

# New Fiction: “Garlic Kiss” by Gessy Alvarez

written by Saehee Cho | March 16, 2015



Strings of chicken fat hang from her knuckles. She leaves oily fingerprints as she reads down the letter. Her body shakes and I reach out, but Papá pulls me away. “Out,” he barks and blocks my view. As the youngest and only daughter, I do as I’m told.

We go to bed early. My parents sleep with their bedroom door open. We live in a small, one-bedroom apartment in *La Ciudadella Madrid* – a gated community twenty minutes away from downtown Guayaquil. In the living room my brother Rubio sleeps on the couch and I lie on a small sofa-bed, a gift from Papá for my thirteenth birthday.

Floor planks squeak as Mamá paces. Mosquitoes buzz around my ears. I throw my cotton bed sheet over my head and try to fall asleep, but I’m so in sync with Mamá.

Mamá’s voice jolts me awake. “Come on, wake up!” It feels like I’ve been asleep for five minutes, but the crickets are silent. Rubio grumbles from across the room. The only thing separating my sofa bed and his couch is a glass-top coffee table.

“We need to hurry if we want to beat the rush hour,” Mamá says and throws a pink dress at me.

“I’ve got practice later,” Rubio yells from the couch. I try to get her attention. “Mamá?”

She shoves clothes into the straw bag we use to carry groceries home from the market. “Please, Ani. We’re running out of time.”

“But, where are we going?”

She stops packing and looks at me. “My mother is sick,” she says. She pinches Rubio’s arm to get him to move faster.

We’ve never met Mamá’s parents. All we know is what Papá has told us. Mamá’s father died when she was five. Her mother hates Papá because he’s dark and Mamá’s *blanca*. Rubio and I are *monos*, monkey children, and therefore not worthy of her attention.

*Buena raza* for our grandmother meant your baby was born with a pink butt. Papá had said this part with a straight face, but Rubio and I giggled. “That’s so stupid,” we said. It was obvious to us that our grandmother didn’t understand that things had changed. The world worked different from when she was a little girl.

It's still dark outside, but orange bleeds into the sky. Papá waits for us inside his Chevy sedan – his big, old American car. He likes to brag about it to our neighbors, even though it's over twenty years old and spotted with rust.

I try to be a good girl and sit quietly in the back seat, but when Papá starts snaking in and out of the lanes my empty stomach growls.

"Mamá, I'm hungry," I say.

"We'll stop soon enough," she says.

An hour later, we're still in Guayaquil. The morning rush hour has begun.

"See, I told you we'll get stuck in traffic?" Mamá says. Papá's too busy looking through his side view mirror for an opening into a less crowded lane. The red and yellow buses ahead slow down to pick up passengers and to drop them off, but none come to a complete stop.

In our city, girls from respectable families don't ride the buses alone. For a thirteen-year-old girl like me, it's especially dangerous, as Papá is always quick to remind me. But I don't care what he says. I secretly ride the buses after school with my friends. It's the fastest and cheapest way to get down to the *Malecón*. Along the pier, we spend our afternoons sipping tamarind-drenched snow cones and walking by the different vendor stalls.

Last week, a local boy started following us around the stalls. He told us how pretty we were. When my friends laughed, I laughed too because I didn't want to stick out from the group. The boy wore a t-shirt with a Coca-Cola logo on it. His denim shorts were torn and he wore no socks with his slipshod sneakers. One of my friends, the one who had kissed a boy before, asked him, "So what school do you go to?"

The boy ran circles around us. "I don't go to school. I work."

We walked away from him and he yelled, "*Comen mierdas, comen mierdas!*" Shit eating, stuck-up bitches, he said. To me, it seemed like all the vendors turned around at the same time to laugh at us. We ran away to the bus stop. I cried on the ride home.

In my group, I'm the one who worries about the nuns and the roll call every Friday morning. I worry that Papá will forget to pay tuition on time and that my name will be called out and I will be asked to leave school until the bill is paid.

The old jalopy jumps. "Careful, Hector," Mamá says.

We rattle, shake, and wait to see what will happen next. Papá's jalopy has a habit of dying, but this time the car jumps back into gear.

Along the highway are sprawling slums. The poor have built houses on stilts

to avoid the floods. Papá always tells us how lucky we are because we live in a *cuidadella*, a suburb close to the city center where the houses are made out of concrete and where all our neighbors are middle class.

