

*When you wake up, I have something to tell you*

Grandma Blanca is wearing Danilo's old shoes. The white ones with the Nike logo he used for turf. She says she wears them because they belong to a future soccer star. But I know it's because she doesn't have anything else. She laughs when I point this out. Her head swivels back when she tries to make eye contact with me. "I am an inch short of being a midget," she proudly tells anyone who will listen. "I've never felt small and I bore six children," she adds. *Five too many* I think when I hear her say this.

We are in the kitchen and grandma is making coffee. If today was Sunday, she would make us hot chocolate; not Nestle, but the real dark bitter hot chocolate with cinnamon and a hint of sugar and she would serve it with fresh corn dough. But apart from Danilo, who is a junior in High School, we are all going to work. My parents work at a Colombian bakery in Flushing, where my father makes bread and my mother tends to the cash register. Blanca, as I call my grandmother, arranges merchandise in a pharmacy near the apartment.

When we first came, we stayed with some friends of a friend in Jersey, in one room with two beds. The women slept in the beds and Danilo, my father and I crisscrossed the leftover space on the floor. We were given a time to use the kitchen and a time to use the bathroom. Grandma had to cook our supper at six thirty in the morning. Half asleep then,

I remember my nostrils easily mistaking the smell of condiment, with the smell of excrement.

Now we live in what we call “the Spanish melting pot,” a part of Queens along the stretch of the over populated Roosevelt Avenue underneath the seven train. It’s been invaded by *taquerias*, churches and *botanicas*; the stores selling religious artifacts, candles and spices, used by believers, for good luck. The poorer the neighborhood the more *botanicas* and churches can be found. We rent a one bedroom semi basement apartment in the back of the building with one window facing the collected garbage of twenty families. I often wonder how people who have so little can produce so much waste. ‘It’s the quality of the products’ my father says. “They’re cheap, and cheap means they are disposable.” I know he is right. I’ve seen the raccoon ripped garbage bags; from which the dismantled items appear. Anything from one armed dolls and vinyl seashell toilet seats to clothes with diffused prints of known children’s characters.

It was difficult to find this apartment. “Too many people” my father was told, and so he did what is done in circumstances like this. He lied about the number of people. The day they were signing the contract, grandma, Danilo and I waited at the McDonald’s next block until my parents came for us. Once you are living and paying on time around here, supers tend to look the other way when new faces emerge from apartments, shy at first.

“Coffee *mijo*?” Blanca asks

“Yeah, thank you” I say.

“What time you start grandma?” I ask her, but my father answers for her “nine thirty.”

My father is pushing fifty, and he looks tired, and resentful; but he is somehow “determined to get out of this mess,” as he calls our standards of living. I don’t see how but I don’t tell him. He sips his coffee making noises and my mother asks him to mind his manners. He brings up how good Danilo is playing soccer, smiling.

“He’ll get a scholarship,” he mentions for the hundredth time.

“He is playing very good” my mother says.

I stay quiet because this conversation is like a good luck charm for the family, the only part of our lives that is a constant, a community dream. “Danilo is an amazing soccer player,” the coaches tell my father. And he thrives on these words. We all do, as if we were putting our future in lay away, hoping to get it, when Danilo makes it.

Danilo was born at seven months and underweight. “It’s a miracle he’s still alive.” Grandma Blanca always says about him. “We used to wrap his tiny body in chunks of heated cotton to keep him warm. That and your mother’s milk is what turned him in to that *muchachote*, big guy, he is right now.”

“They told your parents you weren’t going to live at first.” Grandma says to Danilo when she tells him this story. “I don’t believe in palm readings; but when I saw how short your life line was,” she pauses for emphasis. “I thought we were *going* to loose you.”

Both Grandma Blanca and mom regard Danilo as a miracle child and have incessantly told him so.

“He was coughing last night,” says Blanca

“We should have him go to the doctor again.” My father cautions I think.

Danilo got sick once when he was fourteen. My mother and I had taken him on foot to the medical center a mile and change from the apartment. It had been snowing for two days; the streets were flooded as the temperature rose. The doctor we got to see that day diagnosed pneumonia and the onset of asthma. “His lungs are weak” he told my mother.

