

“The Fish Tank”

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Matilde sat beside her mother in the same manner, the same chair, and in the same corner as an hour ago, the corrugated vinyl of the seat cushion hot against her small thighs. Her back created a perfect parallel to the chair’s backrest barely two inches behind her, and the organza skirt she wore, a faded green, frothed around her legs, its color a pitiful contrast against the vivid white petticoat underneath. Unlike the other adults inside the room, who shifted nervously in kaleidoscope patterns, Matilde tried not to move. Her doll also mimicked her posture, its weight barely denting the rigidity of her own, starched green dress.

Matilde raised her legs without jostling the doll on her lap and studied the top of her black vinyl ballerina pumps. If she stared hard enough into the tiny black mirrors, she’d see a distorted, dark image of her lace-fringed bobby socks reflected off the shine. She lowered her legs and pointed her feet, testing the length of the void beneath them until the very tip of her shoes patted the mottled terrazzo floor. This action distracted her from the queasiness in her stomach. She felt boxed in by the three walls of military green and the one of bulletproof glass, but she didn’t complain. Her mother had warned against the dangers of fidgeting, of playing. Attention must not be drawn. Period.

Her stomach disagreed.

Matilde sensed her mother’s glance and watched as she opened her vinyl pillbox purse. She hoped her mother scavenged for her favorite violet-flavored candy. The imported pastilles, little lilac-colored squares filled with French fragrance, had been rationed like stolen treasure for the past year and each had been carefully quartered to extend the pleasure. Only three remained. Now, careful so the wrapper wouldn’t disintegrate in her fingers, Matilde watched as her mother separated one purple pill within the protective shadows of the purse.

“Suck on this, *mi amor*.” Her mother pressed the square candy, intact, against Matilde’s sweaty palm. “I’ll see about lunch.”

Her mother’s hushed voice barely filtered down to Matilde’s level. For the past year, conversations, transformed into nervous whispers, were flavored by an undertow of fear and despair. The whispers had gotten even softer since arriving here at *la pecera*, the airport’s holding pen. A fish tank, her mother had said—a temporary prison quarantining them like diseased animals. Her mother didn’t like the room. Matilde didn’t either.

Her mother’s soft touch lingered on her cheek and Matilde leaned into the caress with a slight tilt to her head. Warmth dissipated as her mother stood and retreated, the muted sound of her high heels picking at the dirty terrazzo floor.

More whispers.

Trying not to attract notice, Matilde deposited the square candy on her tongue, caressed and spread the flavor ever so softly around her mouth. Her eyelids drooped, hiding her gaze as it darted from object to object in this stuffy room, warm despite the cranky air conditioning. The mold stain at the bottom corner of the wall facing her had mottled the paint like chicken pox and

played peek-a-boo with the ugly brown orthopedic shoes of the old lady sitting on the couch. A thin fault line marred the dirty pumpkin-colored cushions of the misused couch, the gray clumps of wadding underneath trying to break free. The important lady, an actress Matilde had been told, so pretty in her black chemise, matching nylons, and high heels, circled and circled in the middle of their enclosed space, a human merry-go-round going nowhere.

Matilde's saliva was now full of a violet richness that calmed her stomach and her nervousness. She heard her mother speak in agitated whispers now as more adults gravitated toward her. The important lady joined the group, her fresh dress a stark contrast to her mother's tired one. Matilde wanted to sigh but only exhaled quietly. The simple, strapless, blue cotton sundress her mother wore looked like a washed sky, but it was starched crisp, and it was clean. Her mother fiercely insisted that dignity and cleanliness must prevail, especially during these terrible times. Besides, wearing their good clothes would only focus unwelcome attention on them. That mustn't happen.

The adult's whispers solidified in the stale air, crashing and receding against Matilde's ears.

"... can't hand out food."

"Nothing. Left her with nothing."

"Young man, conscripted. Only fourteen."

"His father . . . Oh, God!"

"Betrayed. Her own daughter."

"... wounded, trying to stow aboard the plane."

