What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth
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The season of scrambled eggs came upon us on January 6, Three Kings Day. Perhaps it was the holiday spirit—the gifts, the piñata, the candy—that reminded my mother’s younger sisters that it was time to start planning for Holy Week, only three months away. Their appeal, made just when the day’s excitement quieted down over dinner, made my body stiffen because it was an announcement of the labor to come.

“Don’t forget, everybody,” Tía Luz said. “Start saving eggshells.”

“Please,” Tía Chata added. She resembled my mother the most because they were both short and had the same pale skin. Tía Luz was the youngest, but also the tallest, and she always sported the same shoulder-length hairdo.

A few heads nodded in acknowledgment, and this seemed to satisfy my aunts. The evening’s meal progressed as if nothing had changed, but in fact, it had changed breakfast every morning. No more hard-boiled eggs or eggs served sunny-side up until enough shells had been collected for the cascarón sale. My fingers twitched because they still carried the memory of the times the sharp edges pricked their tips.

On the way home, I held my bag of candy, too distracted to eat more of it. My mother walked in front of me with a plastic bag over her shoulder, my toys inside. I pictured her in the kitchen,
tapping the end of the egg in order to make an opening large enough to coax the contents out yet small enough to ensure that the egg preserved its oval shape. Once we had enough of them, my aunts would come over with the art supplies: scissors and construction paper to make the confetti that would be stuffed inside the shell, thin tissue paper to glue over the opening, and food coloring to paint the shells pink or blue or green. Each of the tasks demanded patience and skill that I was too young to handle, but my aunts insisted—cascarones were an Alcalá family tradition, and although I was actually a González first, I was the oldest grandchild on the Alcalá side. My brother, Alex, was only a year and a half younger, but he was still considered too clumsy to handle the delicate task of making a cascarón. My father had objected in the beginning, on the grounds that this was woman’s labor, but my mother didn’t take long to remind him that until I became a man, I was under the care of the Alcalá women, who seemed to come around too often and stayed too long—or so I heard my father mumble many times.

Making cascarones was just one of the Alcalá women enterprises. In the summers, they made bolis (flavored ice), in August they made paper doves for the church’s celebration of the Virgin Mary, and in the winters they made tamales and champurrado, a hot cornmeal drink. All these items they sold from the living room or at the town plaza, where the citizens of Zacapu converged in the evenings, particularly before and after church. My aunts sometimes made commemorative keepsakes for birthday parties and weddings and brought over the materials to our house then too. I half-listened to them giggling and gossiping with my mother while I played at their feet. They didn’t ask me to be part of the circle of bodies around the kitchen table, and I didn’t miss it. I knew my time would come, and when it did, I wouldn’t like it.

What was more maddening than cutting paper into tiny little pieces to make confetti and then sticking them into the tiny little
holes, which is how I hurt myself on the pointy edges, was adding the signature detail to the Alcalá cascarones: at the intact tip of the eggshell, I would have to dab a little drop of glue and then sprinkle just the smallest amount of glitter. Many of the clients who bought cascarones missed this detail because they were so anxious to break them on top of someone’s head—which is why they had been made in the first place. No one held the cascarón in his hand and admired the artistry, the tell-tale signs that this was an Alcalá cascarón, not just one of those sloppy ones that had been assembled in a rush. That was what upset me most of all: that it took so long to make one of these, and in one fell swoop it was gone—turned into rubbish in an instant.

I once started to color an eggshell, and Tía Luz ordered me to stop immediately.

“Why?” I asked.

“The opening is too large,” she explained. “Throw it away.”

“Who’s going to notice?” I said.

“We will. It’s going to look vulgar and cheap. We don’t make vulgar and cheap.”

I looked closer at the opening. Compared to all the others, this one looked like the egg had been cut in half, not carefully tapped open by my mother’s hands. The tissue covering would have to be wide. More glue would have to be used. She was right. It was going to look vulgar and cheap. I set it aside and moved on to another, which now looked elegant with its smaller opening.

As my little brother struggled in my father’s arms, weary and bored after another long visit to our relatives on the opposite side of town, I swelled with pride that I had a part to play and that it would set me apart from the moody child annoying my parents on the walk back home. And though I still wasn’t looking forward to months of scrambled eggs, I was more comfortable with the idea.

“Don’t forget about the eggshells, Mami,” I said.
My father scoffed, and my mother gave him a friendly swat on the arm.

“You’ll have to remind me again at breakfast,” my mother said.

By the time we got to the house, I had all but convinced myself that I couldn’t wait to make cascarones.

A few weeks passed, and the eggshells were accumulating in a small box next to the stove. I caught a glimpse of it once in a while as I played near my mother when she was cooking. When my aunts arrived, they always entered without knocking, so I was always caught off guard when the front door suddenly flew open and they burst in with their art supplies.