"We're close," Mamá says. I wonder how long I've been asleep. My tongue feels like sandpaper against the roof of my mouth. There are few cars on the road and some of the houses we pass have the lights on inside.

Rubio snores next to me. He's in uniform: white soccer shorts and yellow tee shirt. At fourteen, he's the best goalie in our neighborhood's league. His favorite pastime – besides kicking a ball, a leg, or the side of a head – is to remind us that he's the best goalie in his league. I stick my head out the window.

"We can't be close. We haven't even entered town yet." Papá says. He drags his arm across his forehead and crouches against the steering wheel.

"Hector!" Mamá says, but Papá doesn't respond. She reaches over and turns the steering wheel herself.

The car swerves to the right and then all the way around. My body moves in the opposite direction. Papá curses as he fights to gain control of the old jalopy. We jerk to a stop.

Beside our jalopy is an old wooden sign. It hangs off a few rusty nails from the branch of a dead tree. Carved into the wood is the word "Milagro" with a faded arrow underneath.

"You could have killed us," Papá says. "You were going to miss the turn."  
"What turn?"

"The arrow is pointing to the right. See the road over there?" Mamá says.

"I don't see a damn road." Papá shakes his head, but turns the car around, because he does see the dirt road after all.

We drive through a green cavern of trees. After a thousand feet of dense shrubbery, we see a large cluster of short buildings ahead. The old jalopy jumps when it hits pavement. We drive across railroad tracks and follow the tracks into town.

"How come we didn't take the train?" I say.

"Do you know what happens when that train gets crowded?" Papá doesn't wait for my answer. "They make you ride in the freight cars, and when those get too crowded, you have to ride on the roof."

"They wouldn't make me and Mamá do that," I say, smiling, "just you and Rubio." I say this because I'm as light-skinned as Mamá, but Rubio, despite his golden name, is as dark as Papá.

"You hear that," Papá says to Mamá.

I wish I can see her face, but all I see is the back of her head.

"She's already talking like her and she hasn't even met your mother yet."  
Mamá looks straight ahead. "I have to see her."

"You keep saying that, but what about us? Do you think we want to see her?"

"I want to see her," I say, reaching over Mamá's seat. I try to squeeze her shoulder, but she smacks my hand away. "Behave, Ani," she says.

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Milagro is different from Guayaquil. The buildings are no more than a couple of stories high. The streets are flat; a fog of dirt and grime rises from the ground. Vendors crowd the road. Papá honks at them. Dark, stout men walk up close to our car. Papá can easily drive over their feet. Most of the women stand with their backs against the walls, terrified by our ferocious jealousy. From the distance, they appear to have the same slanted eyes as Mamá, the same blouse and skirt, the same thin arms, but as we get closer, I can see they aren't all the same, some are young and some are old, some look out of curiosity while others look away in fear.

We drive past a row of storefronts. The signs above each store are small and rectangular.

They each contain a small paragraph detailing the nature of the business. Almost all are cantinas or luncheonettes.

Mamá tells Papá to turn at the end of a line of white buildings. He drives into a narrow alley that opens up into a courtyard.

"Park here," Mamá says.

"Wait!" I try to jump out when we stop, but Mamá pushes my car door close. "Ani, I need you to stay with your father and brother."

"You can't go up there by yourself," I say, but Mamá is already walking away. "I'll be right back," she says over her shoulder.

Papá gets out of the car and lights a cigarette. For a moment, he looks like he's about to run after Mamá, but instead he starts pacing the length of the car and back.

"Great," Rubio says, leaning back and crossing his arms. "We should follow her," I say.

"You heard what Ma said. We have to stick together." Rubio runs a hand through his buzz cut. "I was supposed to go to practice, but instead I've got to sit in this hot car with my bratty sister."

I get out of the car and slam the door. "Where are you going?" Rubio says.

"None of your business!" I walk over to the front of the car where Papá is

standing. His narrow shoulders droop as he looks at the building Mamá entered. He rubs his rough chin, places the cigarette between his lips, and finger combs his waxy black hair.

"Who lives here?"

Papá ignores me. I wait until he can't suck on his cigarette anymore. He flicks away the butt and lights another cigarette, staring me down as if to challenge me. "Your grandmother, who else?" he finally says.