"Twenty years. For what?"

"—cursing the official."

"... found string of pearls . . . in lining of suitcase."

"Strip-searched. In front of husband."

"Bastards."

"Bastards."

Matilde smoothed the cool velvet of her doll's dress with the fastidious precision of an adult, careful not to crease the blue fabric, adjusting the skirt just so. It was a beautiful Snow White doll, crafted in Switzerland, with a smooth porcelain face, round innocent eyes, rosy cheeks, and a pout for a smile. A family heirloom, handed down from mother to daughter for four generations. Matilde cradled her doll, softly pressing her against her bosom for a moment, and sang to it, her words barely a breeze in the recycled air. She missed her toys, her dresses, and her beautiful, illustrated books. She missed her pink ballerina wallpaper, her bicycle, and her creaky rocking chair. But these were sad times, her mother kept saying. That was why everything that was portable had been smuggled out of their home, distributed to the few relatives who insisted on staying in Cuba. Matilde, even yesterday, had sat on top of her mother's silver flatware set in the back seat of their black Fiat. The box cradling the silverware had dug into the back of her exposed thighs, while the guard, posted at the periphery of their neighborhood a year ago, had meticulously searched the car's trunk. The man had never

suspected that Matilde's petticoat concealed a silver hoard under a layer of fluffy tulle and itchy fabric. And with a final *buchito de café*, one her mother had thoughtfully brought for the guard in an aluminum thermos, they had outwitted the *miliciano*.

Matilde's curious eyes swept around the room once more but stopped short of the daunting glass barrier on her left. If she focused on the transparent wall sealing them in, she would see her ghostly image mirrored back, fragmented by the human traffic on the other side. She concentrated on a single drop of condensation weeping down the slick surface, and realized the shoes were not there. She wanted to smile, but didn't, just in case. It was so horrible when he was there, the man who observed them intermittently, his gaze calculating, radiating a palpable, hypnotic malice. When he stood on the other side of the cold glass, his shadow crept across the pane as if searching for a victim. Once found, it would absorb and digest their ghostly reflections like Jonah's whale. Nobody from the group ever noticed—nobody but her. And each time he stood there, someone was taken out, never to return.

A shudder rippled over Matilde, but she immediately stilled. The man with the empty stare might be out there, waiting beyond the glass, undetected, targeting their scraggly group once more, his face devoid of humanity, his glance hungry for them.

She must not fidget. She must stay still.

Matilde's mother returned and sat noiselessly beside her only child. "No lunch now," her mother whispered close to her ear. "Can you wait, *mi amor*?"

Matilde nodded. Her mother gathered her in, squeezing Matilde's shoulders until they folded inward like an accordion. "We'll eat on the airplane," she continued, her voice low, crooning almost. "The stewardess told me they have ham and eggs ready for us."

Matilde's mouth watered once more. They hadn't had the luxury of ham and eggs since the government had rationed food a year ago and restricted everything for everyone. Well, not everyone. Before he escaped, Matilde remembered her father saying that the government bastards had plenty to eat. It was everyone else who didn't.

"Would you like that?" her mother asked.

Matilde nodded and barely smiled. "I'd prefer a *tostada* and a Coke," she confessed. Freshly baked Cuban bread cut in thick chunks and swimming with butter was her favorite. So was the fizzy sweetness of the soft drink she preferred. Her grandmother always fed her that as an after-school snack. She hadn't had one for more than a year.

"We'll ask *Papi* to buy you some when we get to our new home."

Matilde snuggled closer to her mother. "Will we get there?"

Her mother squeezed Matilde's shoulder harder, but said nothing. She couldn't.

The brightness in the room dimmed. A shadow crept across Matilde's doll and she jerked, her heart thumping so hard, her dress front vibrated. She glanced through the glass barrier and saw the shoes, then the man. Matilde's small frame shuddered, rattling the doll on her lap. He was looking at her, his black eyes focused. From her angle, those black eyes seemed to devour instead of reflect images. Instinct tensed Matilde's small muscles for flight, but she didn't stir, nor did she move her doll. She only blinked. And the man, miraculously, didn't

linger. He simply walked away, blending with the air and the outside world at the edge of the impenetrable glass.

