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The Fortune Teller

Fernando loved the fortune teller's house. Every day after school he would walk there under the boiling Colombian clouds. Through the muddy schoolyard, past the abandoned shack, take a right at the corner where the old man with the broken teeth sits, jump five cracks in the sidewalk, and look up.

The fortune teller's home was a crumbling metal contraption. Soggy moss collected in the cracks of the brick. An orange banner with the words "*La Pitonisa de Bogotá*" hung above. Two stories of half-exposed foundation, two stories of rusting barred windows, two stories of the most beautiful, magical place that Fernando had ever seen. The front door was blue like the patch of sky above. He opened it and stepped inside.

****A CATALOGUE OF THE FORTUNE TELLER'S PARLOR****

x2 yellowed curtains

x2 tapestries with *paso fino* horses woven into them

x1 pack of second hand tarot cards

x1 plastic light-up crystal ball

Fernando had a question for the fortune teller that day. It was about his brother, Alejandro. Alejandro was a six-year-old wiry boy with watery eyes and a nose that was drowning in snot. He shared a room with Fernando and never left him alone.

"Fernandito! Come play tag with me!"

"Fernandito! Buy me an apple!"

"Fernandito! Let's play *fútbol*!"

These days, Alejandro never called Fernando's name anymore. Over the course of a year, he had shriveled like a coffee plant in a drought. His eyes sunk back into his sockets and seemed to dry out. His ribs jutted out of his side like the wooden boards of a wrecked ship. Cracks formed deep gouges in his lips. All he did was lie down and stare at the cockroaches on the ceiling. Then he started vomiting. It poured out of him like rain from the heavy clouds. He gagged and choked and the storm cleared up, only to restart an hour later. All Fernando could do was watch helplessly and wonder how such a tiny body could contain so much vomit.

So, Fernando had a question for the fortune teller that day: "Will Alejandro be alright?"

****THE FORTUNE TELLER'S FACE WHEN FERNANDO ASKED HIS QUESTION****

Dimples fade, creases highlighted by the grimy light of the room.

Concerned, sad, but not scared.

Not yet.

"Let me see, *querido*." She takes her crystal ball and it lights up with a flick of her fingernails. She shuffles her flaking tarot cards and pulls one out. It's a sun. Her golden eyes flicker for a moment. "Hmm, yes. Your brother will be okay."

Fernando thought about this as he laid in bed. Trying not to hear the coughing. Trying not to picture the blank eyes and the dried vomit on Alejandro's lips. The fortune teller is always right.

****WHAT HAPPENED AFTER SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY****

Fernando beat his muddy shoes against the brick path that led to his home. He opened the door. Alejandro stood there, smiling. His eyes were watery again, and he clutched an apple.

"Fernandito! I am well!"

That night, for the first time since he could remember, Fernando did not think about blank eyes and dried vomit. He went to the fortune teller's home the next day.

"¡Buenas tardes Señora! Alejandro is well!"

A sigh. "Thank the Holy Spirit, Fernandito. God is good." She picked at the flaking gold sun on the tarot card. "God is good."

For the next two weeks, Fernando did not go to the fortune teller's house. Instead he would walk to the market and buy an apple with his few, rusted *pesos* for Alejandro. Then, they would play *fútbol* on the street until the burning Colombian sun sank into the hills.

****A GAME OF FÚTBOL ON A WARM JULY EVENING****

The ball rolled into the gutter. Alejandro was squealing, laughing, bouncing up and down in his tattered shoes. Fernando took the ball in his hands. Suddenly, a cough. Then another, and another, spit and blood splattering onto the pavement. Then there was a spurt of vomit. An intense spurt of vomit. And silence. The ball seared into Fernando's palms as he turned around, dreading the empty eyes, the husk-like body. Alejandro was lying on the storm drain, with nothing left to give and nothing left to see. "Alejandro! Alejandro! *Hermanito* Ale!"

The fortune teller was wrong.

He didn't know where he was going until he was there. Under the cheap orange banner that hung from the crumbling building on Main Street. Alejandro was getting heavy.

"¡Señora, señora!" Fernando sobbed, bursting into the musty parlor. "Fix him! Please!"

The fortune teller stared at the shriveled coffee plant boy in Fernando's arms. The reflection of the greasy lamp quivered in her pupils.

"¡PARA AQUI! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"But Ale-"

"NO! LEAVE MY HOUSE NOW! ¡AY NO! THE SPIRIT OF DEATH SHALL BE UPON ME SOON!" Her face twitched and blotted with veins, throat swelling and retracting, oscillating like roiling storm clouds. She slammed the door.

Fernando sat down on the curb and stared into Alejandro's eyes. When they were little, they had played *canicas* with the cracked marbles that they found on the ground in alleyways. Now, Alejandro's eyes looked exactly like the marbles. Dull, brown, foggy.

Finally, Fernando spoke, the words pouring out of him like a thunderstorm.

"Ale, remember the time we went to the market? And the *señora* that ran the orange stall said that you looked like her son? And she gave you an orange? You were only five at the time, so you bit straight into the peel and started crying because it was bitter. And remember when..."

Fernando spoke and cried and spoke until the sun disappeared over the hills, until all that was left on the street corner were two little boys staring up into the boiling, Colombian clouds.