My throat tightens. He gives me his most menacing look, a bad impression of his favorite American movie star, James Cagney. For Papá, the only movies that matter are the ones filmed in black and white.

"I'm hungry."

He reaches for the gold chain around his neck and kisses the cross that dangles from it. "Quit whining," he says, then smiles at me. "If I tell you what I know, do you promise to be a good girl?"

"Yes." He's my only hope.

"Your grandmother has been kidnapped," he says. "Come on."

"What do you mean 'come on'? You're the one who watches those stupid *telenovelas*. Isn't that what happens in them?"

"You always said that the Salinás hated us." "That's true."

"Because of you. Because we're not like them." "Yep."

"Why did you let Mamá go up there by herself?"

"The old lady's sick," he says. "You're mother hasn't seen her since she moved to

Guayaquil. That's it, Ani. The end."

"Why is she living here? Why isn't she with Mamá's brother? Doesn't he live in Quito?" "You are so nosy. Your *Tío* can't live with her, okay."

"Why?"

"Why is the sky blue? Why can't a pretty girl shut up for once?" Papá smiles then. "Stop making fun of me."

Before I can ask him another question, someone catches his attention. I turn around, annoyed by the interruption.

A dark-haired boy runs towards us – white, square teeth and a wide purple mouth. He's about Rubio's age. His dimples are deep grooves that don't disappear when he speaks. "Hello, hello," he says.

I look away, a bit embarrassed by my uncombed hair and knobby knees. I hate

my pink dress, a hand-me-down from one of our neighbors. It makes me look like an oversized baby.

"I'm Oswaldo, Sentenia's son," the boy says.

"Yeah, so?" The boy is almost as tall and as dark as Papá. "My mother says you can come up."

Papá sizes him up for a little while longer. He opens the car door and yells at Rubio, "Move out!"

Oswaldo walks over to Rubio and whispers something in his ear. Right away, they like each other. They walk together to the back entrance of the building. They talk about the upcoming World Cup.

Papá pulls me by the hand and we follow the boys inside. As we climb up a dark staircase, I let go of Papá so that I can hold down the skirt of my pink dress. Oswaldo leads us to the second floor. We face three separate apartment doors. Oswaldo pushes open the middle door. A fat woman pulls him and out of her way. She kisses and hugs me. Tells me how beautiful I am. The apartment smells like food. Like the air is seasoned with garlic and cumin.

"You look just like your Mamá Elsa," she says.

My mother's name sounds foreign to me. The fat woman looks like Mamá. She has the same smile that never reveals any teeth because it's rude to show off ugly, crooked teeth. She even laughs like Mamá, expelling a breath before the sound of joy escapes her mouth. But this woman's skin is a rich milky coffee. I stare at her and I can see her tan cheeks blush. She bows her head like she's embarrassed. As she smothers Rubio, I look around.

The living room is long and narrow. At one end there's a small kitchen, and at the other there's a sliding glass door that leads out to a balcony. The light from the setting sun casts strange shadows on the barren, concrete balcony. My eyes follow the cracks that run down the white plaster walls like spider webs spreading over the upper corners of the room. There are two sofas facing each other in the middle of the living room. Both are the same cream color. One sofa is plush and has buttons stitched all around it, the other is a love-seat with a white shawl draped over it. Its flattened seat cushions curve up at the edges. Between the two sofas is a coffee table painted to look gilded.

Mamá pulls me by my hand. Tear tracks and lipstick marks stain her face. She kisses my nose. "Isn't my baby beautiful?" she says. I shrink away. Oswaldo smiles at me.

"She's shy. Come on, don't be shy, this is my cousin, Sentenia and this handsome boy is her son, Oswaldo." I sneak a peek at the boy.

"Sit down. Make yourselves comfortable." Sentenia points at the sofas. Rubio sits next to Papá on the love-seat. I sit next to Mamá on the sofa across.

Sentena offers Papá a cold beer and hands the rest of us tall glasses of

cola. She stands by Mamá as if she's waiting for instructions. "Sentenia, please sit. You've done so much already." Mamá makes room on the sofa for her cousin.

"You have a beautiful family," Sentenia says. She squeezes in beside me.

"They're growing up fast," Mamá says. "Pretty soon this one is going to make me a grandmother."

