

Rosebud **Ben-Oni**

## A Way out of the Colonia

By noon, the sun would dissolve into the sprawling gloom over the border town, dimly filtering specks of light through the unending cloud-cover. For two weeks, the woman waited and watched for the first storm of the hurricane season to descend upon them, clear the dusty, wet air. Years later, her family would recall that during this time she was unusually silent and still, allowing them to cocoon her in a large, stiff blanket bearing a faded insignia and another family's crest.

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Whether it had been discarded or donated, no one could remember how it came into their home.

But after two weeks, when this mass still hung heavy above the *colonia*, darkened in its furthest reaches, and rumbled without releasing a single drop of rain, the woman became restless. When her father came home, he found her sitting on the bed, fully dressed, having bathed herself. Her daughter Oni sat next to her on the bed. The child could no longer sit in her mother's lap without causing the woman pain, and had already forgotten the warmth she'd once felt there. Now she looked bewildered and frightened as the woman declared that the sky had decided to leave Matamoros.

The woman's father, who sat on the side of the bed next to the child, dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand so sharp and quick that it accidentally collided with Oni.

Rubbing her stinging head, Oni nodded in agreement with her mother, and added: "I've forgotten what blue looks like."

The woman closed her eyes. "The sky has left us nothing but its bones."

"Stop this," the old man warned in a gentle tone.

Oni looked out the window above her mother's head: the dark mass was slowly drifting eastward toward the Gulf Coast.

"You're scaring your daughter," he said.

But the woman wasn't listening. "Bones a dog wouldn't even want."

At that, the old man picked up the child and carried her out of the room, mumbling about the woman's nonsense and that her mind had gone wandering again. Hearing the tinges of concern in his voice, Oni clutched him around the neck and laid her head on the old man's shoulder as the wind started to blow. She kissed him above his collarbone, as she'd seen the old man do this to win an argument that he couldn't otherwise with his own wife, while outside the bones of the sky rattled and scraped against each other, darkened and spread out further, as if the bones were hardening and cracking at the same time, and filled their heads with their osseous snaps and snarls.

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The next morning, the heat was already so unbearable that Oni begged her grandfather not to cook, or the steam would cling to the walls and furniture. Then they'd have to open the windows, and within an hour, the whole house would fill with the heavy, wet air that sank into their skin and could not be scrubbed off or washed out of their hair. As she pleaded with the old woman who'd already lit the burner, Oni's mother suddenly appeared, pushing back a curtain they used to create more space in the two-room house.

Shivering under a men's sports coat that she wore over a wool dress, Oni's mother told her that they were going to see where the sky had gone: what lied beyond the wild brush that grew in the northern outskirts of the border town. Oni turned to her grandmother who said nothing and continued to cook. Since her mother had fallen ill, she noticed changes in her grandmother: how she stayed out most afternoons and evenings visiting friends as the sick woman tried to sleep, wheezing and moaning softly, forgetting that she could be heard in the desperate, despairing quiet that had fallen over their house. It was a viscous silence that trembled and stiffened with every cry and moan, and chased everyone away from each other in that household and the old woman who could no longer bear it. It was a silence that even her grandfather, the guts and guardrail of the family, could not penetrate, wiggle past its congealing borders with his knowing fingers, which, that morning, could catch only a fatal ray of light from the gloom and shine it, dully, into Oni's tearing eyes.

"It's okay, *mi'ja*," he said to Oni. "Your mother wants to show you something."

As the woman waited for Oni to dress, she tucked under her right arm a long cane that the old man had spent the previous night whittling out of a gnarled branch. It had come from an old sapodilla tree on the other side of town where the homes were large and gated, a good distance from their own *colonia*.

