

*The Red Old Man*

“You didn’t go to school today?” Nata comes out to the street, looking like a pale inflated balloon with tarantula legs and arms. People bark at you if you miss school in this *colonia*.

“No, I left my uniform outside last night. It got very wet.” I look down at the dirty water, only half paying attention to Nata’s legs in white stockings close to the puddle.

“Why didn’t you iron it, lazy little girl?”

“Our iron is not electric like yours,” I answer her. “It needs a lot of wood coals.” I jump into the puddle, making sure to splash the brown water all over her. “Oh, oh you little devil. I hope very soon, the red old man scares you, when you become a woman!” She screams this at me, so that other women going to market can hear her and call my mother. I run inside my house before Mamá can come to hit me with a stick.

Doña Nata, whenever she encounters the neighborhood women either on their way to or from the bus stop at the end of our street, moves alongside my mother whenever she joins the group to shop at El Mercado Central. Then Nata stands in front of Mamá, holds her own hands together behind her back, her stomach extending as big as a watermelon, even though she is not pregnant. She says, “Oh, your daughter’s breasts are starting to show! Don’t let her wear tight T- shirts. I have seen the men’s eyes narrow and their shoulders widen when she passes in front of them. Has the red old man visited her yet?” My mother only listens to her because she lets her buy food for the family on credit at her tiny market in her living room. We always pay later.

I go inside the house. I stand on top of a chair trying to reach the window to see whether the women have gone by yet. The silence of the morning grows in my feet. I sit down on the metal chair and little by little I give sound to the silence, smacking my bare feet on the tile floor as I look in at Mamá’s room.

She stares into the tiny broken mirror she grips in her hand as she combs her long black hair with her fingers, touches her cheeks, examines her mouth and the empty spaces where her molars used to be. The mirror with the big crack down the middle of it divides her thirty-eight-year-old face. We girls never use a mirror. Everybody else’s eyes tell us how we look. The broken mirror used to belong to my cousin, Teresa. She picks up things the rich people leave next to the trash cans on the street.

“Mamá, why don’t you buy a mirror?” I move aside the curtain that separates her room from the living room, sitting down on her bed.

“You and your brothers and sisters break them.” She moves quickly out of the room to join my aunts in the kitchen. I want to ask her about the red old man, but instead I follow and sit at a distance from the women. The morning is moving quickly. The clear yellow light has already hit the mango tree’s branches. Aunt Lina is visiting us today. We used to live in her house, but she married an evangelic man who told her to sell the house and to kick us out.

I come back inside to my oval chair, move it close to the radio and put on some music. “Dalia, turn off the radio and start cleaning the house, and then wash the dishes,” Mamá yells from the kitchen. The kitchen looks more like an improvised patio. From there you can see all the neighbors going by to Nata’s store, or heading to get to bus number five. We always have to say “goodbye,” or “how are you?” to passersby. We ignore the ones we specifically don’t like or don’t know by running inside the house. The people always turn their heads to look at our kitchen. Papá should have walled it in all around.

“I already swept the floor, Mamá. Washing dishes...it’s not my turn today.” I turn down the radio. My aunts stand talking in the kitchen doorway. Their faces lean in closely to one another. They are both tiny women, small feet shifting in sandals and flat black shoes. Their little hands move in different directions as they talk. Sometimes they glance at me accusingly, as though I am trying to steal their thoughts.

My curly-haired aunt, her name is Margarita, but we children like to call her Tía Yita. I like her curly hair, and she is the only one with curly hair. Mamá says it’s because she has a different father from hers, but that’s never been a problem, since they love each other as though they have the same father. None of their fathers were around anyway; only my grandmother was there for them. My Tía Yita and her two children live with us. Tía Yita never sits in a chair to eat with us or to talk. She is always standing. If I ask her to sit, she answers scratching her head that she has no time to waste.

