What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth

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My brother and I had been interacting all these years because we were related, because we shared a common loss—the death of our mother, abandonment by our father—and because our grandmothers had reinforced a sense of unity. “There’s only two of you,” they said at different times. But during adolescence, I withdrew into a depression that our family members called shyness, and my brother began to act out, becoming just another troubled youth in that neighborhood where the adults were farmworkers and many of their sons were gang members. My brother never joined a gang, but Abuelo saw my brother’s behavior as evidence to the contrary. Alex had been ditching classes more often, and hanging out with the high school dropouts, who kept him out late at night and introduced him to beer and smokes. This included a few of our cousins who never adapted to life in the U.S. and so became wage-earning laborers, which also gave them permission to make independent choices like partying late into the night even though they still lived with their parents. By this time, I had already gone away to college, and I would get distressing reports from my grandmother about Alex’s fights with Abuelo. And at one time, she even suggested I let him move in with me.

“There’s only two of you,” she said over the phone, reaching for that simple phrase that didn’t require further justification.
“But it’s not that simple,” I tried to explain. And it wasn’t. I had left the Coachella Valley with its sad memories and its sad people. The only thing I took with me was the duty to check in on the family once in a while, to listen to them and then let them go as soon as I hung up the phone. That included my brother, who had drifted away from me since the death of our mother. He refused to invoke her memory, even her name. So I moved forward on the path of grief on my own. There were only two of us who understood that loss, and one of us wasn’t talking.

“Can’t he go with my father?” I suggested.

The silence that followed betrayed the terrible truths of that statement: I had defied my duty as my brother’s protector, and we had become desperate enough for an alternative that we turned to the man who, a year into widowhood, found a widow with three sons. He eventually remarried and moved on without us.

“I guess there’s no other choice,” Abuela said, solemnly.

At sixteen years old, my brother left school and moved in with our father, who had relocated to Mexicali, just south of the border. The distance between us grew, and so did our silence for the next five years. As I focused on my studies, on new friendships and romantic relationships, I became less and less interested in Abuela’s reports about the goings-on in the González family. The only time I perked up was when she told me my brother had shacked up with a young woman. I became excited by the idea of Alex finally settling down, so I resolved to go to Mexicali and meet my new “sister-in-law.” I was already in graduate school in Davis at the time, and a generous fellowship had allowed me to send my brother funds to furnish his new home with Azucena. There was even poetry in her name—it meant “lily”—and I began to shape a romantic image of this young woman who had decided to make a home with my beloved brother. I imagined her as pretty as her name, a lovely scent about her, and her voice so soft and delicate that I would have to bend my ear toward her to listen. On the way
there, I even bought a hefty pile of women’s clothing to express my gratitude for my brother’s rescue. I beamed as I imagined myself stepping into a scene so common in those fantasy love stories on Mexican telenovelas: a young couple stumbling around in a room like a pair of turtledoves because the shared space was new, the intimacy was addicting, and all they had to do was get drunk on their own voices. It was a cheesy expectation, but I needed to place my brother inside something different than in the spaces that had become, sometimes reluctantly, his homes. But then came the letdown.

The history of this piece of land in the outskirts of Mexicali was another example of how members of the González family couldn’t bear living apart, no matter how much they annoyed each other. With no running water and weak electricity, this isolated place was called El Rancho, though there was nothing ranch-like about it—no animals, no farmland. It was just a long stretch of dirt with an outhouse and a small two-bedroom house that belonged to the man who had married my aunt, my father’s only sister. On our many visits to the border, we had eventually end up in El Rancho because the space gave us a sense of freedom. The adults would stand around a grill and talk while the kids would play in the small canal nearby if it wasn’t overflowing with irrigation water. These times were actually pleasant, and I caught a rare glimpse of what it was like to be part of a happy family. The rest of the time, the family was busy battling each other over petty things like gossip and money. Perhaps El Rancho’s association with the good times is what encouraged my uncle to sell pieces of this land to his in-laws. It seemed like a profitable venture since the land was at least a decade away from development and his own children expressed no interest in ever living there. He divided the land into three properties, and sold one to Abuelo, one to my father, and one to Tío Rafael, my father’s brother. Unlike the man who had sold
this property, the González men did envision making homes there for themselves and for the generations to come. I knew it was yet another way for them to stay within shouting and fighting distance of one another. This was confirmed when I finally made my way to El Rancho to meet Azucena.