"I'm only thirteen," I say. There's no way I'm ever getting married. I've seen how stubborn Papá gets when he's been out all night. Mamá following him around the living room, making sure he doesn't pee on the floor, then the next morning, Papá acting like he can't remember a thing, telling Mamá she's crazy.

"I bet the boys are wild about you," Sentenia says to me. Large freckles cover her arms and hands.

"I need to use the bathroom," I say.

"It's through that hallway, first door on your left." Sentenia rises from the sofa, but I

make my way down the hall before she has a chance to follow me.

A door at the end of the hallway opens as I enter the bathroom. A shrill voice says, "Who's there? What's going on?"

"*Madre!*" Mamá charges past me. An old woman trudges out the door. Mamá throws her arms around her, but the old woman doesn't return the hug.

"You finally came," she says in that shrill voice, then points at me. "Who's that?"

Mamá turns to me and says, "Come, ask your grandmother for her blessing."

I walk towards them. The old woman pinches my chin. She's wearing a loose, white blouse over a billowy, brown skirt that reaches the floor. Her thin, white hair is pulled back into a long braid.

Mamá follows the old woman into the living room. I lock myself inside the bathroom.

As I relieve myself, I look up and see a green shelf that matches the color of the bathroom walls. On top of the shelf is a stuffed monkey with a tan body and black face. His long arms and legs hang in front of him. He's holding a felt banana in his right hand. Next to the monkey is a hot water bottle with a long hose hanging from it. Water drips from the tip onto the tiled floor.

I wash my hands and face. I want to leave, forget everything, and go back to our kitchen. I want it to be the night before: Mamá, Papá, Rubio, and me alone in our small kitchen, eating chicken stew.

Sentenia picks up the empty beer bottles on the coffee table in front of Papá. The old woman rocks in her chair. "You've gotten darker in your old age," she says to Papá.

"Not possible," he says. I could tell he's a little drunk by the way he slouches and waves his unlit cigarette.

No one offers us food even though the smell of an earlier meal lingers in the apartment. I want to shake Mamá. Make her take care of us.

Sentenia fusses over our grandmother. Once when I was at my best friend's house, I met this lady who turned out to be my best friend's cousin. She had come into the room unannounced, plopped an ironing board in front of us, and began ironing clothes. My friend leaned in and told me that her cousin was from the poor side of the family. "We pay her to do odd jobs around the house," she had said.

Taking care of the old woman is Sentenia's odd job. Except it's more than an odd job. When I had asked my friend if she felt bad giving her cousin work to do, she said I was stupid. "We're helping her out. If it weren't for us, she'd be begging in the streets."

Sentenia helps our grandmother up from the rocking chair. Mamá holds on to her mother's right hand. Together they walk the old woman back to her bedroom. Sentenia comes back after a while. She's carrying a couple of bed sheets in her arms. "*Hijo*, come here and help me," she beckons Oswaldo. He runs over and wraps a bed sheet over a sofa.

I grab the other bed sheet. "No, no *hija*, let us do it." Sentenia takes the sheet away from me.

"Sentenia!" Mamá calls out from the hallway.

"*Mande*," Sentenia answers back. "I'm at your service, cousin." She throws the bed sheet over Oswaldo's shoulder and runs back to the room down the hallway. When she returns a few minutes later, she drags a cot and unfolds it against a wall. "Hector, you can sleep here and the children can sleep on the sofas," she says.

"What about Elsa?"

She looks surprised by Papá's question. "She's sleeping with her mother tonight, of course." Sentenia and Oswaldo say goodnight and disappear behind the kitchen.

"Where are they going?" I whisper to Papá. "They live here. Back there must be their room." "What about our things?"

"We'll go down to the car tomorrow." "Papá?"

He grunts at me.

"How come our grandmother just sat there staring at us?"

"That's a stupid question. She's never seen either of you in the flesh. Of course, she's going to stare at you."

"I'm hungry," Rubio says. "I can smell whatever they ate for dinner. How come they didn't give us any food?"

Papá says. "Shut up and turn off that damn light."

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The next morning, Sentenia stands by the small stove in the kitchen. Papá, Rubio, and Oswaldo are sitting around the kitchen table. Sentenia places a heavy pancake on her son's plate. There's no plate set for me. Punishment for being the last one to wake up no doubt. I pull my wrinkled dress and run my fingers through my hair.