The night before, the old man carved the branch by the light of a kerosene lantern, and told the child, Oni, about his reverence for the sapodilla tree. For over twenty years he'd passed by the tree dur-

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ing his evening walks, its branches gradually creeping through the gates of the house that cared for it. Each grew broad with deep ridges, and sprouted thinner, smoother limbs. Often the tree had been dotted with brown sparrows lost in an eternal hopscotch. In the highest branches green jays with their blue mohawks croaked like frogs, while red-crowned parrots hung upside-down to taunt passers-by, their wild, garbled tales carried in the wind. In the winter, dusk

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would bring a solitary hawk to a low-lying branch, its head turned to one side, its gaze somewhat pontific as if it alone could decree the hour of nightfall. It had been evenings like those when he'd linger outside the gates of the home, admiring how the hawk's presence silenced all the fussing and twittering of the other birds that had disappeared from sight. But when the last light of the sun would clear the overcast sky, and it was time to head back to the *colonia*, the old man would dig his hands deep into his pockets, and walk away slowly. Though he could feel its eyes on him, he knew that hawk would not attack him from behind, as long as he never looked back.

Year after year, the trunk of the sapodilla tree had thickened around the middle, its color blanched by the sun to a dull brownish-grey. As if it was an old man who'd spent his life in the fields and found his soul in the very work that thickened his skin. Such men are rare, he told Oni as he shaved off the deep groves of the branch. There are very few people who reap the beauty of life from survival alone, and can wear it so visibly.

But if you looked long enough at the trunk, he went on, if you let your eyes fall deep into the dark, oblong knot in its center, you also could find pain. Not the kind caused by sadness or regret, but a kind of tenderness of having turned your face toward the sun, knowingly. Forged by this seasonless, burning climate, the knot would seem almost viscous, like black tar, on the hottest days. But sometimes, he told Oni, when the air was cooler and its branches filled with birds,

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when he'd dare to stand so close to the gate that his nose touched its cool, smooth metal, when he did not let his eyes blink for almost a full minute, he would see in that uneven, dark knot the venerable face of a monk. He would see an immovable spirit, toughened up without giving into scorn for the life that had made him. A spirit so strong that even as tropical storms ripped through its lesser counterparts, like the thin trunks of palm trees, the sapodilla tree never lost more than a few leaves. That is, until one day he'd spotted a shiny cobweb covering one of its upper branches.

The paring knife in his hand paused for a moment. He fingered a particularly deep groove as he told the child it wasn't long before almost every branch was covered by webworms and the great, old tree with its venerable face was uprooted by a bulldozer. Only a few hours ago on this very night, in fact, he'd watched the tree, swollen-looking and half-rotten, being shoved through the open gates. It was the only time he'd even seen the gates open, and yet he still hadn't seen one person who seemed to live in the house. He'd waited until the last of the workmen left, and then managed to pull off one of its branches—one untouched by the webworms—before the tree was to be carted away to the city dump.

After her grandfather returned to his work, this time in silence, Oni watched the curlicues of wood float lightly to the floor, as he carved in an even rhythm, a light cadence of slicing and smoothing, his knife passing down the branch, followed by his hand. The rhythm had a certain soothing quality, but Oni found that she had to listen carefully. At first it seemed to her an under-sound, a rustle of muted whistles escaping between gaps of the noises in the *colonia*. She listened for it among the barking of strays, the rattling of pots and crackling of fires, the shouting and fighting of the street children, the lonely lover's waltz of a ranchera on a neighbor's radio caught between static and Chivas losing a fútbol game. Shutting her eyes, she heard it climb over these sounds, stretch over fighting words and heavy smells of cooking, muffle the nocturnal laughter of young women that Oni's mother so disapproved of, until she

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could almost feel the tendons of her grandfather's hands tensing as he stripped the rough, grayish-brown bark from the branch. As she heard the old man exhale through his nose, grunting slightly, Oni waited to see if the immovable spirit would emerge from it, her hands shaking with both anticipation and fear.

But she heard his knife and his hand fall silent and then opened her eyes, staring without blinking for almost a full minute, all she could see was a very white, long stick, its creamy flesh completely exposed, resting against his chest at an angle. There was no trace of a Great Spirit, or semblance of a man made stronger by his work. In fact it seemed thinner, weaker, than the heavy, knotted branch he'd carried home on his shoulders. She looked accusingly at her grandfather, as if he'd stripped the branch so severely that it wasn't even a branch anymore, but saw he'd closed his eyes.

