

Cobwebs
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My morning began with Pearl Jam, as always. Contemplative music is the only effective way to start the day, I think. Their music is strange and heavy but that makes sense and I like it. It's fitting, the band only came together because this other musician Andrew Wood overdosed on heroin and ended up dead, which broke his friends' hearts but inspired his roommate to write some songs which he then brought to some of his other friends who started playing together and became Pearl Jam. Andrew Wood inspired a whole lot of music. Artists sure do weave a tangled web. But my mom says that's too heavy a conversation for breakfast and Sofia says we can't talk about heroin until at least eleven o'clock, after everyone is awake and fed. There is such thing as too much contemplation.

"Olivia, after breakfast I need you to do some vacuuming ok? I'll clean the bathroom and then I'm washing the nice dishes for the wedding. Sofia, I want you ironing tablecloths, then out of the house when Jimmy and the boys arrive because I promised Jimmy no fights this time, at least not the day before your wedding." Mom's voice rang through the dining room, easily heard even over the ringing telephone, sizzling pan of greasy eggs, and tip-tapping of Sofia's shoes. Being heard was quite a feat in this house, a place always filled with the noise of Spanish and English and food searing on the stove all intermingling in the air.

For as long as I could remember my mom had had the single-minded determination that came from being a well-educated but desperately poor immigrant. Maybe that's not why, I'm sure the poor do not hold a monopoly on motivation, but either way, my mom was not holding back when it came to planning the wedding of her most beloved eldest daughter (I was the

youngest. I was not the most beloved). Everyone in our family was loved, but Sofia most of all, I believe. If Sofia was going to get married, you best believe it would be the wedding the neighbors talked about and her friends tried to imitate.

“Fine by me, Ma. And please tell Uncle Jimmy that I never start any fights with Sebastian; it’s not my fault Jimmy raised such a mean kid. Besides, it’s my wedding; I don’t see what right you have to monitor who I’m allowed to argue with.” Sofia was not wrong, at least about Sebastian. He was the type of person who did not listen to contemplative music.

Sebastian pushed my sister down the stairs when she was thirteen and I was nine and the walls were still painted blue not yellow. She has a little scar above her left eyebrow that you can’t see unless you get real up close. Sebastian was what his teachers called disruptive and his dad called just a boy being a boy. His mother left him and Jimmy almost ten years ago. Nobody talks about it.

I finished vacuuming in an hour just as Sofia was starting to lose all semblance of stability (*Married, Olivia! Me, married! Oh, I can’t wait*) and my mom was reaching new depths of frantic (*Sofia, married! My own daughter! Did you finish vacuuming, Olivia? I’m going to clean the bathroom; don’t even think about getting any dishes dirty while I’m in the other room*). I decided it would be best to leave for work a few minutes early, where I only had to produce mugs of coffee at a steady rate. I quietly slipped out the door and set off on my short walk to work.

Working at the diner was fine. Customers were predictable and conversations were simple (*Hello ma’am, what can I do for you today? Do you need a few more minutes to decide? Let me refill that mug for you, Mrs. Rodriguez*). Life requires money. I always hoped for big tips.

Mrs. Rodriguez always sat in booth eight, the only one completely lit up by sunlight from one to three PM. In the summer, you could sit in the kitchen and peer over the stove with a perfect view of her head. The other waitresses liked to time how long it would take for the curls in her hair to unwind from the humidity and frizz up on the back of her neck. She always tipped us generously.

Work continued uneventfully for the rest of my shift, and after letting Dan know that I was done for the evening, I walked back home. It only took me a second after entering the living room to sense that something was off. My mom's smile looked forced, and Sofia had suspiciously upright posture, which only ever happened when she was uncomfortable. As I scanned the room, the source of their discomfort immediately became clear.

"Uncle David? What a surprise! I thought you weren't going to be able to make it to the wedding but," I found myself laughing nervously, "I see you made it. I'm so glad." This was not good.

"Aw! c'mon now, tha's no way to greet your favorite uncle! Come gimme a hug, O." Only four in the afternoon, but his words were already slurring together. His smile was lazy and crooked, and for some reason the fact that he called me O had me angry. Uncle David has always brought out parts of me I wish didn't exist, and for him to be here the day before the wedding was a disaster in the making.

