

## She Is Familiar and I Am Strange

It's not an easy thing to love someone the way I love Sandy. Sometimes I wish I didn't. But that love has also pulled me closer to the world. I'll tell her someday, probably shock her to death. But maybe not. It could've already occurred to her. She probably knew it before I did. Sandy's always had the answers to questions I didn't even think to ask.

When we were in third grade, she showed me how to let the ground swallow us up. I could never quite manage it. We lay in a sea of grass, eyes squeezed shut, waiting, me fidgeting, until she started yelling. A giant hand reached out of the ground and seized us. (According to her.) After a valiant struggle, which we always lost, we splayed out on our bellies, faces pressed down. Sandy said the earth claimed us, gobbled us up in one bite the way we inhaled her mom's empanadas. I felt the sun baking my body, saw the glowing red of my eyelids, but Sandy insisted we were swimming through the world beneath the field. I squeezed my eyes tighter and hoped with everything I had that the earth would consume me the way it did Sandy. But it never did. I opened my mouth and tasted dirt and grass.

Sneaking a peak over at Sandy, I watched the wind caress her dark curls. She embraced the earth with her entire body, large limbs spreading in different directions. Faint freckles covered her arms like stardust. Sandy's skin is paler than mine, courtesy of her Irish father.

"Alix, what do you see?" She always asked this.

I quickly plucked something out of the anxious current of my thoughts. A man made out of pinecones floating past us, a beautiful conch shell, a bunch of women talking and laughing.

"So you saw mis tías?" She asked expectantly.

“If I say yes can I come over later for food?” The words tumbled out of my mouth, prompting her laughter. Sandy has a booming laugh, the kind that fills a room. Just total abandonment. It could scare a herd of grown elephants.

“Yeah you can come,” she said.

A month and a half ago, I asked if I could stay with her and her kids for a long weekend. Work was becoming unbearable, or maybe I was. I think another version of me exists somewhere, probably under Sandy’s field. My skin feels like an itchy coat that I have yet to throw away. And the crux is that I don’t know why. It’s a peculiar conundrum, not knowing exactly what my problem is. To not have a name for it.

Names hold power, an outline of destiny that may or may not happen. Living up to its name, the new coronavirus began ruling the world shortly after that long weekend with Sandy and the kids. She couldn’t bear the thought of me waiting out the pandemic alone, so she called and told me to stay at her place. I paced around my apartment. Breathed in the stale air. The possibility of being around Sandy and her kids melted the ice in my thoughts. It wasn’t a difficult choice to make.

Being at Sandy’s is like living in the color yellow. The place vibrates with the people who live in it, as well as those long gone. When a door opens of its own accord or the floors creak and groan, Sandy and the kids greet each ghost by name. At least one dish breaks every day, and food seems to have mysteriously taken on the ability to fly. It’s a happy chaos: chattering kids and Lola Beltrán crooning in the background. For a girl who likes her peace and quiet, it’s kind of funny that this is one of my favorite places in the world.

“Oy Alix, you trying to retire on me?!”

The sinking couch cushions were lulling me to sleep, but her voice pulls me awake.

A giant yawn distorts my explanation.

“C’mon girl, let’s go sit in the sun. Best medicine there is. Gotta keep our immune systems healthy. Plus, Santi and Vale want to play outside.” Santiago and Valentina could be heard crashing around the kitchen, arguing. Sandy heaves a theatrical sigh.

“Let’s go before they destroy my kitchen.”

I acquiesce.

Most of the yard is a forest of plants: sage, tomatoes, corn, various succulents, rosemary, cucumbers, lamb’s-ear, yerba santa, roses, nasturtiums, and a bunch of things I don’t recognize. Each gentle breeze carries a new aroma. The rest of the yard is a concrete slab strewn with toys. An old rusted brown Chevy, which Sandy fondly calls the Honey Bucket, is parked in a corner. Probably permanently. There’s a blue checkered sofa rescued from the side of the road that’s proudly displayed in the center of the yard. Despite its rough and weathered look, it’s still inviting.

We sit in a pale patch of sunlight. Vale and Santi start an incomprehensible game that involves whispering words and scattering small stones. I take this moment and imprint it in my heart to reexamine later. My mind starts to wander away from the garden, fractured thoughts vying for my attention. Part of my focus disappears to an unreachable place.

“Earth to A? I think we should talk. Something’s up. I don’t think you’re happy. Or even okay. And not just ‘cuz there’s a pandemic happening.”

I watch an ant make its way across my big toe.

“It’s like only half of you is here. Not saying you owe me your full self all the time. But I-” This is heading into dangerous territory.