Oswaldo spots me and rises too fast from his seat, almost crashing into the frying pan. "*Muchacho*, be careful!" Sentenia says. When she sees me, she smiles. "Oh, the princess

is finally up. I didn't want your *llapingacho* to get cold so I didn't make you one yet." Sentenia walks back to the kitchen counter. She dips her hand into a large, plastic bowl and rolls mashed potatoes into a ball. Papá tells me to sit down next to him at the table. The chair is still warm. I look over at Sentenia who stands a foot away. "I've put some cheese inside but not too much. Your brother tells me you don't like cheese," she says. She flattens the potato ball stuffed with sour smelling cheese and places it on the hot frying pan.

Standing near his mother, Oswaldo shoves the last few bites of potato and cheese into his mouth then washes his plate and utensils. He uses a raggedy towel to dry everything and places his plate, fork, and knife in front of me.

Sentenia slaps a pancake on my plate. "You drink coffee, sweetie?" She doesn't wait for my answer. She brings over a steamy cup of *café con leche*; a layer of milk fat floats to the top.

The boys stand around talking about *fútbol*. I pick up the still warm fork that Oswaldo washed for me. An image of his tongue flashes in my head.

With the fork, I lift the skin of fat off my coffee. I eat my *llapingacho* with my fingers, making sure to eat around the gooey cheese.

"That's no way for a Catholic school girl to eat," Sentenia says as she takes Rubio's and Papá's plates.

"You must have fancy friends," Sentenia says as she sits down next to me. "Not really," I say. Changing the subject, I ask her if she's going to eat.

"Please, with this belly." Sentenia grabs a handful of belly fat from under her dress belt. "I can't be eating like a teenager anymore."

From the living room, Mamá yells, "Hector, go get our stuff already!" Papá thanks Sentenia and pushes Rubio out the door.

"I know she doesn't show it, but your grandmother is very happy you're here." Sentenia rubs my back.

"I don't like her," I say.

Sentenia frowns. "God will punish you if you don't take that back." "But it's the truth and God will punish me if I lie."

"It's not the truth. You don't know your grandmother. How can you not like someone you don't know?"

When Mamá walks into the kitchen and sits opposite me. She grabs her cousin's hand across the table. "I can't thank you enough for taking care of her," she says.

"Please, if it wasn't for Tía, Oswaldo and I would be out on the street." Sentenia looks over in my direction.

"Still, you are so patient and good to her."

Mamá looks down at her hands. "You think she's happy to see us?"

After a long pause, Sentenia says, "Nothing makes her happy anymore."

I want to yell out, "So let's get the hell out of here!" But instead, I say something I know is wrong. "Is Sentenia our servant?"

Sentenia stands over the stove, but there's nothing cooking. Mamá plays with a napkin on the table but never answers my question.

When Papá and Rubio come back with our bags, I grab some clothes and run to the bathroom to take a shower. Rubio bangs on the bathroom door for a while, yelling, "No fair!"

I stand under the cold water and try to freeze out the guilt and shame I felt for what I said back in the kitchen. After my shower, I pull on a pair of shorts and a pink tank top.

Rubio pushes me out of his way. He takes a two-minute shower and comes out wearing the same clothes from the day before.

Oswaldo asks Rubio if he wants to play *fútbol*. I follow them even though I'm not invited. I can't be in the same room as the grown-ups. We leave as Papá gossips about our other relatives.

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Rubio jumps in front of the ball and spreads out his arms. Oswaldo races behind him, his foot gets close to the ball but Rubio's too quick. When the ball rolls over to me, I stare at it. "Hi," Oswaldo says as he retrieves the ball with one foot. He's still staring at me when Rubio shoves him away.

"Ay, what are you doing?" Rubio says.

"Nothing." Oswaldo bounces the ball on one knee. "My sister is off limits. You got me?"

Oswaldo runs away with the ball. Rubio chases after him.

As I step away from them I see Papá as he walks out of the building. "Behave," he says, heading over to his parked jalopy.

"Where are you going?" I run up to the car.

"Don't worry, I'll be back later. Rubio, keep an eye on your sister!" He winks at me before driving off.

"I'm going back upstairs," I say when he's gone. "You better come, Rubio." "Why?"

"You heard Papá. You have to look after me."

Back upstairs, we hear Mamá crying from her mother's room. "Follow me," Oswaldo says.

