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Paradise

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Fernanda Legarreta

Paradise

He pressed his forehead against the back of her head and held her softly from around the neck. His breath smelled like cheap cigars and smooth scotch. He inhaled sharply as he rubbed his pencil grey mustache against her wet hair. He had been doing this every morning since he found her last August. That was ninety-two days ago. He liked the smell of Jazmin in her hair, and the warm auburn shade that looked like scarlet flames when the sun hit it. He had never seen hair like that, so he cut strands and placed them in a green glass jar he kept on the mirrored nightstand.

Not a single word came out of her mouth when he cut a strand of hair, or when he ran his long fingernails along her arms and sides, or when he whispered songs she couldn't understand in her ear every night. No chills, not even a slight flinch. She couldn't feel any of it. She sat down facing the window, bare back against the straw chair, and knees pushed hard against her chest. The window was kept open during the day. She was starting to forget things. Like the sound of the ocean, the feeling of fresh clothes brushing her skin, the taste of cold pizza after a hangover, the sound of her voice, and her mother's face. She looked down at the tin foil roofs and cardboard houses below her. She looked at the wet clothes hanging on thin wire as the resonating sound of a yin yang wind chime filled the air. The abandoned flesh colored constructions looked like naked figures standing in the distance; and the pyramids just lay there. She could see all three perfectly, but she didn't think they looked like 'wonders' anymore. The long line of tourists looked like a trail of ants swaying in the horizon. She forced herself to remember her last day.

“The water looks brighter on Tuesdays,” the spice vendor mumbled. He gave you a bag full of turmeric roots. It was a gift for your father in law. He drinks turmeric tea every day, your mother does too. Remember? You were there on business, but there was nothing wrong with taking a day off. You asked the vendor about the closest beach from Cairo, and he sent you to ‘Sharm El Luli,’ a beach with pink sand, and no tourists, locals, or vendors. He said not to drive alone, but you ignored him. You drove until the road became narrow. It turned into a string path once you reached the desert, and it gently faded into the sand. It made you question if you were headed in the right direction, but after two hours, you saw it. A faint blue line became visible in the horizon, growing brighter as you approached it.

You were wearing a white linen dress with puffed sleeves and a square neck. The fitted bodice was adorned with embroidered blue butterflies, and the ruffles on the long skirt were stitched with gold thread. Do you remember that dress? It was your first time wearing it. You dipped your blue painted toes in the crystalline water, and you forgot about the hundred-degree heat burning your pale freckled skin. It felt like paradise. You had your hair tied up with the tortoise hair clip you stole from your mother’s vanity eighteen years ago when you were four. She never used it because it tangled her curls. You sat on the beach, and buried your toes in the sand, letting your body sink into it. Then you heard it. The sound of a car engine coming from behind the dunes. You were closing your eyes, but you felt their gaze, so you turned around and saw them. Two tall figures emerged and walked slowly towards you. You didn’t speak Arabic, and you didn’t have to. Their eyes said it all. Your mother’s voice echoed incessantly inside your head, “Words are strong, but looks can kill.” You watched her clip wash away with the sea foam as they dragged you by the sleeves and ripped the butterflies one by one out of your chest. You have to remember. You have to.

The man paced barefoot around the room, holding a leather sketchbook and a maroon pencil. He had sketched every inch of her body. The walls were a testament to his artistry. He spoke slow and soft, the way a father speaks to his child. “Let me hear your voice, Raquel. Speak to me. Let me hear it.” He stood in front of the window, casting a shadow that clothed her naked body. He kneeled before her and traced his finger across her cupid’s bow. Not a word came out of her lips. He lifted her arms and moved them away from her chest and placed them on the wooden armrests. She moved unconsciously, like an articulated mannequin. She watched him sketch her ribs, but in her head they didn’t look like ribs. They looked like the iron bars of an empty birdcage wrapped in bruised skin. She looked down at her bony knuckles and clenched fist, and then she smiled when she noticed that the red wool string wrapped around her left wrist was somehow still intact. She was starting to remember, or at least that’s what she told herself. Her mother tied it the day before she left for Cairo as a sign of protection. She remembered.

“The string will break when it can no longer repel the negative energy around you,” your mother insisted as she finished tying the seventh knot.

“It always breaks, it’s useless,” you said. Her friend from the Kabbalah Center brought her the string from Rachel’s tomb in Israel, but your mother chose to give it to you. Rachel was the matriarch and protector of women, but you didn’t believe in the powers of the little amulet, or in the effect of the evil eye. They named you “Raquel” after her. You only let your mother tie the string because she said she had a feeling that you’d need it more than she would. You probably didn’t think that that would be the last time you’d watch her do this. You didn’t know it would be the last piece you’d have left of her. You thought you’d hear her voice again, saying, “don’t talk to strangers,” or “pack a sweater in case it gets cold at night” or “please call me when you’re back at the hotel.”