“We’ve got a cute order, Avelina; wait until you see this,” Tía Chata said.

“I’ll help you mop so that you can sit down with us,” Tía Luz said.

And in no time, the three sisters were sitting around the table, giggling and gossiping like usual.

This time, however, my mother brought the reverie to a halt when she made an announcement about my father that made even me stop to listen.

“Rigoberto’s going to the north to work,” my mother said.

“Really?” Tía Chata said. “Leaving you and the babies all alone?”

I only became the baby when someone wanted to highlight my vulnerability. At six years old, with a bicycle that had no training wheels, I hardly felt like a baby anymore. My little brother, Alex, who still ate from a high chair, was the baby.

“Do you want one of us to move in with you to keep you company?” Tía Luz suggested. But I knew even then that this would never happen. If my father barely tolerated the long visits by my mother’s family, he would definitely not put up with any of them moving in. It wasn’t so much his objection but pressure
from the González side of the family, who didn’t seem to take a liking to the Alcalás—they were too religious and too forthright. The Gonzálezes were drinkers and partiers.

“I’ll be fine,” my mother said. “It’s better this way.” And we all knew what she meant.

In the coming weeks, I didn’t really notice my father’s absence too much, perhaps because I rarely spent any time with him. Once in a while, I would dream about him and casually ask my mother where he was and what he was doing.

“What? Working,” is all she would answer.

What I did notice was that my aunts stopped coming around. Suddenly the house appeared too empty and quiet without their laughter. When I asked about them, my mother would look away and make some dismissive remark. But most noticeable of all was that we had stopped having eggs for breakfast. My mother started feeding me farina, which I didn’t like much because it tasted gooey and grainy.

“I want eggs,” I said to her in protest one morning. And so my mother burst into tears.

I didn’t know how to respond. So I ate my farina without further complaints, and each morning after that I was careful not to let her see how displeased I was with my breakfast. I caught a glimpse of the box of eggshells and thought longingly about those days when the dreaded scrambled eggs graced my plate. What I wouldn’t give to have them again.

And then the farina ran out and I longed for it as well because now my mother was feeding me tortillas with salsa.

I understood the word “poverty” but I had never experienced hunger. I didn’t realize they came hand in hand. At school, I recognized children who had less than I did. I could tell by their shoes, their notebooks, which were always smaller than mine. But I also recognized children who had shinier shoes than I did and who carried notebooks that were thicker and heavier. Suddenly it made
sense why my aunts and my mother would gather to make their arts and crafts—they were not just entertainment or excuses to socialize; these were economic necessities, proper ways for God-fearing women to make a little extra money. All those coins in the can they brought back from the plaza paid for staples like bread and milk. And eggs. Now that my aunts were not coming around for some inexplicable reason, now that my father was gone, it was just my mother, my baby brother, and me, consuming very little or nothing at all. And when something is gone, it is eventually forgotten and no longer missed.

A group of boys started playing marbles in front of the house one afternoon after school, and that was my cue to run into my room to grab my cache. I eased my way into the next round. I played with my lucky white cat’s eye, which the other boys coveted. Halfway into the game, one of them wanted it badly enough to cheat, so I called him on it.

“I’m not cheating,” he said. “The cat’s eye is mine now.”

“You leaned in too far,” I said. “You didn’t shoot behind the line.”

“Yes, I did,” he insisted.

I picked up my cat’s eye and pocketed it. “I’m not letting it go.”

“Oh, now who’s the one cheating?”

The other boys didn’t step in to defend either one of us. This was the law of the game. Contentious calls had to be resolved by the two parties involved. I held my stance, remaining motionless until his next move, which seemed to be evidence enough of my accusation because the boy withdrew, but not before letting out a cruel remark.

“I’m letting you have it,” he said. “Because your father left you.”

I looked around at the other faces. They seemed to be complicit in this knowledge that up until that moment I didn’t have. I heard someone laugh, a giggle that might have been prompted by the
most unrelated reason to what had just been revealed, but at that moment I felt the sting of ridicule. Red-faced, I ran into the house. By the time I reached my mother, I was in tears.

“What happened?” she said. “Did someone hit you?”

“Where’s my father? Did he leave us? Did he really leave us?”

My mother’s eyes began to water. She had this devastating ability to cry instantly, and it bothered me because that excused her from verbalizing her pain, from offering no more than an emotional response. There was nowhere to go but into silence after that. I was six years old. What did I have to know about our broken home except that it was now as empty as my stomach, something else to get used to?