Again her eyes fell on the branch resting against him. Its nakedness reminded her of the times when she was sick and he'd bathe her in medicinal herbs, rubbing her every limb with a vigor that would've hurt her had it been anyone else, until her head felt clearer and airy, even though her body still ached. Just like the branch, she too would lay in his lap at an angle, her feet on the floor with her head on his shoulder, only he'd tell her stories about the bailaoras who twirled in their golden dresses and white cowboy boots outside the Presidencia Municipal Matamoros. Her grandfather had never fallen into silences like this, or shut his eyes as if he wished to shut her and everything around her out.

Oni stared at the stick and her grandfather, silently willing him to look at her, until a sudden shriek and a cloud of static shot into the room. The neighbor's radio had found a Brownsville station from across the border, and American pop music soon drifted into the room. Her grandfather then opened his eyes, a sigh escaping from his lips. As he carefully inspected the branch for any remaining unevenness, Oni watched him a moment longer. After silently deciding it wouldn't be much of a walking stick, she went to bed with a pulse in her abdomen that kept her awake for most of the night.

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That morning they set out, Oni's mother, though touched by the old man's gesture, hadn't wanted to use the walking stick. Though her posture was slightly stooped, she remained a woman aware of how she moved, whether alone at home or navigating her way through a flood of tourists in Hidalgo Square. Her shawl gracefully billowed behind her as she led her daughter down the muddy path, the stick wedged firmly under her arm.

But halfway through the *colonia*, though, the woman had to stop and catch her breath, trying her best to straighten up. She'd been bedridden for four months and the muscles in her wasted legs quivered with exhaustion. Her teeth chattered when the winds rolled in from the nearby Gulf Coast. Most of the people they passed on the street stared at them. Both the woman and Oni pretended not to notice until a group of children, who were barefoot and bruised-looking, began to follow from behind. They stopped when Oni and the woman stopped, imitating the woman's hunched body with glee.

When Oni spun around and cursed their puta mothers, may their bread fester with gusanos, her mother jerked her hand so hard that she almost fell into the mud.

"Turn around and don't look back," she wheezed, and took the walking stick from under her arm, and leaned on it.

"But Mata, those pendejos—"

"You will not speak like that," her mother snapped. "*Vámonos*. We have to hurry."

Though she could hear the children howling behind her, flinging insults about her skeleton-white skin and long, skinny limbs that belonged on a monkey, Oni obeyed her. She took her mother's arm and draped it around her narrow shoulders, feeling the weight of her body accept the support readily.

Without another word, they continued down the narrow street, which was lined on both sides with shacks and sheds. Most were stuck together with broken bits of siding scavenged from the local open-air dump. Some were covered with rusted sheets of tin and others, plastic tarp. Many did not have a single window. Oni thought of her own home, an austere rectangle with cracked, ramshackle walls,

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a roof that leaked, and bare rafters from which hung blankets and sheets. Her grandmother had hung them to establish some sense of boundaries in their home, but they could not muffle the hushed quarrels between her *mata* and her aunts, or the anxiety in her grandparents' voices as they bickered over the price of food.

Worse were the nights when the street children would creep along the sides of the house, taunting the family for being *gitanos*, for allegedly casting spells on the unborn while they were still in their mothers' wombs. Climbing into her *mata's* arms, Oni would hurl curses right back at them: May the Ten Plagues of Egypt visit you twice. May a swarm of *cucarachas* eat you alive. May your skin break open in sores. May the waters of the *maquiladoras* turn to blood as you swim in them. As the street children grew louder, Oni would burrow her head, cursing them deep into her mother's chest, until she was shushed and squeezed tightly, so tightly that she thought her bones would shatter.

In the mornings that followed, her grandfather would sit her down in his lap. He was never angry like she was. He would tell her these children were high on glue and their own hunger, and did not mean what they said. He'd always add at least they now lived in a house made of concrete and couldn't be toppled by a storm.

As she now walked down the street with her mother, the shacks becoming fewer as they approached the northern outskirts, Oni thought of how she'd learned to nod as her grandfather was speaking, avoiding his gaze and then squirm her way out of his lap the moment he had finished. She could almost hear her grandfather calling after her, did she hear what he'd just said, his voice sounding sad and tired. Suddenly she felt her body grow warm. What if those curses had seeped inside her mother's chest and caused her illness? Oni felt the warmth deep in her fingers, making them tingle with a strange ache. She was glad she did not have to look at her mother, and shook the thought from her head, as the taunts of the street children grew fainter until they disappeared altogether.