“It is a problem to have daughters,” Aunt Lina says from nowhere. Perhaps she is picking up a conversation left hanging from the last time she visited. “You never know where they are going to end up,” my curly-haired aunt says with a shy expression on her face, as she looks in my direction. I pretend I am listening to the radio and not to them.

“What are you listening to?” Aunt Lina comes close to me and touches my hair. “It’s a song in

English. It says ‘plise, plise don gow,’ in Spanish it means ‘*por favor no te vayas.*’” I stand up to get closer to her. “I don’t know how you can understand that, but I hope you continue studying. You are still young. At eleven years old you can learn all the things you will need in life.” She walks back to Mamá in the kitchen.

“Why don’t you sit and I will make you some coffee, Aunt Lina?” I ask as I follow her. I want her to talk to me. “We have work to do. Go up into the tree to cut some mangos for Lina to take home,” my curly-haired aunt interrupts me, and heads purposefully out the door to the cement sink, where we wash the clothes. Mamá and my aunts arrange themselves into a triangle, they talk and work at the same time.

“How is Teresa? Did she come back?” Mamá helps Aunt Lina set chairs in place and drops her own big black bag on the ground. Mamá settles herself comfortably to talk and to write down the things she needs from the Mercado Central. “I went yesterday to see if I could talk to her, but she was locked up in a room.” Aunt Lina seems almost ashamed.

“What are you doing standing there, listening in on adult conversations? Go up to the tree and cut some mangos for your aunt.” Mamá says to me, while curly-haired Tía Yita nods. I slip back into the house quickly to get a knife and a bowl in case I feel hungry for mangos up there. “Be careful going up. The tree can be slippery. It rained so hard last night,” Aunt Lina says as I run to the ladder to go up on the terrace on top of the house. From there I can easily reach the mango tree, which although it grows from below, reaches up high over the little patio where my mother and aunts are seated. I climb quickly near the top of the mango tree. The branches are full of mangos. I clear off a small branch full of them, placing them in the bowl. From here, out of their sight, I see the three women talking freely, forgetfully unaware of my presence.

“How old was Teresa when the red old man came to her?” Mamá bites a ripe mango leaving red lipstick marks on it. “She was twelve,” Aunt Lina puts an apron around her waist. “I am worried. Carmen is nine and once they turn twelve and the red old man comes, you cannot control them anymore.” Tía Yita’s pained voice does not slow her washing of the clothes. By this time I have shifted from the tree to the edge of the terrace where I dangle my legs.

“I took Teresa to church to see whether that would help her, but she just made fun of the Evangelics.” Aunt Lina reaches down to pick up the hen my mother tied up earlier. She lays the hen on the table, slices off its head, and holds the hen still as its blood flows. My mother asks, “Did she bleed a lot?” “I didn’t know about it until she was already pregnant.” Aunt Lina pours

water over the table to wash the blood off. “You were foolish to take her to the church. Now that evangelic man has locked her up in his house until he gets home from work.” Mamá wipes the mango juice from her hands and the smudged lipstick from her mouth. “When the red old man scared me I didn’t even realize it. I was working so hard on the tobacco farm,” Tía Yita says as she washes my father’s blue pants.

Mamá readies herself to go to the market. “I remember when Margarita was locked up in a house, too. Remember, Lina? That crazy man who nailed the door shut on Yita and nobody knew about it. Somebody came and told our Mamá that Margarita was missing and Mamá took a *tecomate* gourd and went to each corner of our house at noon calling Margarita’s name into the gourd. She told us that the echo of the *tecomate* would reach Margarita wherever she was and make her desperate to do anything in order to escape any danger she was in.” Tía Yita nods. “I remember I broke the door down and never saw that man again.”

I lean back, lying flat on my back on the terrace, to look up at the open blue September sky. Teresa is only three years older than I, and now she is pregnant. I used to play hide-and-seek with her at her house. There were three houses on their barely developed dirt street, with a *cafetal* in front and a long tall wall to separate the skinny houses from the new rich *colonia*, called Jardines de Guadalupe. There was the tall *maquilishuat* tree with its pink flowers, the only tree we could climb on the whole narrow street.