"What are they doing in there?" I say, because I don't want to find out for myself. "Praying for *Ta-Ta*, I think."

"Oh," I say, feeling a little hurt that Oswaldo gets to call my grandmother *Ta-Ta*.

We follow Oswaldo through the kitchen into a small alcove. Oswaldo pulls out a necklace from under the collar of his shirt. Hanging on the silver chain is his key. He unlocks the door. It smells like *Agua de Florida* and dirty socks inside the small bedroom. Two twin beds sit against opposing walls and between the two beds is an ironing board with some clothes on it and an unplugged iron. Behind the door, there are cardboard boxes filled with clothes. Oswaldo removes a pile of clothes from a hidden chair. He places the chair at the foot of one bed.

"Please sit," he tells me.

Rubio throws himself on top of the other bed.

"Do you want something to drink?" Oswaldo asks me. "What do you have?"

He rummages under one bed and pulls out a brown bottle. "What's that?"

"Nothing you can handle." Rubio reaches over me and grabs the bottle.

"Let her try some," Oswaldo says. He goes out into the kitchen and brings back three glasses.

Rubio pours a small amount in each glass. "Alright, big girl, here you go."

I avoid the lipstick stain on the rim and tip the glass into my mouth. The

liquid burns my throat.

Rubio laughs. He swallows his drink like water, and then his face turns purple. "Wow, that's good stuff." He smiles at Oswaldo. "Okay cousin, it's your turn."

Oswaldo swallows the contents whole. To Rubio's amazement, he asks for another shot. They continue to play this game until Rubio stretches out on the bed and tries to sing his school's alma mater.

Oswaldo sits on the edge of the bed next to my chair. His knee touches mine. I notice a faint scar on his cheek and fight the urge to trace it down to the left side of his mouth. He's not smiling. Rubio raises one finger up then drops it, mumbling something.

Oswaldo's breath is on my neck. I smell a hint of garlic on his breath, but I resist the urge to make a face. I look at my sleeping brother. I think about the jasmine bush outside our living room window. How the breeze blows its smell into the room. I hear Mamá crying on the other side of the apartment. A part of me wants to run out and comfort her. Another part wants to forget her.

Oswaldo takes my hand. He kisses my palm, licks his lips, leans in, and rubs his wet lips against my cheek. Then he kisses me.

Mamá's still crying. I pull away. It's as if she's right outside the door.

"They're in *Ta-Ta's* room," Oswaldo whispers. "Don't worry. They don't know we're in here." Then he comes at me again. After a few seconds, he pulls away. I open my eyes. He looks serious, but I want to laugh.

My ears ring. My hands fall on my lap, lifeless. He rubs my exposed knees then caresses my inner thighs. I don't pull away. I should stop him, but I'm curious to see how far he'll go.

Papá calls us from the living room. I jump, but Oswaldo signals me to be quiet. I sit there breathing in the smell of alcohol and garlic on my upper lip.

"Where are you two?"

We hear Mamá tell Papá to be quiet, then a door slams.

Oswaldo pulls me up. I look over at Rubio. "Forget him," Oswaldo whispers. We step out of the room, creep through the kitchen and into the empty living room. Oswaldo points to the loveseat. I obey and sit there.

He winks at me and calls his mother. Sentenia rushes out. "What? What's wrong?" "Mamá, Rubio fell down. I took him to our room," he says. "Is that okay?"

"What happened?"

"Nothing serious, he head-butted the ball too hard that's all."

I hear Papá yelling in the other room. "I don't know what you're talking about!" He bolts out and sees me on the sofa. "Where have you been?" His eyes are bloodshot.

Before I can answer, Sentenia tells him Rubio's hurt. Mamá and my grandmother shuffle into the living room.

"I had one hundred American dollars in this room," the old woman says, pronouncing each syllable in case Papá's too stupid to understand her.

"I told you, I don't know what you're talking about," Papá says.

"You're a thief and now my daughter's a thief because of you. She's telling me you would never do such a thing. You've made a liar out of her." The old woman stands up straighter. "Sentenia told me how you ran out of here this morning like the house was on fire. Makes sense now, doesn't it *hija*? He went out there to squander my fortune away."

"Fortune? Now, I know you're crazy." Papá says. "Elsa, tell her I'm no thief." Mamá ignores him and sits her mother down on her rocking chair. I'm rooted to the sofa.

