

## Asylum

My daughter sleeps upright with her back propped against the concrete wall. Her head rests upon a worn canvas bag. The seams are split and frayed, bound together with thick silver tape. Her black hair is dull and matted, falling to her shoulders in tangled knots. Even in her sleep, she scratches at her scalp and the skin around her neck and ears. I don't know if she has lice or fleabites or both. The streetlight arched high above us casts a pale, yellow halo over the dark alley where we stopped for the night. I reach out to wipe dirt from her face and freeze when I see my own fingers, crusted with mud and dried blood.

"Ashli," I whisper. Her eyelids flutter, yet they remain closed. A police siren wails in the distance and a bottle breaks somewhere down the street. The acrid smell of urine burns my nose. The night is warm, but I shiver because the cloak of darkness that conceals us also puts us in danger. There are others nearby, hidden in the shadows, forgotten creatures claiming the city's most deteriorated areas.

A few feet away, newspapers rustle. Someone coughs. I flinch and reach into my faded knapsack, searching for something to protect us, already knowing my fingers will come up empty. Two thousand miles ago, it was stuffed full and the zipper strained against the fabric to close. The bag is empty now, except for a set of papers and a Spanish-English dictionary. The spine of the dog-eared book is torn. The papers are smudged with fingerprints. I smooth the crumpled pages bearing an eagle and a flag of the United States. Below this seal, there is one word stamped in heavy black ink.  
*Approved.*

We have been traveling for months, maybe even a year, or more. I have no idea what day it is, but I know the exact date we left home. August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It was my birthday and the day after my husband Manuel disappears. We catch the last bus leaving Honduras for Guatemala. It departs at midnight. I wait in the shadows with Ashli until the last passenger climbs the stairs and the driver stretches his legs one final time before sitting behind the wheel. As we step onto the bus, I shield my daughter's tiny body, bracing for the bullet that might pierce me from behind. No one is waiting for us at the bus depot and the accordion door slides shut.

I miss Manuel. His coffee-colored eyes were bright and full of light. They were the first thing I noticed when we met. We were only children at the time, but the moment he smiled at me from across the classroom, I knew that I would spend the rest of my life with him. His family owned a grocery store and my parents approved of our match.

Once we were married, Manuel stopped working for his father and began selling beans and rice to the locals on the other side of town. They liked him, often stopping to say hello when they passed by his simple street-side grocery store. God blessed us with our beautiful baby girl. Her hair grew in thick lustrous curls that fell to her shoulders. Her lips were full and she had Manuel's eyes. Her laughter was a soft lilt, like a fairy twinkle that floated on the air itself. We spent hours trying to find ways to hear it again and again. We were happy.

Despite his father's stern warnings, Manuel added more items to our inventory; sodas and flavored waters, hard candies and pan de coco that I made in our small kitchen using my grandmother's recipe. His business doubled each week. We spoke of opening a second store. We talked about having another child.

But the Barrio appear. Two of them. They do not carry guns and they do not dress differently from anyone else on the street. When the front door opens and they step inside the store, Manuel knows who they are. He shoves Ashli towards the back room. Our toddler stumbles forward and falls to the floor, letting out a cry of surprise. When he doesn't turn to comfort her, I know, too. The men have come to collect taxes. This is part of life in our country. Everyone in town knows about the people who refuse to pay the gangs. Bloodied corpses with missing limbs and fingers, and stab wounds, and bullet holes are dumped alongside the roads outside of town.

At first, the two men stop by once a week, tapping on the window to let Manuel know they are outside. He hands them ten dollars and they leave without exchanging words. The weeks wear on. Now they come every three days. Manuel cuts a hole in our bed pillow and slips money into the opening when we have it to spare. I fasten the hole with a safety pin. At night, we whisper. In America, we will open a big grocery store.

Manuel and I have no money to restock supplies. Our shelves grow empty and after he hands over the last of our earnings to the Barrio, I sift through old beans left in the sacks no one wants to buy. I boil them for a long time. They are still tough. I feed Ashli first. Manuel insists that he's not hungry, but I shush him and divide the remaining beans between our two plates.