“He needs this medicine right away,” the medical assistant said, showing us an inhaler. “Comprende, mama?” she said and gave my mother referrals for lung x-rays and other medicals exams; by the time Danilo had been tended to his temperature had escalated. “Let’s take a taxi.” I said to my mother as we walked towards the pharmacy.

“I only have money for the medicine.”

“He can’t walk” I insisted, holding him from one arm, I felt his legs getting stiff, and he was gazing off absently and away. My mother held his other arm firmly against her strength, until his legs bended and I had to carry him on my shoulders. He ended up in the hospital for a week. We are still paying that bill two years later.

“I’ll ask Danilo to stop by the pharmacy, maybe the pharmacist can prescribe something for the cough” Grandma Blanca said while she washes dishes and dries them with the kitchen towel with the printing of a bottle and the word Merlot. I want to ask her if she knew what Merlot meant but I decided against it. She probably bought it at the ninety nine cent store I think. I hate the smell of the store. It’s a mix of plastic and moth balls. The stench drifts by when you walk this neighborhood of run down houses, bars,

and need. A neighborhood of round faced children, red cheeks and black pointy Indian hair. We all live in denial I think sometimes. We are more than poor. We are legal and legally poor. We are like rats, diligent nibblers of what is discarded.

“I have to go,” my mother pokes my reflection.

“I do too” I said and we all scatter.

I notice my grandma’s jeans cuffed temporally inside out because those, like the shoes belong to Danilo. I swallow hard and reach her before she steps out the door, from behind I hug her. I can’t see her face but I know she is smiling. She touches my forearms and I see her rugged, freckled hands.

“Carlitos,” she says. “You are a good man, young man I should say.” “One day your time will come, you’ll finish school and become someone important.” I hate that she tells me this. “I wish you went to school,” she tells me all the time. But I am eighteen now, I don’t have time for school.

I walk the fifteen blocks to the pizza place where I work for the two brothers who own it. It is cold out and the fat fuckers aren’t even here to open the store, so I go to the coffee shop next door where the tanned skin blonde, with thick black roots makes conversation with me all the time. She is my age, from the Dominican Republic. She likes me she said and I like her too; we have been together a couple of times. I think I’d like her even more if she didn’t have a kid.

“Hey,” she says

“Hey,” I say.

“Coffee?” she asks with the hot pot in her hand and a smile full of white, beautiful

straight teeth. The kind given by nature not braces.

“Coffee?” she repeats. I smiled and nod affirmatively.

She pours it slowly as she looks out the front window, stopping just before the rim intuitively. She turns her face to me after.

“How is your son doing, Araceli?” I ask

“He is with his father in the country” she says and I know she is not talking about upstate; but her actual country

“Let’s get together, tonight” she says but before I answer to that I hear the Iron Gate next door and I jump out of the stool and put three dollars on the counter. She pushes it back.

“Take it” I say. “It’s pay day.”

I wink at her; and she bites her lower lip and then she smiles. I have a girlfriend back home. But we didn’t get intimate. I was leaving to New York and “she didn’t want to be left back with a bump in her stomach.”

“Pick me up when you get off” Araceli says. “We can go to ‘Moon Dreams’ to dance.”

“I need to do something for my grandma, but I can meet you later.” I tell her.

I feel bad for Araceli, living with her parents and brothers and sisters. I know her son calls, one of Araceli’s sisters, who is seven years old, “aunt.”

When my work day is over, I pass by the pharmacy to get grandma. I am thinking of getting her a new pair of shoes and medicine for Danilo.

Grandma Blanca is putting items from the food aisle into a shopping cart, I see her fix her glasses, to serve a double duty for both her near and far sight ness. She walks slowly frowning and pausing with attention to detail. I stay put to watch her because I feel proud of her strength. At seventy three, she is still relentless. I am admiring her when I see her lifting her apron and putting a bag of microwave popcorn in her right pocket. “What?” I whisper. We don’t even own a microwave. I freeze. She pushes the cart forward and starts a new aisle. I follow looking at the giant mirrors on the ceiling. There is pet food on one side and cleaning products on the other. She checks and picks up a pack of sponges and moves quickly. I go back to the entrance, not really knowing what to do and I don’t see the guard but I see Danilo coming.