“Keep an eye on the magic string,” your father said. He always teased your mom, “You know, it’s bad luck to be superstitious.” Do you remember him? He doesn’t eat chicken, but he made the best paprika chicken. Remember when you sat on the bayside window of your room to watch him fish every Sunday afternoon? He turned around and waved every time he caught another fish. He knew you were watching over him. When you were little, you used to say his eyes were the color of a mossy pond. Remember how you used to cry when the girls at school said you were probably adopted because he had blonde hair and you didn’t? He drove you to the airport on the night you left. Do you remember him now? He was your best friend. Please remember him.

Raquel continued to face the window, waiting for the sun to hide behind the pyramids. She was jealous of the sun. It disappeared as it pleased. At dusk, the man put a blindfold around her face and turned the radio on. He only listened to the classical station. He untied his robe and then he grabbed her hands and guided her back to the mattress. There was an antique mirror hanging on the ceiling above it. Frida Kahlo had one like that in her bedroom. She put it there so she could paint self-portraits. He turned the volume up, and then he opened the green glass jar and took a strand of her hair and rubbed it slowly against his shaved head, gradually rubbing harder as he dragged it down to his temples, and then violently across his tattooed chest. He moaned and mumbled Raquel’s name as he did it, fixing his gaze on her reflection as he waited for the sun to enter the room and taint her body and the white bed sheets red. She kept her eyes shut after he removed the blindfold.

“Open your eyes, Raquel,” he murmured. She couldn’t open them. Looking would remind her who she was, and she didn’t want that. She couldn’t look at herself because she wasn’t there anymore. Whatever was left of her was a weak voice that resided inside her head.

He turned the radio off, and then he pressed himself against her back and slowly began singing, “London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down, London bridge is falling down my fair lady. Build it up with iron bars, iron bars, iron bars. Build it up with iron bars my fair lady...” He wiped away the tears running down her cheek. He hadn’t sung to her in English before.

The light rays creeping from the edge of the linen curtain dappled across the sheets. He kneeled beside the bed and watched Raquel sleep. She controlled every breath and kept her eyes closed, pretending she didn’t know he had been watching her. “Let me look at your eyes, Raquel. I want to see them,” he said, holding her face between his palms. He was growing impatient. His veiny hands trembled when he realized she had been awake all this time. He pushed her head against the bed and pressed a pillow over her face. “I will count to ten, and when I finish, I want you to open your eyes, Raquel.” He counted slowly, but she didn’t open them. The magic trick wasn’t working for him that day. He screamed, and then he pressed again, suffocating the spirit out of her, but still, nothing. “Welcome to Hell,” he whispered. His breath still smelled like scotch. She heard the liquid collapse against the glass. It was his third one that morning, and yet he swallowed every drop of it. He kept empty bottles of Macallan in the rusty white van he locked her in that day on the beach. She remembered.

You watched the bald man with the thin mustache strip you away from your dress as you screamed at the top of your lungs. The young man standing beside him looked into your eyes as he watched the other man place the gun against your ribs, motioning you to get inside the van, but you couldn’t move. They didn’t look like father and son. The young man’s eyes were silver, and his hands were gentle as he carried you inside the van. “Sorry,” he whispered. He fastened the seatbelt and kept his eyes away from your chest, using a piece of your dress as a blindfold.

He squeezed your left hand, and then he whispered, “Your silence will kill him.” Immediately after he closed the door, you heard a gunshot, followed by another one, and then another one. He was gone, just like that. I know you remember.

When Raquel opened her eyes, the room was empty. The man went to the market every day around noon. Sometimes he bought flowers to keep in the empty terracotta vase in her nightstand, but she had a feeling that he wouldn’t bring them again. A thin line of blood trickled from her nose down to her belly. She could still feel the weight of the man’s knuckles burning her skin. She wiped the blood away from her nose with the back of her hand, but it kept dripping. She walked over to the door, pushing the handle down, but it was locked. The bathroom was locked too, but the window was open. She pushed the curtains to the side, watching the little specs of dust fly carelessly around the room. She took the curved embroidery scissors the man kept under the mattress and began cutting the remaining strands of hair she had. She threw every piece out the window, watching as they gently kissed the ground. It made her feel like a part of her was free now. The man wouldn’t have any more hair to place inside the jar, and that would upset him, but she didn’t care.

She looked through the man’s sketchbook until she came across a driver’s license. It read “RAQUEL AVRAM, 333 SUNSET AVE, PALM BEACH, FL, 33480, HAIR BRN, EYES GRN.” She held on to it as she opened the drawers where the man kept his painting supplies until she found what she was looking for. She took a clean plastic palette and three tubes of acrylic paint. She squeezed black, white, and blue paint out of the half empty tubes. She lay in bed, looking down at her pronounced ribs. She didn’t look up at the mirror. She didn’t want to paint herself like Frida Kahlo did. This wasn’t art, she was painting an armor. She used the thin synthetic brush to deposit the blue color on her skin as she painted a butterfly in the middle of

her stomach. It looked like the ones the man pulled out of her dress. She outlined the wing veins with black paint, and then she used the back of the brush to adorn the forewings with small white dots. When she was done, she took the black paint and drew thin horizontal lines, using her ribs as a guide. The butterfly was in a cage now, safe. Raquel dipped her fingers on the palette and covered the rest of her body in paint. There were no more bruises, or faint scars in sight. Her body was grey, and so was her face. She sat on the window's edge, looking at the pyramids one last time.

