merche shakes her head as if to dispel a dream. "I thought you were from the Americas," she says.

"I've been gone a long time." Her eyes draw an arc around the *plaza de abastos*, her thin smile and small shrug tell Merche that she is reminiscing, and that the place looks smaller now than it used to. "How are they? Your mother? And your grandmother. She continues, yes? Is she well?"

Merche's phone jangles from her purse, which is hanging on a hook. She tries to look apologetic, but feels some relief. "Abuela is in the old age home on the *carretera*," she says. "She can't walk much anymore, but she's doing well. Happy enough. I'll visit her today." She moves toward the phone, but reaches it too late. It was Jose, of course.

"My name is Josefina," the woman says, shaking three euros from her change purse. "She'll remember me. Her memory is good?" Merche nods and hands over the bag of sardines, unties her apron, but Josefina is still standing there. "And your mother?"

Merche doesn't think about her mother very often. She comes to visit once a year at the most and Merche hasn't been to Madrid since she finished high school. Her childhood there has faded in her memory to a smeared canvas of anxiety, smog, and cardboard boxes. Merche would come home from school and there would be the boxes, a small city of cardboard in the kitchen. "I found a great apartment in a better neighborhood," her mother would say. Or, "They're going to renovate." Or, "the landlord is a son of a bitch, honey." As a single mother, Merche's mother was an object of scrutiny. What was she doing alone? Where was the girl's father? Merche's mother didn't let it bother her. She'd get her hair cut short and dyed platinum; she'd smoke cigarettes defiantly as she waited for Merche to come out the elementary

school, always separate from the other mothers. But Merche hated it and wished for a mother who would stay home making lunch. She wished for a mother who would wear clothes in the house, or even a bata. A mother who didn't spend her free time making mobiles out of rusty nuts and bolts that she found in a vacant lot and then throw her hands up when she'd forgotten to make dinner, open a can of tuna, and hand it to Merche with a fork.

"Fine," she says. "Still in Madrid." Merche slides off her boots and slips her feet into zapatillas.

"She was my friend," Josefina says. "I'm sorry, you have to go."

Merche looks at the small plastic clock on the wall. "Yes. I'm sorry."

Josefina has the bag of sardines looped over her wrist and her arms are crossed; she is looking at Merche with an expression that reminds Merche of her mother: equal parts pity, amusement, and disdain. Or is she imagining it? Perhaps it's just curiosity. "Where in the Americas did you migrate to?" Merche turns off the lights and the two women start toward the exit, an enormous wrought iron door with plastic panels to keep out the wind.

"Argentina," Josefina says. "But I've been in New York for the last ten years." She puts her hand on Merche's forearm and they stop on the sidewalk. "I'm so glad to see you. Me alegro mucho. I remember your grandmother with the fish. And you a little girl."

"I'm sorry, I don't..." Merche trails off.

"Of course you don't remember me. I was in Madrid too, though, you know. With you and your mother. We left Galicia together. You didn't know that, did you?"

Merche can't tell if Josefina's eyes were glassy before—the plaza de abastos is dimly lit—or if there are tears in them. Merche realizes that Josefina hadn't been looking at her with pity, as her mother used to do. It was something else, something kinder: Loss. Envy. Maybe even regret. "You were just a baby. Your mother and your father. Well you know about that." Merche didn't know much about it, actually, not because no one would tell her, but because she didn't want to know. Her mother had tried to tell her, but she had always walked away, left the room, satisfied with the life she already knew awaited her in Galicia, with her grandmother. She nods though, not wanting to give Josefina's story fuel to branch off in another direction. She is irritated at this woman for interrupting her life, making her clean sardines, and now telling her all of this, and at lunchtime. She must have been gone a long time to have forgotten the sacred quiet time of the siesta. Merche has been at work since eight and will have to work from five to nine at the perfumería, after making lunch. Josefina goes on, "So we couldn't stay here. It would have been impossible. But your mother." Here Josefina laughs, remembering something naughty. "She was such a free spirit. I loved her you know." Merche nods. Her grandmother had instilled ironclad rules about being polite, honest, generous, but she can feel her face harden, her spirit shrink with the hunger that, if she feels, Jose and Xan must also be feeling. Jose will be washed up after plucking leaves all day in the vineyard, ready to eat. Impossible to fully clean his hands, the nails short and tipped permanently with brown dirt from labor. And Xan, probably on the couch with that sinister Nintendo thing held two inches from his face. "You were such a sweetie. Your mom and you had a real bond when you were a baby. To tell you the truth, it made me jealous. I