Alex appeared clueless about our predicament. He walked around the house in that turtleneck sweater that he refused to take off even though Mami kept asking him to. With the rainy season came the oppressive humidity. I wondered if his thin, tiny frame even felt hunger the way my body did. Sometimes I would stare at him with envy, his peace left undisturbed by his lack of understanding that our mother had hidden us away in shame. Other times, I was grateful that at least one person was spared the terrible truths that weighed over the rest of us. If my mother discreetly moved food from her plate onto mine, I would do the same with my brother’s plate when she wasn’t looking. My brother received the offering passively and without objection, as if he sensed somehow that this was the new dynamic at the dining table. At night, Mami would light a candle in front of a picture of Jesus and we would pray together, and I marveled at the strength it took for God to hear such pleas and do nothing. Every night, we performed the same ceremony. I grew thinner, but my body appeared to be sinking into the mattress. I imagined that months later the bed would swallow me completely.

Then one day, miraculously, my father reappeared, dark and handsome as always. I wasn’t sure how much time had passed
since he had vanished—a few weeks, maybe a few months—though long enough for me to push him out of my mind. And suddenly there he was, smiling down at me as if he had only gone to town for a quick errand. And just as easily as I had forgotten him, I remembered him, pleased that his absence could not be used against me on the streets or at school. My mother must have felt the same because she paraded him down the block, their arms locked, for all the neighbors to see. Even the kitchen went back to normal. Even my breakfast plate because there, glorious as gold, were my scrambled eggs again.

No one mentioned my father’s disappearance or subsequent reappearance—not in front of me anyway, and I didn’t ask about it. The more it remained unsaid, the more it became undone, this painful period of my childhood. And cascarón season came to a close with a successful sale at the plaza during Holy Week. It seemed everything was back in its place, and I even set a few cascarones aside for myself, which I had never done before. I broke one on my father’s head, and he laughed as the confetti rained over him. I gave him my second one and he broke it over my mother’s head. At the end of the night, Alex slept soundly over my father’s shoulder as I fought drowsiness to watch the highlight of the festivities—the burning of El Castillo de Chuchurumbé, an intricate fireworks structure with fire wheels and sparklers that was all whistles and explosions, a castle that shrieked and cried so that we didn’t have to.

But if happiness had come back to our house, it didn’t last long. Four years later, the González family was living in California, squeezed into a single house with my grandparents, my uncle’s family, and my aunt’s—nineteen bodies in one tiny space—a complete shift from our household arrangement in México, where the possibility of having Tía Luz or Tía Chata move in with us for a spell was not even an option. But as usual, there was no questioning the why or how of things; there was just surrender and moving forward with the decisions of the grown-ups.
The biggest challenge was getting used to living with Abuelo—and his bristly mustache—who always seemed annoyed and angry. As the patriarch, he kept a close eye on the goings on in the house, particularly in the kitchen, which he had claimed as his domain above all the women because, in a poor household, whoever controlled the food controlled the family. If he wasn’t snapping at the women over their wasteful cooking habits, he was yelling at any of the kids who dared wander to the refrigerator uninvited. He was like the guard dog that instills such fear that he’s even scarier when he’s not in sight.

Unlike my older cousins, I was having an easier time adapting, probably because at ten years old, I enjoyed school and learning English. One of my first friendships was with a girl named Eve. She was half Panamanian, and her mother spoke fluent Spanish, but Eve was monolingual. She also had a small dog, named Peanut, which they kept in her backyard.

One summer, Eve went on vacation with her family, so she enlisted me to feed Peanut once a day. All I had to do was unLatch the gate, scoop half a can of dog food into the plastic dish, and fill the second dish with fresh water. I accepted the responsibility, not because I cared much for Peanut, who barked too much, but because I liked the idea of a pet. We had dogs in México, but they had functions—to guard the house from the rooftop—while Peanut was a fat little critter that couldn’t even guard her own dish. It was an entirely different relationship with animals that intrigued me, yet I had no fantasies that we would ever have a pet, and we never did at that address.

Eve gave me an opened can, and Eve’s father gave me money to buy more dog food later in the week. I waved at the family as they drove away, and then I sauntered back home. I announced to everyone in the kitchen that I would be storing the dog food in the refrigerator, and no one batted an eye.

A few days later, Abuelo opened the refrigerator and asked...
about the can. I explained my role as animal caretaker, and he simply shrugged.

“What’s it made of?” he asked, inspecting the can.

I was surprised by the question. “Meat, I guess,” I said. I read the ingredients more closely and translated what little I could.

“Meat,” Abuelo repeated. He placed the can back into refrigerator and went about his day. So did I.