My bus arrived in Calexico, and then I used a pay phone to call my brother at the gas station where he worked. Since he was the manager, it was relatively easy for him to announce his early departure. Still, I had to wait at least an hour in that stuffy bus station with its coin-operated bathroom door and a snack bar that sold Mexican candy and flour-based chicharrones that glowed an unsavory orange. I had my portable cassette player to drown out the noise and a book to block my view of the strange dramas that unfolded in places like these, usually fights with the man behind the counter about luggage.

I was still confused about why my grandparents had chosen to move down to El Rancho after they retired. El Rancho was so removed from the paved roads, from the nearest supermarket, that any errand was an inconvenient car ride away. But after many years of living in government housing, units so compressed they were more like prison cells than homes, a house in the middle of nowhere was better than an apartment squeezed in between two others. And although El Rancho now had running water, it still had no drainage pipes. I wasn’t looking forward to using the outhouse.

When my brother suddenly popped into the bus station, I jumped out of the seat in the waiting room. I had not seen my brother in over a year, yet there was no affectionate exchange, not even a handshake. That was the González way.

“How was your trip?” my brother asked as we walked to his car. He carried the heavy bag of clothes I had brought for Azucena.

“Fine,” I said. “Tired as fuck though.” Since we were now crossing the border, I switched to my native Spanish. He laughed
and that pleased me because it made me believe everything was going to be all right.

But everything was not all right. As soon we pulled into El Rancho, I was stunned by the other changes. The canal had been filled in but there was still no road. The population had exploded, but mainly by residents who lived in shoddy shacks. The path to El Rancho was lined by the poverty I thought we had abandoned long ago. And now my family had moved right back in. The car stirred the dust into clouds, and even though the air-conditioning didn’t work, we still had to close the windows, locking ourselves in with the heat. But the truth was I appreciated the haze of dirt, how it covered up the reminders of México’s Third World reality.

My arrival was anticlimactic. I wasn’t received with hugs or kisses. In fact, I walked into my brother’s house and was met with complete indifference. Azucena looked like a bored teenager, and when my brother introduced me, she simply looked up from the couch in front of the television and then turned back to her show. This display of coldness became even more awkward when I turned over the bag of clothing I had brought for her. She took it and walked away to sift through its contents in the privacy of her bedroom.

I looked at my brother, who was seething with rage.

“She’s a bitch,” he said. His face darkened as he proceeded to tell me all of her faults, all of his regrets, everything stemming from the fact that a year into their union she hadn’t become pregnant.

“She wants something to do,” he said, and I looked around the unkempt house and understood that her behavior was one big passive aggressive gesture. I had nothing to offer by way of consolation, so we opened up a few beers and started drinking, small-talking about the old days in El Rancho. It felt good to fill up the hollowness with something.

The new days in El Rancho stank. Maybe they always did, but as a child I never noticed. The outhouses smelled; so did the pits
in the back that everyone used to burn garbage. And then there was a strange, acidic odor in the air that Alex said was the chicken farm where our stepmother worked inseminating chickens.

“They used needles, you know,” he said. “I should ask Amelia to bring me one and I can impregnate Azucena.”

I laughed at his vulgar joke, though I could feel the disappointment in his voice. This house was empty. Meanwhile, a few doors down, my father had populated his home with three stepsons and one daughter, my half sister. I forced myself to visit, only to be met with the same disinterest. My father’s stepsons were still boys, and they chased each other around the house making farting noises. My stepmother asked me a few noncommittal questions and then went back to her chores. My half sister, only about six or seven, simply stared at me, not with curiosity but with suspicion.

“What’s her name?” I asked, and I immediately regretted doing that. I knew her name. Nancy. But this was my way of wounding my father, of letting him know how little I cared about his new life and family.