When they reached the stretch of wild brush, which the child had never seen before, the woman walked faster as they pushed

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through it. She felt her daughter dragging her feet, heard her complain about the sharpness of the brush cutting into her face and arms and legs. But the woman dragged her on, afraid to stop although she did not know why. She ignored her daughter, who flinched repeatedly, whimpering that something would poke her eyes out, until they came upon a block of small, simple houses, which looked as if they'd just been built. When she came to a sudden halt, Oni almost tripped over her own feet, and half-fell to her knees.

"It's all gone," the woman whispered as she helped her daughter back up.

"What is?" Oni asked, regaining her balance.

The woman said nothing. A lump filled her throat as she brushed off her daughter's dress and returned her attention to the steel-framed boxes of cement and wood. Gone were the makeshift houses that had sunk into the ground softened by storms. Gone were the old, half-blind women who'd sat out in front of them, spitting their toothless curses. Gone were the acacia trees that the woman and her sisters had climbed as children, out of their mother's reach, when they'd been caught pickpocketing in the market. Gone were the javelina bushes in which the ocelots had hid before they attacked the chickens kept in their lean-to.

With a heaviness filling her chest, the woman recalled the day her father had vanished. The night before his disappearance, it had been particularly cold. She'd been six or seven and they were returning from one of their evening walks when they stumbled upon one of those slender, spotted cats, its eyes flashing a fluorescent green, as it crept up behind a sorrel grazing on a bit of brush near their home. It was the first time that she'd known real fear. The kind that numbed your own movement, filling your insides with a coldness that was almost warm. Her father, though, had known exactly what to do. He'd quietly pulled her up into his arms, and backed away, one step at a time. He'd tried to turn her head away, but like every part of her, it had been locked into place, paralyzed, and she'd watched as the ocelot ripped the throat of the old horse.

The next morning, the horse's owner, who owned a ranch on the other side of town, had barged into their house with the police

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while the family had sat down to eat. Her father had tried to explain he hadn't taken the horse, that it must've escaped. The owner had narrowed his eyes at her father, and then walked over to a bucket they used for bathing and kicked it over. The fresh water seeped into the dirt floor. The three police officers had watched silently. As both men's voices rose, the woman's mother then gave her daughters some money and asked them to go to the market and pick up some fruit.

While her sisters had immediately run out of the house, she had not been so willing to leave their father until their mother grabbed her by the arm and pushed her out. When they returned home an hour later, their father was gone. Their mother told them he'd thought it best to leave for a while, and had gone off to pick oranges in the valley across the border. It wasn't until Oni was born that he had told his daughters the truth. That he'd spent three years in an overcrowded prison. That when he was finally granted a trial, he'd been released the same day.

The woman remembered that he'd only told her what had happened when their home here, on the outskirts of town, had been taken from them six years ago and the woman had wanted to fight for it. He hadn't cried when he told her the story. He'd simply told it as if it had happened to a man they didn't know. She noticed that he'd kept his eyes on the newborn sleeping in her arms the entire time. At first the woman had remained adamant about going to the press, even contacting an organization in Gringolandia. But his eyes remained on Oni, who'd been born premature, and in the end, the woman knew what her father's eyes were telling her. She'd held her baby tighter to her breast, as if she could push Oni back inside herself, away from all that was possible for people like them.

Now, as her eyes searched for the exact spot where their home had stood, the woman realized she'd never truly mourned losing it. And now, six years after all the makeshift houses had been torn down, she felt only anger. Anger that no one would ever know she'd been born and grown up here. That she'd so readily accepted their eviction as she did her mother's story about the oranges, bragging to her childhood friends that her father had gone off to

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Gringolandia. That it had taken her so long to realize her father still carried within him the confines of prison, stuffing his ears with cotton at night, fearing that roaches would crawl in while he slept. That his evening walks had become solitary and no longer open to her.

Then she remembered the branch she clasped in the hand. He'd been thinking of her when he saw the fallen tree.