never had kids. We had a falling out, your mother and I. Madrid was far enough for her, but not for me, I had to go halfway around the world.” She pauses, looks up at the sky. It is hard and blue. “Sometimes I wish I’d stayed, you know. You would’ve been like a daughter to me, but, well, you know, some people, it seems, they have to keep moving.” Josefina indicates a small rua that winds down into the old town center. “I’m down here,” she says. “My family’s place. My brother uses it on weekends, but he’s in Vigo during the week.” Merche leans down to give Josefina two kisses. Her face is soft like the skin of a peach.

When she gets home, Merche sees that the hake has leaked into her shoulder bag. She hadn’t gotten a chance to call home and ask someone to light the oven, so she does that now, then gets a sponge and soap to scrub the fish juice out of the bag. Jose emerges from the bedroom, his hair damp and combed.

“What in the devil were you doing?” He takes a beer from the refrigerator but doesn’t sit down.

“I got caught up, a friend of my mother’s.”

“Xan needs to eat,” he says. “If I’m going to have to learn to cook, you should let me know.” She pulls a flat tray from the oven, arranges the fish on it. Pours rice into a pot. Jose leaves the small kitchen and sits beside their son on the couch. Merche can see the backs of their two heads: the same black hair, Xan’s thick and greasy and Jose’s thinning at the back. The skin of the scalp underneath is tanned the color of the earth. The television is on: highlights from last night’s soccer game.

Before she went into the home, Merche’s grandmother used to make lunch on Sundays. The apartment would be full of the smell of boiling potatoes, sizzling meat,

stewed cabbage. Merche misses it. Being the one cared for, returning to that place where children live, if they're lucky, in the bosom of their guardian's hive, protected and fed. It was what had been missing in Madrid, with her mother, and it was what had brought her back to Galicia. But now she is the one doing all the feeding and protecting. It is the way of the world, but still she misses being young.

When the rice is simmering and the fish is in the oven, Merche sits heavily on one of the anemic kitchen chairs. Jose calls to her, "I can smell your fishy clothes. Get changed."

Merche goes into the bedroom, pulls a clean pair of pants from the drawer, hangs her pants on the hook in the enclosed balcony. She turns down the rice and goes to sit next to Jose.

"What? What is it?"

"I met a friend of my mother's today," she says.

"That's strange. And?"

"She seems sad."

"Why?"

"I think they were, you know, with each other."

Jose has a pretend coughing fit and indicates Xan, who has let his Nintendo drop onto his lap, his attention won over by the Choco Puff commercial on TV.

"Best not to talk about that kind of thing," Jose says quietly.

Normally, Merche would agree with him. But today, she wants to talk about her mother, and she wants her husband to listen. "You want to come in the kitchen?" she says, and stands up.

“Is the lunch ready?”

“Not yet. But we can talk in there.”

“Aw, no, Merche. I’m exhausted. I need to rest.”

“So am I.” Her voice is quietly exasperated.

“Fine.” He stands and follows her into the kitchen. They sit at the table, and Jose says, “Your mother is sick. You were smart to get out of there.”

Merche is grateful for his following her into the kitchen. She is grateful that he didn’t completely forsake her for the highlights of last night’s game. But she doesn’t want his opinion. She just wants him to sit with her, and to listen. And if she were completely honest, to goddamn make some food every once in a while. But she doesn’t say that.

“But this woman, she is alone. And my mother is alone. At least she was last we spoke.”

“They’re sick, but I don’t want them to suffer,” Jose says. He drinks the last of his beer and tosses the can in the sink.

Merche’s mother hasn’t visited Galicia in almost a year. The last time she came, she stayed for three nights. She slept on the mattress that pulls out from under the bed in Xan’s room. In the mornings, she’d sit in a chair in the corner of the fish stall, help Merche cook, show her new recipes she’d learned in Madrid. The years had softened her and, while she didn’t approve of Merche’s decision to lead this life, she had accepted it. In the afternoons, she was duty bound to sit with her mother in the old age home. She insisted on walking there, rather than go with Merche in the car, and

she'd leave half an hour before Merche would so she could walk home again. For the little time that she was there, she was pleasant and seemed to get along fine with her mother, but Merche did most of the talking, her mother and grandmother smiling and nodding. Merche left the two of them alone once, and when she returned from her walk around the yard, her mother was outside the door to Abuela's room, waiting for her.