You sat on the edge, wondering if jumping from a five-story building would disfigure your face, or if your body would become paralyzed. It never crossed your mind until today when you wiped the blood off of your nose. Being locked in that room sounded worse than any of those outcomes. There was a pile of empty plastic bottles, ready to catch you if you decided to jump. The idea was tempting, but it all looked too easy. What if he came after you? What if someone else took you and locked you away? You begged to feel death's touch the moment that man laid eyes on you. The thought of dying didn't scare you anymore, so you took one long breath, and you did it.

"Raquel, come back to me! Come back to me! I know you can hear me. Come back and show me your eyes," he said.

You woke to the sound of his voice as he called out your name. Your body was buried deep among empty plastic bottles — out of reach, and out of sight. The yin yang windchime resonated as you stood up, it bid you farewell. Entering the slum was like walking into a maze; one that your eyes knew far too well from looking at it ninety-three days in a row. You stood up after you heard him turn the radio on. You limped as your toes brushed past the pebbled ground. Your toes were wet, and so was your back, but there was not enough light for you to see them.

The sound of the wind running through the empty alleys felt as if someone were breathing behind your neck. The cardboard structures, and tinfoil roofs looked like they could collapse at any given moment, but somehow they didn't. These were the real wonders. You walked past the carcass of a cat, and you stopped for a moment, watching the rats devour its flesh. That could've been you.

The sound of his voice was etched into your head. You stood still, holding your breath as you treasured the silence. For a moment, you thought you heard his steps behind you, but it was your mind playing tricks on you again. Your father used to say that you walked awfully fast for someone your size. You kept walking, gradually increasing your pace, but it didn't feel fast enough. The cardboard constructions were beginning to look the same. That used to be your worst nightmare as a child. You dreamt that you walked, but you couldn't get anywhere, as if the floor was moving backwards every step you took.

You followed the dim yellow light that cast a trace on the ground. It led you to the entrance of a bazar. You inhaled, letting the smell of burning incense and oud fill your nostrils. You felt the paint on your face crack around your mouth. You were smiling. The light you saw in the alley came from a lantern stand that belonged to an old lady who sat on a small wooden stool. Her silver braids were long enough to dust the ground. She waved at you, but you didn't move until she waved again. You walked over to the stand, admiring the star covered lanterns hanging around you. The floor looked like a kaleidoscope, covered in colors you never knew existed. The lady took off her emerald green beaded shawl and wrapped it around your body, like a cocoon. It smelled like cinnamon, and the beads brushing against your bare skin reminded you of the heaviness of clothes. She was silent. She smiled with her eyes and squeezed your hand, beckoning you to keep going, so you did. When you came across a stand of multicolored

hookahs, you hid your face behind the shawl, hoping the vendor wouldn't look at you, but he didn't stare. In fact, he didn't even see you. You kept walking, running your fingers on the surface of the glossy wooden buckets that held candied peanuts, legumes, and nuts. The woven baskets held cumin, cardamom, and nutmeg. You stepped away as you leaned in and smelled the cumin. It made you gag every time you sensed it. You walked unseen, undone, untouched. As you reached the end of the bazar, you saw the lady with the silver braids. It looked like she was waiting for you as she waved at you again. She was holding a fruit basket packed with turmeric root. Inside it was a missing person flyer, but the piece of paper made no sense to you. She squeezed your shoulder, and then she stretched her hand and pointed at the blue hotel at the end of the street. You thought it looked familiar, but you didn't know why.

As you walked towards the blue hotel, you noticed that the same flyer was posted on the light post, and on every corner of the brick walls. You stood at the entrance, wondering how to use the revolving door. The doorman opened the main door and motioned you to come in. You had been in that lobby before. The carpet felt warm against your wounded feet, and your body began shivering as you turned to see the mirrored hallways and ceiling around you. You let out a soft cry as you pressed your fingers against the mirror and looked closely at the girl in the reflection. You turned away, not knowing who she was. The concierge was standing behind you, holding a silver tray with a blue teapot.

“Is this a dream?” you said.

“A dream?” he answered.

You were silent.

“What is your name? Let me help you” he said, keeping his distance.

You uncovered your head and stretched your hand out of the shawl, handing him the dusty driver license. The red string was gone. The man's name tag read "Jacob." His face was adorned with faint smile lines, and his beard looked like it had been speckled with salt and pepper flakes. He looked at the card in silence, avoiding eye contact. When he gave it back to me, he smiled. You let him squeeze your hand.

"You are safe now, Raquel."

In Hell, the man opened the glass jar as he lay in bed. He dispersed Raquel's remaining hair strands and formed a circle. He opened the bottle of Macallan and poured it over the hair and then over his face. He sat in the middle, holding a Montecristo cigar box filled with matches. He pulled one out and struck it against the wooden surface. He observed the blue halo around the glowing flame, and then he threw it in the air and watched the bed light up. He sat there, motionless, waiting for the fire to consume him. His Raquel was gone.