While her mother had been lost in her memories, Oni had taken the time of that rare silence to marvel at the twelve one-story, whitewashed homes, their red, slanting roofs. Each had its own yard of unnaturally green grass enclosed by fences of interlacing wires. The houses were pretty, but there also was a kind of spite, a subtle ugliness, about the fences. Oni could not help but fixate on them. She could almost taste the dullness of the steel, cut her tongue on the sharp, straight edges of the diamond shapes they created. She stared so hard her eyes went out of focus, and yet she could not look away. As if she'd fallen asleep with her neck at the wrong angle, and would never be able to turn her head in any other direction.

"I grew up here," her mother finally spoke. "Before it was a place."

Oni felt the stiffness spread across her shoulders, tightening in her chest as her mother began to lean on her again.

"And now there's nothing left of us," she went on, shaking her head.

Oni continued to stare silently at the houses, feeling a strange urge to break free from her mother and take a running-jump onto the fences. Drag them down, one by one.

Suddenly her mother asked her, "Oni, do you know where those children sleep?"

Her eyes broke from the houses. She looked up at her mother, whose face grew grayer and more hollow since she'd first fallen ill. Yellow dulled the whites of her eyes. Razor-sharp peaks protruded at the top of her cheeks. Every day Oni recognized that face less and less. Swallowing hard, she asked, "what children, Mata?"

Straightening up on the sapodilla branch, her mother adjusted her shawl and said, "The children who tease you on the street."

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Oni suddenly remembered them and was filled with a familiar rage that seemed older than she was. She wrapped her arms around herself, noting how far her hands could reach her back. Today had been the first time they called her a monkey. Usually it was La Gitana Tilica. The Skeleton Gypsy. They threw rocks at her when her mother wasn't around. Once they'd thrown a rusty tin can. Some of the rust had gotten on her skin. Bordered the bruise that would form. It had taken her a whole day to scrub it off.

"Did you hear what I said?" the woman asked.

"I don't know, Mata."

"Take a guess."

She shrugged. "Well, I've seen them sleeping on the street."

"They never last a single night out there. The police run them off."

"Maybe home to their parents?"

She snorted. "What home?"

The strain in her body was becoming unbearable. Oni squirmed and muttered, "I don't know, then."

"The sewers from the maquiladoras. They hide in the sewers."

Oni began to squirm, and looked back into the brush.

Exasperated, her mother went on. "And do you know who built the maquiladoras? The same gringos who built these houses you see here now. Built from their steel and our blood. It's just like the maquilas: we work in the factories, but nothing there belongs to us. Not the workbenches we slave over, not the machines that demand us to work faster. Not even the chemicals that soak into our skin and make us sick."

Oni continued to look into the brush behind them. She wanted to go home, and forget that this place ever existed.

"We had to leave here because your grandfather could never buy the land," her mother went on, speaking slowly. Through a series of coughs, an enthusiasm emerged that had not been seen in months. "Your aunts and I were then offered jobs by the very people that forced us out. And you know what? We took them. We had no choice."

Oni still would not look at her, so her mother took her chin in her rough hands and jerked her daughter's head toward her.

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“Do you understand why I brought you here? Can you see it?”

A sting rose up from behind the child’s eyes, and she felt her stomach rumble not from hunger but unease. She was angry with her mother, whose face was contorted with deep furrows and an almost religious zeal. Oni recognized it from the face of an old, crumpled-looking woman who haunted the streets at night with her strange idols painted with bleeding hearts and the heads of animals. The old woman was always predicting the end of the world, when only she’d turn to angels and the rest of the *colonia* would burn in hell-fire. Nobody took her seriously. Now Oni was worried that her mother would one day join the witch in the tirades. Her *mata*, who was losing her nimble, towering figure, which once commanded awe as she swept down the dusty streets. Oni was proud of who her mother was, and yet less than an hour ago the children on the street had been jeering at her. And here she was, talking about them. Like she cared where they slept at night.

“I’m waiting,” her mother interrupted her thoughts in a hoarse voice, and soon she broke into a coughing fit, and had to let go of her daughter’s chin.