He nods hello, “Did you come for grandma?” he asks.

“Yeah, let’s tell her we are both here,” I say. “Better yet, you wait here, and I’ll tell her.”

“I’ll go with you” he says. But I start walking away from him pretending not to hear him. When I see Blanca I whistle and she turns around and smiles. Her hair is pulled back for work, and her forehead shines. She is strong even on days you hear her huffing to get out of bed. But if you ask her she’ll tell you she had never felt better ignoring the thinness that pursues her. Her face looks darker under these bright lights, she smiles and the skin in her face creases, the lines taking unpredictable shapes and turns, just like her own life has been, unparallel paths all leading to a rough life. She is someone of mine. I

feel moved by her image. She is someone that I love dearly, I think with pity when she walks towards me. I almost tell her I saw her doing it when she interrupts.

“I’m almost done,” she says.

“I’ll meet you at the register,” I tell her, when I hear Danilo behind.

“Let’s go get some medicine for your cough” I tell him turning his way.

“I got it,” my grandmother says. I look at her, “do you have anything you need to pay for?” I ask her, opening my eyes and clearing my throat, she ignores it or she doesn’t understand.

“Grandma, get your purse, I’ll wait for you,” I tell her

“Danilo, you go get a gallon of milk.”

I take my wallet out while we wait on line, turn to her and ask in Spanish, if she needs to pay for something else. I don’t want to accuse her. The guard is standing by the door now; and I feel he has an accusatory look. I’m paying for the milk when grandma and Danilo move towards the door.

“You have something in your pockets” the guard says in a Jamaican accent, looking down to grandma from his height of his six feet. Grandma keeps walking, proud and indifferent; but he raises his arm as if to stop her.

“Listen,” I say touching the guard’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” His voice rumbles and carries out and people turn heads. His face is purple dark, his eyes bulge when he addresses me.



There is a hint of arrogance in him and I know this is our common denominator. Grandma makes an attempt to walk out. “Stop!” he says louder this time. I turn and I see Danilo’s confused look and my heart saddens.

“The manager is coming,” the guard says.

“I’ll pay for it.” I say, looking at the guard.

“She needs to put the things in the basket and wait for the manager,” he spoke without looking at us. His body is massive and stiffens with every second. One of his hands hugs the nightstick as if he needed to be ready for a threat of some sort.

It was clear to me that we were in this mess and we wouldn’t get any help from him. Danilo starts to walk back and forth nervously.

“Grandma, put the things in the basket” I tell her. But she keeps walking and the guard pulls her blouse trying to stop her. Danilo jumps forward and tries to punch the guard. The guard meets his fist with his huge hand before it reaches him and takes out his nightstick, to make a point. I pull Danilo away from him. But he frees himself from me and stands in front of the guard.

“What are you going to do now, are you going to hit me with that?” Danilo says. I see anger in the guard’s face. He raises his nightstick not to hit Danilo I don’t think; but I jump to stop him and he pushes me backwards. Grandma lets out a scream, and tries to attack the guard with one of the baskets. The woman at the registers picks up the phone and calls for a manager “right away.”

I pull grandma off him, “You sneaky piece of shit, what do you care, is this your fucking store?” She curses at him in Spanish.

“It’s my job” he says without much of a gesture, he is staring at Danilo who is looking back at him defiant.

“You snitch; you and I are the same shit here.” My grandma says shaking her head ignoring my plea to stay quiet.

“You and I are not the same” he says “I don’t steal.”

“Enough, grandma,” I say. “Don’t say anything, just wait for the manager.” We all calm down a little. I look at Danilo and I wish I could do something to get him out of here. Out of the store and out of the neighborhood. Out of this fractured stretch of dingy streets with no future, before he settles and makes peace with these surroundings.

The manager walks towards us. He nods at my grandmother and she blushes, her feet take a step back and she lifts her chin and looks at him as if he is supposed to understand.

“Blanca, what did you do?” He says with shaking his head.

“I did nothing” she says. “Took a bag of popcorn and some Robitussin, I’ll pay you Friday or take it out of my check.” She believes this is fixed; she turns her face to me and signals to go on.

“No, I can’t do that. Come into my office, all of you,” he says partly looking at me and partly eyeing the guard.