My brothers and I used to play a game with Teresa called “The Prisoner.” We were the birds that fed the prisoner. We would lock her in her bedroom and then spend an hour passing fake and sometimes real food through the window. From the tree we connected a string to the window and let a plastic container slide to her with food and imaginary weapons inside to help her get out of jail. The food was sometimes mangos, leaves, flowers, or some bread that Teresa donated to the game. The weapons were stones, pieces of wood, sticks, and pieces of broken bottles we found in the trash of the rich people.

My sister Estela would climb with Teresa on top of the dining table and do go-go dancing. They would sing a song that always played on the radio in the afternoon, that goes “bule, bule,” and another that goes “I guana hol iour han.” My little brothers and I were the audience. They lifted their dresses above the knees to look like the girls in mini-skirts from the magazines my brother brought us from the rich *colonia*. Estela and Teresa’s legs look like straws, they are so skinny.

I look down at Aunt Lina. She looks different, stiller and calmer than her sisters. On the

weekends, she works as a midwife helping with the delivery of babies in the poor communities. She is so clean and organized as she washes up all the mess related to our chicken lunch.

Tía Yita says, “Teresa has been a fighter and a big-mouth since she was little, a complete devil. She talked back to me. How can this be happening to her?” She places white clothes in a bucket with water and bleach.

“Don’t worry, Lina,” says my mother as she puts a pot full of water on the wood burning stove. “She will get out of there.” Mamá disappears back into the house to get ready to leave. I look hard at the other two women wondering where they hide the red old man.

“Well, I hope Carmen gets married and doesn’t run around with men when the red old man comes. I will keep an eye on her so she doesn’t have all the problems I did,” Tía Yita says with a voice that sounds hurt, like the hens when my dad ties their legs so they cannot nest their eggs.

Mamá reemerges from the house looking very beautiful. She puckers her lips and says to her sisters, “Does it look all right?” Before they can answer, she turns and looks upward. “Where is Dalia? Is she still up in the tree? That little girl still wants to climb trees.” “Well, she’s eleven. You should be thinking about her,” says Tía Yita. “Ah no, their father insists on keeping them at school and not letting them near boys until they have finished something.” My mother’s solidly sure voice always leaves my aunts silent. “Dalia! Dalia! Come down! I’m going to the market now.”

I gather up the bowl of mangos and rush down the ladder. “Here I am.” I face the three women with only my sad voice to protect me. “I don’t want the red old man to scare me.” The words come out loud like a Mexican ranchera that plays at five o’clock in the morning. The three women look at each other. Then, my two aunts return to their chores. Inside I feel as if my body shrank like an old ripe mango under the hot sun.

“You will be punished for listening in on adult conversations,” says Mamá. I hug her. “Don’t be foolish. No one will scare you.” She returns my hug. I go out of the house, stand in the middle of the street to watch Mamá leaving. As she disappears from sight, the image of the red old man is right in front of me. He has two faces. One side of his face is like a man’s, wrinkled with dark red lines in his teeth. He is laughing so hard that I want to pull his long bright hair and tie his mouth with it. But the other side of the face is a serious pale woman. She holds a red bag in her hand. When I try to touch her, she throws the bag in my face. I jump away from her, and land in the puddle of soft brown water, the exact place where I was playing before. I wonder why Mamá did not tell me the red old man has two faces.

The women coming back from their errands talk about what they are cooking for lunch.

“I bought these big tomatoes to stuff them.” One woman takes out a big red round tomato.

“I am going to prepare bean soup with pork bones,” another woman says, looking at me in the puddle where I play, lost in my thoughts. “Look at this little girl still here. She just might become a little pig in the dirty water!” She points at me with her finger.

I stand in front of them quite seriously with my arms planted on my waist. “I know the red old man has two faces!” The women laugh hard, looking at me with pity. I come back inside my house and sit on the oval chair and think about the women’s laughter, so similar to the laugh of the red old man.