Oni waited until her mother spat up a glob of dark phlegm into a handkerchief. Then the child said, “Bueno, so I’ve seen them in the sewers. I’ve seen them eating right out in the rain. Running around when everyone else is dying in the heat. They don’t look so miserable to me... Yesterday I saw them feeding pelicans those tablets people take for stomachaches.”

Stumbling, she gripped Oni’s shoulder for balance. “Why would do they that?”

“It makes the birds’ stomachs explode,” she said.

There was a pause as Oni felt the grip tightened on her shoulder. Both remained silent, and looked straight ahead.

**I**t was getting late. As thunder rumbled in the distance, Oni and her mother began to make their way back through the brush. They did not speak during the way home, and avoided each other’s questioning gazes. The woman did not stop to catch her breath as she had before, but leaned even more on Oni’s shoulders.

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They did not run into the children again. The streets seemed deserted, save a mangy dog that skulked past them.

When they arrived home, they found the old man preparing dinner. As they took off their muddy shoes and socks, he explained that Oni's grandmother had gone to buy some more masa. Soon, he added, she'd return and her aunts would come home from the maquiladoras and they would all eat together.

"You're not going for a walk?" The woman asked him, as she looked at a large pot filled with simmering water.

The old man did not respond, as he flattened some masa by hand into tortillas to be grilled on the comal. Then he gestured to the large pot and said, "You should bathe."

Oni's mother nodded, and began to tell him what they had seen at the outskirts of the *colonia*. But the old man cut her off.

"Oni," he said, grabbing some rags to pick up the pot, "push back the curtain while I bring the pot so your mata can bathe."

Lifting the curtain, the child watched her mother follow the old man into the room where the family took baths in a large, tin tub. She could hear the steam hissing as it hit the metal. Then she heard her mother say, "The water needs to cool a bit first."

"I can help you," Oni's grandfather said.

"*Por favor*, let me be."

"You're covered in dirt and dust, head-to-toe."

"I can do it."

"Let me at least help you into the—"

"No."

"*Mi'ja*, there's no shame—"

"I said no. I'm going to bathe Oni, then myself, and then I'm going to sleep."

"You can barely stand up. You need to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

The old man groaned. "At least wait for your mother."

"Why? She can barely look at me when I'm dressed."

There was a pause, and then he came back through the curtain. Oni waited for her mother to call for her, but all she heard was a

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dog barking outside and the hissing of animal fat in the comal. She climbed up into a folding chair in the kitchen.

"She shouldn't have gone back there," her grandfather said, shaking his head. Oni watched him crush tiny, green chilies on the stone molcajete that looked like a headless little pig which had always made her smile, but not tonight. It was strange to see her grandfather cooking. She sat very still as she watched him.

Then, wiping the sweat away from his forehead, his fingers drenched in the fiery juice of the chilies, he turned to her, and said "Of all the things that have been taken from your mother, her health, her beauty, any good sense not to go back, still she's..."

Her grandfather trailed off and sighed, running a hand through his white hair. He hadn't combed it that day, and it looked too long. Oni didn't like the look of this man. Her grandfather had always been careful in how he dressed when he wasn't working. He never smelled like animal fat and sweat, or rubbed his eyes until they were red and swollen. She wondered if he was thinking of prison, and realized that, for the first time in her life, it was not something she could ask him. She wished her mother had never told her that story. Now she couldn't bear to be in the same room as him.

The child was already on her feet when he said, "Even now... she is stubborn."

Disappearing through the curtain, Oni found her mother struggling to remove the sports coat. The woman immediately crossed her arms across her chest.

"Get out of here."

Quietly, the child approached her, looking at the steam rising from the tin tub.

"Did you hear what I said?"

Oni thought it best not to say anything, though she wasn't sure why, as she helped her mother take off the coat. Once it was off, her mother's body seemed to have shrunk even more. The wool dress, which Oni remembered had always fit her mother snugly, now hung like an old sack. She started to unzip the dress in the back. Again, her mother quickly crossed her arms against her chest.

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“Mata,” Oni finally spoke. “I can’t if you do that.”