"What are you doing?" Merche said. "Is she okay?" She peered past her mother's shoulder to look into the room.

"Fine," her mother said, shaking a cigarette from a pack. "The same as ever." She paused. "I'm glad she's a good grandmother at least. I'm just going for a cigarette. Be back soon."

In the room, her grandmother was picking lint nubs from the sleeve of her black sweater.

"Hola, abuela. Todo bien?" Her grandmother looked up from her sleeve and nodded. Some emotion that Merche couldn't decipher flickered across her face for an instant.

"Of course. Where were you?"

Merche sat on the ledge below the window. "The bathroom. Mom's gone for a cigarette." Her grandmother nodded and went back to her sweater.

Merche never asked either of them why they were like this. She more-or-less already knew and she knew too that she wasn't going to be able to change things. She knew she was disappointing to her mother and that her mother was likewise a

disappointment to her grandmother and that when her mother came to visit it was a chore—she'd much prefer to stay in Madrid, where nobody would judge her.

Merche opens the oven and prods the hake with a fork, then rinses the rice. She can hear Jose peeing loudly in the bathroom. She calls Xan for lunch and they both sit at the table. Merche gets plates, knives and forks, douses a platter of lettuce with olive oil and vinegar. Finally, as she sits down herself, Jose and Xan are already eating.

After lunch, when Xan is back on his Nintendo and Jose has returned to the sofa, Merche takes their tiny Seat to visit her grandmother.

There are several ancient people bent into wheelchairs on the front lawn as she approaches. The sun is behind the building so they are in the shade, and a nurse sits nearby, reading a magazine. She looks up as Merche passes and says, "Muy buenas."

Inside the building, everything is painted yellow. Merche figures the builders were trying to make it cheery, but it feels like they're in the middle of a giant tortilla. Her grandmother is sitting on the chair next to her bed. Merche kisses her soft cheek and crouches down to look at her face. "Muy buenas, Abuelita," she says. Her grandmother's hair is wispy; her eyes are rheumy. She has somewhere between seven and twelve teeth sticking out of her pink gums. She has worn no other color than black since Merche's grandfather died thirty years ago. Her hands are still strong as they grip Merche and pull her close. Merche finds herself wanting to put her head into her grandmother's lap, to sit on the floor and stay that way all afternoon. But she is a grownup now. She is no longer a child and hasn't been for a

very long time. She moves back and sits on the bed. Being a grownup means feeling alone a lot of the time. Even when you're with people.

"I met a woman named Josefina today, at the fish stall," she says, looking at the floor. "A friend of my mother's." When she looks up, her grandmother's eyes are closed. When she opens them, she shakes her head a little to say she's not sure she remembers. Merche goes on, "We had hake today, and rice. The woman bought sardines, but I don't know who she was going to be eating them with. Maybe she'll be having some for breakfast." Merche recounts the details of her day. Her grandmother interjects with things like, "Well, sardines are good for breakfast, especially in the wintertime," and, "Those games the kids are playing, they must be ruining their eyes." Then it is time for Merche to leave. Jose will need the Seat to get back to the vineyard and she has to work in the perfumería. She kisses her grandmother's cheek, lingers, crouching. "Thank you for coming," her grandmother says. "Nonsense," Merche says. "I always come."

The next day, Josefina shows up again. It is warmer and she wears green cargo shorts that are popular with teenage boys and a white T-shirt with a smear of gold paint in the shape of a heart.

"How were the sardines?" Merche asks.

"Not the freshest, but they were fine." She winks to show Merche that she isn't mad.

"You never asked," Merche reminds her.

“No. I never did. I guess you can’t expect a person to tell you something if you don’t ask.”

“Yes,” Merche agrees. “If you ask, you need to be prepared for the answer.”

There is silence as Josefina looks over the fish laid out on crumbly blood-streaked ice. “Estás contenta?” she says. Merche, who hadn’t been expecting such a question, blanches. She’d been enjoying their banter and is annoyed to be exposed like this. Like Josefina had wedged something into her.

“Of course,” she manages.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to....” Josefina looks remorseful. “Listen, just give me one of those flounder there. I will fry it in the pan; you don’t need to do anything with it. I’ll clean it at home.”

Merche feels her strength returning and says, “Bueno, Josefina, are *you* happy?”

They both laugh when Josefina replies. “More than that flounder.”