My father shirked off my immaturity and started spinning his usual stories. Amelia soon joined in, bantering with him in such an amusing manner that I understood immediately how well suited they were for each other. They teased each other and cut each other off with laughter. It was such a different interaction than the one I had grown up seeing with my mother, who always had too many tears and frowns. Amelia was the opposite of my mother; she was a big joyful presence with her hearty laugh and big chest. Her levity was contagious, and soon her sons joined in the fun. I listened and offered up a weak smile from the corner of the room, aware that I had nothing to contribute to this household and that a plate of food on the table was the only affection they would ever show me and that I would ever accept.

But just as quickly, I became angry at my father because whatever wisdom he had about relationships wasn’t making its way to
my brother. It was then that I understood why Alex had decided to find a partner—to leave my father’s house.

“It was always too noisy,” he said to me later when I asked him about it. “There’s a happiness there that didn’t include me.” And I knew exactly what he was talking about.

My visit to Tío Rafael was a brief exchange through the fence. Divorced and a deadbeat father, he had moved out of the country to avoid paying child support for his three children. His ex-wife had since remarried, but he was afraid to return to the U.S., so he formed a common-law marriage with a woman who worked to support his whims. There were many false starts, however, and we witnessed him chasing after a series of women before he met Mari, the only one who could stand living in isolation, with only my temperamental uncle for company. Abuela once told me that he announced to the entire neighborhood when one of his conquests went sour because he would crank his stereo system all night and drink away his sorrows until dawn. Finally hitched, he avoided socializing with anyone except for my father and Abuela, who were the only ones he allowed into his house.

My grandparents hadn’t changed much. They kept busy with a lively garden and a menagerie of dogs and parakeets. They never had any kind words to say about Amelia or her brood, and they pointed out repeatedly what a terrible decision my brother had made in moving in with a girl who didn’t cook or clean.

“And apparently she doesn’t fuck either,” Abuelo said, rubbing his mustache. “Not even a belly after all this time. Then why keep her around?”

Instead of chiding him for his crassness, Abuela nodded in agreement. “He should throw that one away. Find another one.”

“And you?” Abuelo asked. “When are you getting married? Whatever happened to that Chinese girl you were seeing?”

“Vikki,” Abuela said. “How’s Vikki?”

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I blushed. My father hadn’t even bothered asking about my love life. And my grandparents held on to some fantasy they created when I came home to visit with my friend Vikki from college. We had been having sex, but neither of us saw a future in the relationship because her parents wanted her to marry a Chinese man and, with the exception of Vikki, I only desired men. We were college companions and not much else. But when she insisted on tagging along the next time I visited my grandparents because she wanted to try homemade Mexican food, I knew her presence was going to mislead them. They were so pleased with my choice of girlfriend and displayed such a newfound respect for me that I began to convince myself that maybe this was the correct path to follow.

On the drive back to college, I dared say out loud, “Hey, Vikki, why don’t we just get married? I mean, when we’re done with school.”

Vikki scrunched her face and said, “Why? To make your grandparents happy? You said so yourself, there’s no such a thing as a happy marriage in your family. Maybe you are like all the other men and you’re incapable of being alone. No way; you’re not using me like that.”

Her rebuke sobered me up, and I never proposed such a crazy idea again, though for months after that, I looked for signs during our lovemaking for a change of heart.

“She’s doing fine,” I said. “She moved back in with her parents.”

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a photograph of Vikki that Abuela had on display atop the television. Oh, brother, I thought. I should have never sent her that.

Back at my brother’s house, Azucena only smiled once, and very faintly, when I complimented her cooking. The rest of the time, she disappeared into the television or her bedroom. She didn’t surrender anything more than that single facial gesture. I tried to engage her repeatedly in conversation, but she responded by shrugging, or by pretending she hadn’t heard. Frustrated, I
simply gave up, and when my brother was at work, the heaviness of the silent treatment was so maddening that I chose to sit outside in the hot weather, reading as the sweat collected beneath the lenses of my glasses. I would hear the voices of my father and stepmother from two doors away—hers always punctuated by a chuckle. Once I had enough of the heat, I decided to walk back inside. When I reached the door, Azucena had locked it. She had done this deliberately, I was certain of it. But I refused to knock. I went back to my reading spot and endured a few more hours of exile, until my brother came home.

To my relief, my stay wasn’t longer than a few days. I had decided to travel down to Michoacán to visit my maternal grandparents, so my brother dropped me off at the bus station. I had never made that trip alone before, and the feeling of independence was exhilarating. I took a small duffle bag, some extra cash to leave to my maternal grandmother, and a camera I borrowed from Azucena.