The next time I took a can over to Eve’s house, I became curious about the dog food. It didn’t smell like any meat I had ever tasted, but this was the U.S., and there were foods here I had never smelled or eaten before. As Peanut ate her fill, I dared to take a pinch of food out of the can and place it into my mouth. I didn’t swallow it, but the taste lingered even after I spat it out. My curiosity satisfied, I knew I would never do that again, yet I still blushed, embarrassed at my own bravado.

Months later, as Christmas season approached, I recognized something familiar was happening in the kitchen. I knew that hollow sound of pots and pans ringing without purpose, of the refrigerator light glaring at its ribs, of the desperation in the voices of the grown-ups as they fought over supplies to feed their young. For dinner, Abuelo cooked these greasy stews that filled us up with hot oily water, but later that night my mother called my brother and me into her bedroom, and she sneaked a slice of Spam into our mouths. On those occasions, I only pretended to brush my teeth. I looked forward to going to bed with that taste locked in my mouth, swirling my tongue around and around until sleep defeated me.

School lunch was another reason to look forward to school days, and I don’t remember if we were coached or not, but we didn’t reveal to anyone that we showed up without having breakfast. This poverty was temporary—that’s what we were told at home. No sense letting anyone else in on our shame. It was the
same silence we had to keep about how many people were actually living at home. Since many of us were undocumented, we didn’t want to invite any scrutiny from neighbors, teachers, post office workers—any one of them was a phone call away from the immigration authorities. We allowed no one to look in, and we certainly didn’t leak anything out.

At about this time, Abuela started feeding us vitamins, huge red pills the size of a toy car—or so we joked. It was also a thing of humor to stand in a line with my brother and my eight cousins, each one of us taking our turn as Abuela shoved that monster pill down our throats. “Don’t choke, don’t choke!” the others chanted as Abuela made sure the pill was swallowed.

The grown-ups must have worked hard to protect us children from really seeing what was happening in that household. If my older cousins understood, they didn’t share it with us younger ones. I figured it out because I had been down this road before, and so I also went to lengths to keep my knowledge a secret from those younger than I.

One evening, Abuelo prepared a casserole he called lasagna. It was an Italian dish, he bragged, and he was particularly proud of this because he used the oven, which was a feature of the stove none of the women in the family had occasion to operate.

As we gathered in the living room to watch TV, a smell wafted among us that made our mouths water. I thought that perhaps this might be the turning point we had all been waiting for, the sign of better times to come. It was customary for the children to eat first, so all ten of us squeezed around the table to receive a serving of this fancy lasagna dish Abuelo had made.

I didn’t admit it to myself at first, but there was a familiar smell on my plate. I couldn’t quite place it, so I thought that perhaps it was my mind reaching back to a flavor I had not had the pleasure of enjoying since the kitchen went bare. But when I took the first bite, I remembered: it was Peanut’s food from the can. The others
didn’t know this. Their responses to the food were mixed. Some took a few bites and then started to eat around the meat, and others ate the meat willingly. It was lasagna, it was Italian food, it was supposed to taste funny. But the pasta was soft and the tomato sauce was tasty. It would do.

The sound of chewing around me was deafening, and it took me back to that moment I had experienced hunger once before, when my father had disappeared. Suddenly it all came back to me—how it felt as if my guts were tying knots around each other, how I came across a candle on my mother’s bureau, the one that released the scent of cinnamon, and how I couldn’t figure out how those teeth marks had gotten there, but now I did. I had always heard the grown-ups say that I would never be able to tell when my body was stretching because it happened gradually. But something inside me grew in an instant and I felt like exploding.

Abuelo stood at a distance, rubbing his mustache. His face appeared pleased somehow, maybe curious about how effectively he had deceived us. I wanted to detect some cruelty in his gesture, but I didn’t find any. Instead, I saw sadness in its pure form for the very first time. It was a look of defeat, as if he had wanted us to reject this food, to spit it out and cry foul, to accuse him with fits of anger that he had fed us dog food. It would be a moment of truth for all of us, to finally admit that this moving from one country to another had not solved our problems, had not delivered on a promise to lift us out of poverty, to satiate our hunger. And that would have meant that all this sacrifice, all this hope we had packed into our bags, all this hiding and secret-keeping, had been for nothing. I could tear this whole theater apart and end the dream for all of us, or I could triumph over the test that had been set before me. Eat it or beat it back to México.

“Are you going to eat your food?” Alex asked.

I looked down at my plate. I had scarcely touched it. My fork was still buried in the entrails of the dog food lasagna. The

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moment of reckoning was in my hands. I was no longer the boy who belonged to the Alcalá women; I was now a young man who had joined the hardscrabble lives of the González family. And so had my little brother, who ate the lasagna with a sense of urgency. Without further hesitation, I scooped out a generous portion of the lasagna and stuffed it into my mouth.