Sentenia disappears inside the kitchen. Oswaldo waits for a second. He looks like he wants to protect me, but then his mother calls him away.

I try to think of a good excuse for Rubio, but my mind is blank. Before I know what to say, Sentenia comes back into the room. She's carrying a heavy blanket which she places over the old woman's lap. The blanket looks like a burlap sack. She whispers something in her ear.

Mamá looks at me.

"Anna?" The old woman says. "No, Ani." Mamá corrects her.

"Anita, your father's a thief," the old woman says.

I stare at her ugly face. "No, he's not and my name is not Anita, it's Ani." I stand beside my father.

He places his hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear, "I didn't see you out in the courtyard."

"What?" I take a step back. "Where were you, Ani?"

Sentenia, Mamá, and the old woman are all staring at me now.

"You see, *hija*, your children are rotten like him. Tell her, Sentenia. Tell her what

Hector's son is doing in your room." "*Tía*, let it go," Sentenia says.

"Go ahead, tell your cousin that her boy is drunk." Mamá looks at me, but I

still don't know what to say. Papá walks towards Sentenia's room.

"What a beautiful family," the old woman calls out to him.

Papá carries Rubio out to the living room and places him on the free sofa. Mamá sits beside Rubio and feels his forehead. Sentenia hands her a glass of water. Holding the glass to his lips, Mamá says, "Ani, help your father pack our stuff."

"You're running away again," the old woman says, rocking in her chair.

Mamá settles Rubio back down on the sofa, places the glass on the tacky coffee table and walks over to her mother. "Sentenia will help you," she says. She walks over to where Papá is standing, wraps her arms around his neck, and then surprises us all by giving him a long, passionate kiss.

It's so different from the kiss I shared with Oswaldo. Mamá is in control of the kiss. Papá stands still, hands hanging by his sides. She turns to me, takes my hand and kisses my palm.

"Sentenia's a good woman, I want you to thank her for what she's doing," she says and turns me around so that I face her cousin.

"What about my hundred dollars?" The old woman says, rocking her chair a little harder. Mamá turns to Sentenia and leans her forehead against her cousin's. "Elsa!" The old woman shouts. Mama pulls me over.

I say, "Thank you," to Sentenia, but she keeps her eyes on Mamá and watches as she walks over to the old woman.

Mamá kneels and asks for her mother's blessing. The old woman stares at the top of her head.

"*Adios, madre mia,*" Mamá says.

Sentenia places the old woman's hand on Mamá's head. "*Vaya con Dios,*" Sentenia says to Mamá.

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Mamá is sitting next to me in the back seat, waiting for me to explain what happened in Oswaldo's room.

"Whatever happened, I want you to know I love you," she says.

My beautiful mother with her turned-up chin and small pointy nose is staring at me and I can't resist her any longer. I bury my face in her neck and cry. She holds my head close and rubs my back.

Papá punches Rubio when a Volkswagen drives by. Rubio cries, "No fair, you said we should never play that game."

"I did." Papá rubs Rubio's buzzed head. "That's a good rule. Okay, no more games." "But, wait I've got to get you back."

“No, I don’t think so buddy.”

When a VW van drives by, Rubio looks over at Papá who looks back at him. “One more and then we’re done,” he nods laughing and Rubio punches him on his shoulder.

Mamá kisses the top of my head and tells me to relax, “Go to sleep, sweetheart.” But I can’t sleep. The sun is sinking behind the houses on stilts. Sometimes a bus full of people passes us. Mamá holds my hand and makes patterns on my skin with her thumb. And it feels like she keeps waiting for me to say something.

The jalopy ride is smooth and fast. My body shakes, my cheeks feel warm, I taste salt on my lips, the world is bright with fierce colors and prickling heat. In a hoarse voice I say, “I don’t understand what happened.”

And Mamá remains still and quiet, pulls my chin up and says, “Things in life are not meant to be understood.”

I can’t hear her breath.

We keep driving until it’s dark. We drive and watch the country crowd up with houses, gas stations, warehouses, skyscrapers, and houses again, but not on stilts. These houses are made of concrete with red clay tile roofs.

Our family alone in the jalopy, we sit in silence and turn into our street and return to our world, our small apartment, our kitchen, the smell of jasmine, the chirping of crickets, and buzz of mosquitoes.

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