The Barrio come every day. Through the closed door, I can hear Manuel explain that we have nothing to give. The two men take turns slapping his face. I cringe at the sharp cracking sound their open palms make when they connect with his skin, knowing full well that he would rather die than suffer the humiliation they are inflicting on him. When they are done and they leave, Manuel fishes the money out of the pillow and

hands it to me. We have saved one hundred dollars, which is not enough, but we cannot stay. At the end of the week, we will flee our home and head to America where our hard work will be welcomed and embraced. Ashli will go to school every day where she will learn to read. We will have more children and buy a big house with a yard. We fall asleep holding each other, dreaming of our new life.

The next day, Manuel leaves the house to buy me a small birthday present. I insist that he not leave--we need to save everything for our trip. But he smiles at me and kisses the tip of my nose before setting out to the market. The day is long. As the sunlight fades on the horizon, I sit in the dark apartment. Manuel has not returned. There's no reason to call the police or tell my parents, or his parents. I know they can't help me. I know my husband is dead.

I stuff two bags with our belongings and rouse Ashli from her bed. She rubs her eyes and clutches a stuffed bear. I tell her to leave it behind. My words sound gruff and when she begins to cry, I tell her to stop. Now is not the time to grieve or fuss. We sneak out of the house, keeping to the shadows until we reach the bus depot. Diesel fumes fill our lungs and from where we hide behind a grove of palm trees, we listen to the bus rattle and vibrate as it idles in the dark. We climb on board to begin our new life. As we pull away, I press my head against the glass window and say a silent prayer for Manuel.

The bus drives to Mexico. Our bodies are sore from being bounced along dirt roads, but this is only the beginning of our long journey to America. We live on the streets and we beg for food and hide in abandoned buildings like stray dogs. There are many of us and the locals do not want to help us because we have no money and we are

dirty. I've never been so dirty. Sometimes, they threaten us with angry words and gestures. They make fists and chase us from the village centers.

Ashli is hungry and thirsty, yet she does not complain. I keep her close to my side. She is so young, but I see the way men stare at her and at me. I tuck her hair into a hat. There are other women traveling without husbands and we stay together as best we can. Each day, we draw closer to the American border. A buzz of excitement electrifies the travelers walking with us. But the police begin to raid the streets, often at night, when we are most vulnerable.

They come for us.

We are thrown in jail. We stay like this for an eternity as our papers are reviewed and our lives are considered by a system of faceless individuals who do not know us or our story. I tell Ashli that God will protect us.

America waits for us.

There are many memories I want to forget and as I watch Ashli shudder in her sleep, I know she has them, too. She has nightmares about the rats that crept along the walls of our cell to steal food from our plates. She was afraid of them. I try not to remember the face of the prison guard who shakes me awake every night, holding his finger to his lips for me to stay quiet. He does not have to worry about that. I would suffer a thousand deaths in silence to keep my child safe.

"Ashli," I whisper again. I touch my daughter's matted hair and as I do, a burst of color explodes in the air, followed by a thunderous boom. The little girl jumps at the

sound and cries out. She huddles flat against the ground like I taught her to do when there is gunfire. She covers her head with her arms. The heavens become a kaleidoscope of brilliant light. The noise is deafening. A couple in fine clothing hurries by, holding cardboard whistles. The woman wears a crown made of purple cardboard. When she walks beneath the streetlamp, the crown reflects the light from above and flashes for a moment. She spots us, huddled against the building, and her eyes flicker with surprise. She grips the man's elbow and whispers in his ear. They slow their pace and he slides his hand into the pocket of his coat. He seems to be considering something, but then he changes his mind.

“Happy New Year,” he says, pulling his empty hand from his pocket. He wraps his arm around the woman's waist and pulls her along. The couple reaches the end of the street where they hop into a taxi. I crouch beside my daughter and pull her into a sitting position. She stares into the dark night. Her eyes are knitted together in confusion.

“Ashli, look!” I point into the air as another firework lights the sky.

“Dónde estamos?”

“America,” I say, pressing my palms together in prayer.

“Lo hicimos?”

“Si. We did it.”

“Que día es?”

“Say in English.”

“What day it is?” Ashli asks. Her English is clipped. She looks at me for approval. I nod and smile trying to recall the words the man said to us a few moments ago. Ashli

stands and raises her arms over her head as though she is trying to pull the twinkling lights to Earth and reclaim the darkness.

“It is happy new life.”