“I’ll be back in a week,” I told my brother. He nodded his head and drove off to his job across the border.

My visit to Michoacán was uneventful. Unlike the González clan, the Alcalás were low-maintenance and little drama. They went to church, ate their meals quietly, and spoke softly as they watched the afternoon darken from the chairs they set out in the garden. If there was a burst of laughter, it was nothing close to the cackling I had just heard at my father’s house. And if there was sadness, it was handled with dignity. After the second day, I was bored out of my mind. I began to take short trips to the nearby towns and visit distant relatives, who were always shocked that I had dared to travel alone. “So dangerous,” I kept hearing, followed by horror stories that took place on the road—bus plunges, highway robberies. Everywhere I went, I was asked about my father and my brother, and I kept repeating the same news: they had both become partnered.
“To good women?” I was asked.
“’I think so,’” I said, but I didn’t elaborate, and no one expected me to. Instead, they seized the moment to ask me about my marital plans.
“I’m still in school. I’ll think about it after I graduate.” I blushed each time I said that.

In the evenings, I slipped out to visit one of my old lovers. He was married now, but that didn’t stop us from sneaking around in his house, sometimes while his wife was asleep with their baby. Most of the time, our sex was muffled; other times, he grunted without fear of being caught, as if this was some sort of unspoken arrangement they had made to keep the marriage intact. I suspected as much by the way he didn’t rush to put his clothes back on again. And by how he rolled over, resting calmly while leaving himself completely exposed. When I tried to rest my hand on his chest, he gently pulled it off, and my fingers tingled as they waved good-bye to his hairy torso.

“I need to catch my breath,” he said.
“That’s fine,” I said. “I wasn’t asking for anything more.”
“Shhh,” he said. “She might hear us.”

I sighed. A minute later, he was sound asleep, so I picked myself up and left as quietly as I had entered. That was the arrangement. As I walked out of the house, I heard his wife comforting their baby. The baby made gurgling noises, and suddenly I was filled with such shame that I resolved not to return—a promise I knew that I couldn’t keep because my lover’s pull was strong. The next afternoon, when he walked past my grandparents’ house, he whistled a tune and my body leaned forward instinctively because it was getting called.

On one occasion, I was sneaking back into my grandparents’ house when Abuela Herminia called out to me in the dark. She had been waiting for me in the living room.

“Where were you?” she commanded. It was an accusatory tone that had never been directed toward me.

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“I asked you a question. You’re in my house—I have a right to know.”
“I was out with friends.”
“Were you drinking?” she asked sharply.
I almost giggled but held back. “No.”
“Were you smoking?”
“No, I swear it.”

By now my eyes had adjusted to the dark. I could see her graying hair catching the moonlight. I became uncomfortable. I knew what was coming.
“Were you sinning?”

The scent of sex was still strong on my body. My lover’s kisses, his tongue, those exploratory fingers he had inserted inside me—all the evidence of his touch now glowed in the dark, and I was convinced my grandmother could see if not catch the odor of my sinning. I hesitated in answering, and this angered her.

“I asked you a question: were you sinning? Were you sleeping with a woman?”

In the wording, I caught sight of an escape, a window that would allow me to answer the question without telling her the truth.

“No, Abuelita,” I said. “I wasn’t sinning with a woman. That’s the truth.”

She sighed in relief. Her tense posture relaxed. “Go to bed, then. And no more staying out late as long as you’re here. It’s dangerous.”

I walked away and left her sitting in the living room. She mumbled her prayers, and that brought a heaviness on me that sunk me into a deep sleep. When I woke up the next day, my body ached because I had not removed my clothes.

Later in the week, I made my obligatory visit to my mother’s grave and brought a bouquet of red gladiolas and, as a symbolic
gesture, a second bouquet of white lilies as if to connect my mother to Azucena, her daughter-in-law. I wanted to tell her what had taken place since the last time I came to see her, but it was too depressing. So I simply cleaned the blue tiles of her grave and wept before I left. When I finally said good-bye to the Alcalá family, I was relieved to be leaving them also. It became clear to me then that the problem was me, not my families—I was the one who refused to join in and blend in. I was much more comfortable journeying on my own. They didn’t know who I was, but neither did I reveal that to them. The secret of my sexuality was still keeping us apart. I pressed my head against the glass window of the bus in resignation. I had to make one more stop in Mexicali before heading back to college. Each day was one day closer to the world in another language that I had built without them.