“I am going to have to report this and you are going to lose your job.” He says to her once we were in the office. “Why did you do this? If you needed anything, you should have asked me.”

“She doesn’t need anything” Danilo says.

“Then she shouldn’t have taken anything,” he says to Danilo.

“Let me fill out some papers.” His voice is firm. He is sweating, from his temples, the drops run down his pink face.

“I don’t know how they do things where that man comes from,” she says “your guard.” She adds. “But in my country, I’d have looked the other way.”

“He saw you, and he stopped you and it’s on the tape now. It’s your job or mine.”

“I think you don’t need it, you have these two young fellows that can help you,” pointing at Danilo and I.

On our way out Danilo steps hard on the guard’s foot and called him *regalado*. And the guard pushes him in return. I got in between them but Danilo keeps screaming snitch, *regalado*, *sapo*. I see Grandma Blanca slowly fall to the floor.

I am holding the clear plastic bag with her stuff, the Nike shoes with white laces, her socks, halfway in to the shoes, Danilo’s jeans folded inside out, her bra and the hydrangeas blouse. In my pocket I put her chain with the cross, which she dips in holy water when we go to St. Bartholomew where my parents and her, kneel down to pray with feverish Catholicism. I’ve given up on faith. I wait in the emergency room until my parents come and when they do I go out looking for the coffee shop girl.

I meet her but I can’t take her to the apartment because Danilo is there, so she takes me to her friend’s house and she lets us use the bedroom in the back. Araceli asks me what’s wrong but I don’t want to talk about it. She brings out of her purse full of small bottles of liquor.

“I don’t drink,” I say pushing away her hand and trying to take off her t-shirt.

“Wait,” she says “Calm down a little.” I ignore her and kiss her neck. She laughs hard and throws herself onto the bed.

When we are done, I tell her I need to go, she sighs; she looks her age just now, outside of her apron habitat. “My grandmother is in the hospital in a coma turns out she is diabetic.”

Her eyes open big, and she crosses herself. I, fully dressed now, hand her, her clothes.

“I’m sorry baby,” she says and that makes me want to run out of there.

Danilo is not in the apartment when I get there. I go out looking for him and when I walk back the hospital I see my parents but I don’t tell them Danilo is missing. I stay with them, my mother sobbing and blowing her nose. My father stern and quiet but moved. I wanted to ask about grandma but I figured she was still the same because the sobbing is continuous.

“Make sure your brother eats something,” my mother said gasping for air.

“I will,” I said.

“And you too” she says. “I will.” I kiss her and my father gets up to give me a hug. I leave not knowing where to look for Danilo. I walk slowly, now fighting this feeling of desolation. *This is shitty*, I think to myself. This whole life is shitty, this fucking shitty country is shitty and my fucking country is the shittiest of all. I have tears in my eyes for grandma.

They ride down I lower my head as people pass by. “What a fucking life this is,” I say when no one can hear me. “What a fucking life,” I say again and again until my voice

stretches further and pitches louder. When I get near the park on Broadway where I am going to start looking for Danilo; it occurs to me that he might have gone back to fight with the guard.

I walk fast and absentmindedly feeling my heart throbbing. I am reluctant to contemplate the possibility of a tragedy. The stores are closing and the lights on the street make distorted shadows. When I'm near the Pharmacy I see Danilo crossing the street and I start laughing a crazy laugh. He sees me and becomes agitated, I catch up with him and I hug him.

“Let's take him now that you're here” he says. “He's getting out soon.”

“Let's go home, you have school tomorrow.” I say

He doesn't move and I hug him tight but he leans back. “Let's get some rest so we can visit grandma tomorrow.”

“What if she's dead tomorrow, huh?” He's almost crying.

“It's grandma” I say. “She is super woman.”

The employees start coming out of the pharmacy and Danilo turns to go to the door. The guard never comes out. Danilo looks at me as if I have an answer and he starts running until I can't see him anymore. I don't call him, he needs to run. He needs to take big strides. He needs to look at the sky and rip off the gold chain with the Jesus on it.

I walk slowly back to the apartment. I see his back in the kitchen chair. I go in and I see him hold the inhaler to his mouth. I meet his eyes. *This is it, isn't it?* They seem to ask.