In Spanish, you do not say I am hungry, you use *tener* instead, you say 'I have hunger.' For once, I am grateful for English, because the way I am feeling right now could not possibly be described with *tener*. I am hungry not for food but for life. I do not have hunger, rather it has consumed me, it is me and I am it. One of the professors at the night classes I'm taking told me that just by sitting on this planet we are being tossed through space quicker than I could ever run

and she is right, but that is not enough for me, not in a life where my sister can get married to the man she's loved since she was sixteen and there are people flying in airplanes that could crash but don't and there are seven billion stories I have not heard. Uncle David reminds me of this, the scent of whiskey on his breath screams GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT.

I walked over to my uncle's chair and gave him a hug. His hands were sweaty and they crushed my back too tightly; I could feel the moisture through my thin tank top. Uncle David was my mom's older brother, but as far as I had known they hadn't talked in almost twelve years, ever since my father left us and Uncle David showed up at the house the next week drunk and yelling at my mom for 'driving him away.' He said some terrible stuff to her, most of it in Spanish, to really drive home the difference between the two of them. While my mom was as Mexican as him, she had married an American and raised us speaking English, and I don't think David ever liked the idea that Mom might think she was too good for the rest of them. My mom disagrees with my reasoning, she says he's been like this ever since he started drinking in high school, and while she's definitely right about the alcohol, sometimes people are too close to their problems to see them for what they are.

I quickly retreated back to the couch where Sofía was sitting. Strength in numbers.

"So how have you been Uncle David?" ventured my sister, always the bravest of us.

"Oh, I been doin' fine. Big things comin' up; I'm boutta be a real success ya know, I really made my big break. You didn't think I'd do it but look a' me now, th' picture of success."

My mom stood up abruptly and walked out of the room.

"That's good. I'm glad to hear you're doing well," Sofía responded. I felt confident David was not doing well.

“Where are you living now; are you still in Hidalgo?” I felt I should keep the conversation going.

“Yeah, yeah, couldn’t give up on home shit home, could I?”

Sofia and I both laughed awkwardly. There is nothing more uncomfortable than a conversation with a drunk man that nobody likes who you haven’t seen since you were nine. The conversation came to a stuttering death, and we all sat at our respective seats in silence staring pointedly at the walls, like a true family. Eventually, Sofia stood up and left, at which point I could hear hushed whispers coming from the kitchen, sounding almost argumentative.

“So, what brings you to the States, Uncle David? I think I missed it when you guys were chatting earlier” I spoke loudly, to cover up Sofia and Mom. He didn’t notice the extra volume, or if he did, maybe just assumed we were all drunk like him.

“Wha’? Isn’t my niece finally gettin’ married enough reason to visit? Sorry, didn’t realize I needed to RSVP, your highness.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend. It’s just been ... a while since I’ve seen you. If you’ll excuse me though, I think I should go help Sofia and Mom with dinner.”

I tried to walk away slowly enough that it didn’t appear quite like the escape it was, but I’m not sure I managed. Uncle David was less a snake than he was a weasel dipped in oil, holding a match in his mouth. Soon the whole house would be ablaze. I admit that’s a rather excessive metaphor, but I refuse to sacrifice accuracy for simplicity. As someone who found herself in the unfortunate predicament of living in that very aforementioned house, I couldn’t help but take issue with this. I took a deep breath as I walked into the kitchen, roping my hair back into a ponytail so tight I could practically feel the headache forming.

“Mom, I need you to give me a big knife and some vegetables to use it on before I dig my fingernails so hard into my palms they bleed.”

“Take the peppers, Olivia. Sofia beat you to the onions,” my mom said, handing me a bag of peppers.

“If that bastard is coming into my home and trying to ruin my wedding, I can at least refuse to let him see me cry,” Sofia added. “This way I have an excuse.” Sofia did indeed look a little teary, her eyeliner not quite so pristine. My mom’s lips were pursed so tightly I wondered that she was breathing at all. She handed me the knife before going back to the stove where she was stirring something in a pan with more energy than was strictly called for. I had a strange, sick sort of humorous thought, imagining what it would be like if someone tried to attack my mom right now. She’d probably stab them right back, and then talk to them about how she did not move her whole life to America in hopes that her future children might have a better education than she did in Hidalgo just for him to come and stab her. Then she’d branch off into talking about her good Catholic upbringing as a child, and her mother’s principles, and next thing you know the attacker would be so overwhelmed he’d run away in fear. Or maybe I’m just projecting, and in fact my five-foot-two mother would just be murdered. I chuckled to myself, then got to work on the peppers. God give me strength, it was going to be a long, long week.