Since El Rancho didn’t have telephone service yet, I walked out of the Mexicali bus station and took an expensive taxi ride to El Rancho. I was feeling triumphant that I had survived my solo journey to the homeland, and as I tossed around in the backseat of the taxi, I took stock of the gifts I had brought back. I played with a pair of ornate earrings I was planning to give Azucena. I was determined to win her over yet. There was very little to report to my father and to Alex about the Alcalá family, so I congratulated myself in choosing to travel to the nearby towns instead, visits that always pleased my father to listen to. But when the car finally pulled up to my brother’s house, I knew something had changed.

“Did you bring that camera?” my brother said as soon as I stepped out of the taxi. I handed it over to him. He checked that I had removed the film. Satisfied that I had, he tossed it full force over the fence.

“Why did you do that?”

“She’s gone,” he said. “I want nothing here that’s hers.”

I was so flustered by the news that I wasn’t fazed by the fact that Amelia’s sons were hanging around in my brother’s kitchen.
refused to speak in Spanish though, because this conversation was private.

“What happened?” I asked.

“It was over a long time ago, anyway, so she was looking for an excuse to get out and she found one.”

“What?” I asked. “That you weren’t conceiving?”

My brother turned away from me. “No,” he said. “You.”

“Me? What the fuck did I do?”

“I told you she was just a bitch. She said she didn’t like you. Even after all you’ve done for us, and all the clothes you brought her.” He took a breath. “What a bitch.”

“I still don’t understand,” I said. “Did she elaborate?”

Alex rummaged in the refrigerator for a few items. “You hungry? You want me to cook you something to eat?”

“Sure,” I said. My stepbrothers watched us go about our business in silence. I wanted them to leave, but I didn’t know how to tell them without sounding rude.

“So they just hang around here now that you’re single?” I said.

The clanging of pans drowned out his response.

“I still don’t get it, Alex,” I insisted. “What exactly did she say? What were her exact words?”

That’s when my brother froze, as if considering whether to tell me. When he finally turned to me, he said, “Look, you don’t need to hear it. She’s gone and that’s all there is to it. All I can say is that I had to choose between my brother and my woman and, well, I made my choice.”

“But that’s stupid, Alex; we don’t even live in the same country anymore. She left and now you’re alone. I’m not staying here to keep you company. I’m no longer part of your everyday life.”

“Yes, you are,” Alex said. “You’re my brother. And no one talks shit about my bro, not even my woman. You understand what I’m saying? You’re my brother and I accept you as you are. Fuck everyone else.”
A warm rush came over me because I finally understood that Azucena had seen in me what my father and grandparents and even my brother had refused to see or name. Even worse, she had used that as a weapon, as an excuse to hurt my brother. I felt a renewed sense of love for Alex. I dug into my duffle bag and pulled out the pair of earrings.

“Take these to your mother,” I said to the boys. “Tell her I picked them out just for her.” One of them snatched the earrings and ran out of the house, and the others chased after him.

“Fried chicken okay with you?” Alex said.

“Perfect,” I said.

Only the two of us now, we sat in silence as he marinated the chicken with mustard and pepper. But suddenly my brother blurted out with conviction, “Women. Who needs them anyway?”

I thought about my mother, my father’s quick remarriage, my uncle’s desperate search for a woman after he divorced his wife—one disappointment after another that he would drown out in alcohol until he met Mari. I thought about Vikki and my impulsive fantasy of surrendering to this notion of heterosexual happiness that for the González men was limned with heartbreak. I thought about my poor brother, devastated by his first venture into that González tradition of finding and then failing to keep a mate. My eyes watered. I had no idea what my brother was thinking about, but his eyes watered too. Who needs women? The González men certainly behaved like they didn’t.

Less than a year later, he told me over the phone that he had found someone else. “What is her name?” I asked.

“Guadalupe.”

“Guadalupe,” I repeated. Such poetry in her name.