“Do you remember those games we used to play?” I cut in. “In the field? Do you still think about that place under the field?”

She pauses, letting the questions hover in the air between us.

“Well, yes and no,” she says slowly. “I don’t go to that world under the field like when we were kids, like a game. It’s more like I let whatever I’m doing fill me up. If I’m watering the plants, I’m also pouring in love and gratitude, thanking them for growing. I mean, it’s not that simple. Of course I’m also thinking about the kids, the laundry, the bills...you...”

She trails off and each of us settles into her own thoughts. The kids start balancing stones, building little mountains for their figurines to climb. Vale places a small white stone on the mountaintop. A moment before it all falls, I feel the weight of that stone. One small addition can bring down the whole mountain.

“But what does that have to do with how you've been feeling?” Sandy says.

What, indeed. I feel a stab of resentment towards her. I was the one who left, who went to college and traveled and worked, who got out and saw the world. All the while carrying this love for her. She stayed and had kids with a guy who dipped out shortly after Vale’s birth, and she’s fine. She’s always fine. I don’t think I’ll ever understand the meaning of home. And I’ll always need Sandy more than she needs me.

I choose my words carefully. “You’re right, and I’m sorry. I know I’m distracted all the time. Half of me *is* someplace else.” I’m proud of myself. No note of resentment strikes a chord in my voice.

She locks me in the full force of her gaze, lips tight and eyebrows raised. I haven't fooled her for one goddamn second. We stare at each other until I blink.

I get up abruptly and head towards the house. The sunlight has established itself in my eyes and on my skin. The warmth feels good. I make my way to the kitchen and sit at the table. The cool darkness of the house is shocking. I look at my hands, which are resting palm up on the smooth oak table. I remember Sandy calling me, gushing about how she did the sanding and finishing herself. She was so excited about it.

I feel guilty for my resentment. It's not Sandy's fault that I love her the way I do. That sometimes it makes my skin crawl and I don't know why.

Vale, having apparently abandoned the game with her brother, comes in and snuggles against my legs. I guess she doesn't notice whatever trashy aura of self pity I'm exuding.

"Aunty Alix are you and mami fighting?" She asks.

This child misses nothing. It floors me.

"Baby, no. We were just talking. Everything's okay," I say, running my fingers through her curls. I plant a kiss on her head.

"Are you gonna leave?" Her eyes pool with tears that don't quite spill over. My stomach drops.

"Vale, honey, listen to me. I love you, your mom, and your brother more than anything in the world. I'm not going anywhere."

She watches me with Sandy's eyes. Apparently satisfied with my answer, she takes my hand and marches me outside, chattering about the mountain she and Santi made. They show it to me, babbling excitedly. I can't resist their warmth.

When they move on to another game, I take it I'm allowed to be dismissed. After a deep breath I walk towards Sandy, who hasn't moved from the sofa.

She speaks without looking at me. "My mami, may she rest in peace, taught me some blessing rituals she made up. You know, stuff for good fortune and protection and all that. We could try one." She glances at my face.

I smile a little and nod. Leave it to Sandy to go from talk therapy to this. I'm up for it, though. She gets up and goes into the house, returning with her tools for magic. There's a candle, some chalk, and a bundle of sage. Sandy kneels on the concrete and draws a circle with the piece of chalk. She lights the candle and places it just outside.

"Ok. Stand in the circle, and focus your eyes on the flame. Breathe in as deep as you can. I'm going to smudge sage around you and whisper the blessing."

I do as she says. It feels good to take deep breaths. The flame dances in hues of orange and yellow, and a languid peace steals over me. I'm hyper aware of everything. My heartbeat drums in the tips of my fingers and my breath sounds like the ocean.

But when Sandy lights the sage, tendrils of smoke reach inside me, trying to pull something out. Seized with violent coughing, my eyes streaming, I double over from the exertion. Sandy is pounding my back, exclaiming her distress, but I'm laughing so hard I can't hear her.

Between peals of giggles and snorts, I say, "I think that worked better than we meant it to. Congratulations, Sandy. We didn't just get protection and good fortune. We exorcised a fucking demon."

Despite her concern, laughter explodes out of her so loudly that Vale and Santi stop what they're doing and watch us, mouths open. When the laughter dies down, we just look at each other and collapse into cackles. One look is enough to keep shaking us with hysterics. There's joy, too, joy that can't be contained: just the pure pleasure of being with the person who knows you better than anyone and loves you anyway. She's the love of my life, and I don't think I ever want to tell her. The moment reaches out its hand and draws us somewhere that belongs only to us.

"Sandy." I say her name like an incantation.