Matilde stared until her eyes burned, but the man didn't return.

The only exit door in the room opened. A *miliciano* stepped in, his militia fatigues blending with the color on the walls. He jerked his head to the side and his submachine gun twitched in the same direction.

“Out!” The *miliciano*'s eyes razed the room. Head and gun jerked again. “Now!”

Her mother helped Matilde up, straightened her skirt and petticoat, and weaved trembling fingers around Matilde's sweaty ones. Hand in hand they walked, their shoes placed softly on the hard floor. The important lady went across the threshold first, her head lifted, arrogant, defiant. The airline personnel went next, followed by the old people. No one was stopped. No one was detained. The group scurried along a windowless hallway to the only doors visible. Beyond the streaked door panes, Matilde could see a distorted image of the tarmac and the waiting airplane.

She was going to see Papi.

She mustn't twitch, touch her skirt, or fidget now, Matilde chanted silently. She must be as quiet as a mouse.

The double doors opened. Sunlight overpowered the hallway. The scents of ripening guava, rich earth, airplane fumes, and humidity rushed in. Matilde blinked and hugged her doll tighter.

The shadow surged like a dark force. The barrel of the *miliciano*'s gun gated them back and Matilda whimpered. Her mother squeezed her hand. Her fingers paled as much as their faces.

He had come.

The man stood, feet braced, facing Matilde and her mother, studying them with analytical detachment. Matilde could hear her heart thumping inside her ears. Rivulets of sweat tickled her back. She wanted to step closer to her mother, but her small legs vibrated. If she moved, she would stumble and jostle her skirt.

“Pretty doll,” the man said, his dark eyes huge, pupil and iris blending in an unforgiving black. His arm extended, a destructive tentacle toward Matilde. “Can I see it?”

Matilde's mother nudged her arm, her trembling smile a small reassurance. Instinctively, Matilde pressed her Snow White against her chest. It was her only toy, her most precious toy.

Matilde slowly extended her arm.

The man carefully dislodged the doll from her grasp and examined it as studiously as he had inspected them moments before. As Matilde watched, the man's lips curved in a brutal smile, a satisfied smile. He ripped the doll's clothing apart, tearing seams, ripping undergarments, sleeves, the pieces discarded like conquered confetti. He then quartered the doll, shaking the torso, digging inside for treasure as if the doll were a *piñata*.

Matilde watched in silence. Tears tripped and fell from her huge round eyes, her little hand strangling her mother's fingers. She didn't twitch, touch her skirt, or fidget. Matilde simply stood there in hopeless silence. No time for whispered prayers.

The man shook the doll one last time, inspected his handiwork, and extended the broken doll to Matilde, his face expressionless. What could have passed for regret flickered in the man's eyes before he turned, without rush, to disappear into the airport terminal.

The *miliciano* broke their inertia by pushing them forward and onto the plane. Inside, Matilde followed her mother to their seats and arranged her petticoat and skirt as fastidiously as before. The doors closed, sealing them inside. They waited. The propellers coughed, caught the wind, and roared.

The plane moved. It taxied forever, then gathered momentum, and lifted them to touch the sky. Matilde stared at her injured doll, touched its rent skirt with a finger. She then did the same to her own skirt and closed her eyes. Slowly at first, then more confidently, she caressed the green organza, trying to feel the treasure inside. Her finger glided over the cool material. No bumps, no change in smoothness, the double interfacing cradled inside the facing of her skirt providing the perfect camouflage for the booty inside—currency, hundreds of bills, washed to prevent crackling and discovery. Future hopes and dreams in soft, green dollar bills.

Matilde opened her eyes. She wiggled in her seat and tucked her legs under her. She leaned toward her mother and lifted her doll's broken body.

“*Mami?*” she asked, her voice loud, laced with hurt. “*Mami*, can we fix her?”