She felt her mother’s body tense, and then slowly her arms fell to her sides. Oni unzipped the dress as the ridges of her mother’s spine appeared, then deep indents where her backside had once been full and round. Lastly, as the child caught the dress before it could touch the floor, her legs, once shapely and strong, were thin with veins protruding on the back of her knees. Her once-bronzed skin was the color of the overcast sky outside. Moaning, her mother stepped out of the dress, and climbed shakily into the tub. Oni helped her, since her mother had yet again crossed her arms to chest.

“You shouldn’t see this—” the woman began, until they noticed a thick haze had drifted into the room. Oni coughed.

“It’s smoke from the kitchen,” her mother said, choking on the fumes herself, and asked the child to open a window.

Her body still tense and anxious, Oni did as she was told, and stuck her head out so she could breathe. Across the horizon the low, setting sun had taken on a metallic slant. Nearby was the canal, the open sewer from the maquiladoras, and its thick, dark water that flowed with patches of iridescent greens and blues. She was thinking about the children and the streets, which had seemed so empty on their walk back home, when she noticed her mother’s walking stick lying abandoned right outside the window. One end had stuck in the mud, so that it arose from the ground at an angle. The wind was blowing harder now, threatening to pull it out, but it stayed stubbornly still. As if it wanted to burrow past the first layer of mud and regrow itself, form its deep grooves and its bark darkened and blanched by the harsh climate. But no trees grew in their area. Her grandfather had once told her the soil here was no good. He never let her play in the dirt like the other children in the *colonia*. She was not allowed to do many things that they were. She had to stand at the window and watch the children swim in the canal, as women waded nearby, waist-deep, washing their clothing and bedding as they gossiped. Though Oni longed to eavesdrop on these women, her aunts did not approve of them. Instead, they collected rainwater in plastic buckets, and did laundry inside their home.

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Suddenly a scar of lightning flashed, hung suspended in the sky until it faded away. It was supposed to storm that evening, her mother had warned earlier, before they set out on their walk. Oni didn't know of anyone who liked the storms, the damage they caused to the shanties and lean-tos. How they turned the footpaths into a deep muck that little children sank into, right up to their knees. As gray clouds began to advance from the east, it suddenly occurred to her that always after the rains subsided, an acidic smell would coast through their *colonia*, making her head hurt and joints ache.

Staring at the canal, and hearing the soft splashing of water from the room, Oni felt an urgency well up inside of her. She fanned the smoke out, waving her hands furiously, and then pulled back the curtain so no one could look inside.

She turned back to her mother, who was trying to wash with a special soap that her grandmother said was used by people with burns and sensitive skin. Her shoulders were hunched, and Oni could see she was having difficulty lifting her arms.

As Oni approached her, her mother said in a low voice, "go to your grandfather."

The child said nothing, as she knelt down, and her mother crossed her arms again, trying to bring her knees to her chest. Small, thin ribs protruded, as if threatening to break through her skin. Oni picked up a small, yellow sponge floating in the water, and squeezed it. She touched her mother's arms, and for the first time she'd come into the room, looked into her eyes.

"They're gone," her mother said, her face wet with steam and tears.

Oni said quietly, "you told me."

Still looking into her mother's eyes, Oni held the sponge in one hand, and slid her hands carefully up her mother's arms. Slowly she uncrossed them, and the woman bent her head down to touch the child's forehead.

As she lightly ran the sponge along the large, purple scar across her mother's chest, the woman quietly cried through shut eyes. Soon, the child, too, shut her eyes.

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It was then, as she felt the earlier sting of her eyes seep into the steam and smolder of the room, that Oni saw what her mother had wanted her to see: the old man alone in the kitchen, the telling staccato of torrents growing closer, the chattering of maquila workers coming home and the children who did not belong to them running out to these women, as if they did. With hungry eyes as deep as foxholes, and hearts as hard as the cold, these children would follow the women right up to the piecemeal-doors, some shouting and screaming, some standing very still, all wanting to be asked in, these children of smoke and storms that never pass, blurring where the sky falls into the sea. These children who turn their faces right to the wind, knowingly, their blue full of stone birds and starfish that die the moment they come ashore, brittle, reaching out blindly, for blank rocks well beyond their reach.

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