1

Back Home

Landscapes shine brighter than any gold ingot. The sweetest aroma of desserts prepared by your mother. It didn’t matter the ticking of the clock, nor the number of wrinkles that covered the skin of your body. It was even more beautiful than the already imagined paradise. You will be surprised if I tell you I visited twice and I am sure it will be the third soon.

My grandmother had just come out of a special hospital. I was happy to see her with sad eyes again; She had brought me up since I was a baby. It had been two years since men dressed in white took her in a white van, like the way they take the criminals. It had an image on the side showing a man and a young woman smiling and in the background a brick-covered building with grilles. More than a hospital, it looked like a prison for “different” people.

My mom told me that my grandmother was going through a crisis and needed help. Still, we visited her every weekend and brought her some desserts I made with my own hands. I took the recipes from my grandmother’s old notebook. She once told me that while traveling in different countries, she had the hobby of collecting recipes for cookies and cakes that she found interesting.

Mom made it clear to me I shouldn’t do anything to upset my grandmother. She wasn’t supposed to be disturbed, let alone make her angry. I was barely thirteen when I was already in charge of meeting most of my grandmother’s needs. I knew by heart the time I had to give her medication, the name and the colors of the pills. Instead of medicine they seemed sweet and looked so exquisite that when I tried to eat one, I spit it out instantly when a bitter, dry taste permeated my tongue.

My grandmother showed no expression when Mom was at home. She was lost knitting or watching television, but as soon as my mother went out to work, my grandmother’s mood changed.

-Is she gone?

-Yes, Grandma.

-Good. You know what’s next, my girl. -She was smiling at me.

My grandmother would change her clothes, braid her hair into a chongo and put on the crimson lipstick that my late grandfather gave her. Meanwhile, I prepared the tea and arranged in three slices of bread with apple jam that my grandmother prepared. Every afternoon, around five o’clock we had snacks in the garden next to the carnations. My grandmother said those flowers reminded her of some good friends from the hospital. I never liked that place; people walked nonsensically screams and cries heard in every corner. It seemed like nightmares invaded the minds of all the inmates, including nurses who kept looking at me as if they would devour me in an oversight.

I’m glad my grandma’s with me again; I used to hate it when my mother went to work, but now when she’s gone, my grandmother becomes my confidant. She sings the songs on the radio and plays with me on the grass. It didn’t look like my grandmother was 76 years old. When she plays her favorite music, we dance and end up exhausted drinking the tea I left in the teapot and the marmalade bread. That’s when my grandmother tells me stories. Sometimes she told me stories that made me sleep some years ago. Other times it was the story of her life with some fantastic things, but it sounded so convincing that there came a time when I thought they were real.

As the winter came I changed the snack menu and this time my grandmother helped me prepare something special: hot chocolate and raisin cookies. It was raining, so we just went out on the terrace. A few drops of rain grazed our cheeks and caused a relaxing sensation. It was the feeling of being alive, of breathing that icy air that froze your nose.

Today’s story was neither cheerful nor sad. This afternoon there were no princesses, no men selling tears. There wasn’t even a villain or a monster eating dreams.

-Yesterday I had a dream, my daughter, I was giving a cup of chocolate to drink. Or maybe it wasn’t, I’m not sure.

-What did you dream of, Grandma?

-I saw Dinorah.

-Who is Dinorah?

-She was the one who saved me from the silent death within the white walls of the hospital.

2

Improvised family

-So... Veronica Eigner? A nurse was taking Mrs. Veronica’s blood pressure.

-That’s right.

-Do you know what today is?

-My granddaughter’s birthday.

-Do you know why you’re here?

-No, All I know is, I want to go back to my granddaughter. I can’t miss her party.

-You yelled at the child and told her to stay away from your family and said something about a man...

-That’s a lie.

-And threw a knife at her, luckily it was made of plastic! Your family is worried, especially your granddaughter. She put a lot of emphasis on this part; They're afraid you will lose control again. Do you know what schizophrenia is? Because it already has a history.

-I do not have that. Please, miss, release me from the chair and let me go back to my daughter and granddaughter. They are the only thing left for me as a family. Mrs. Veronica began to cry.

Although the nurse tried to stay cool, the lady’s tears touched her heart; she had the feeling they were sincere. It was normal at that age for older adults to be afraid. The nurse, better than anyone else, understood; she had many experiences inside and outside the hospital. She thought of her parents and her husband’s family.

- Please, madam, take it easy, she offered her a handkerchief. You will be back with your family sooner than you think.

The lady wiped her nose and dried her tears. I tried to be a little optimistic; It is not the first time she ends up in a hospital and it will not be the last. She maintained her posture and do whatever it took to get home.

\* \* \*

-Were they very mean to you inside the hospital, Grandma? My cup of chocolate went halfway.

-No, girl, on the contrary. they treated me with a lot of patience. My only complaint was food.

My grandmother described dishes so insipid that I imagined them as if they were taken out of a garbage buffet. Chicken salad with cream that looked like cheese; strawberry pudding with strange lumps; she even told me she once found cockroach legs in a soup of letters. That didn’t look like a hospital anymore. Usually, everything had such extreme cleanliness that you could eat on the floor. My grandmother said that everything had a smell of bleach and chemicals with flavors, like those bottles with colored liquids we use at home

My grandmother continued to tell me about her experience at the hospital. She had a room shared with a woman much younger than my mother, in her early twenties. I only saw her once on one of my visits. She didn’t seem to have any problems like the other patients. Her hair was long, knee-length, curly and red. They said she hadn’t cut it for ten years. It was tan skin. She once saw me with my grandmother in the visiting room; greeted us and put a box of milk candy in front of us. My grandmother said that her family came once a month and left her a box of those candies. She never finished them and spent her time giving candy to the other inmates. No one refused the angelic smile she sketched.

-Her name was Allium, she had the name of a princess and looked like one: she walked delicately, ate correctly with cutlery; she brushed her hair with such care that it could take a whole morning to do so. She looked very innocent.

-Then why was she in the hospital?

-Don’t trust appearances, my child. When she was alone in our room, she would play with dolls and rip their limbs off. On four occasions, they put her to sleep because she ran naked in the halls, my grandmother chuckled. It took two hours to catch her; she was very elusive, like a fox in the woods. Although, for a while, I noticed how the hospital director looked at her. Perhaps he cheated with his subordinates, but he cannot fool an old woman who has experience over the years.

-Why grandmother?

-The director of the hospital, I think his last name was Johnson, was looking for any excuse to bring her into his office and it could take hours. After that, she came out very serious. Now that I think about it, I think I was right about what I thought was happening behind that door.

- I don’t get it, Grandma.

- Better girl, I’m glad you don’t understand. There are many things in the world that it’s better not to know. Sometimes it’s more convenient to live behind a sweet lie.

Allium got out of the hospital before my grandmother. That day they invited us to a small party in a separate ward of the hospital for her farewell. The redheaded girl said goodbye to my grandmother with a hug, a very strong one. There were tears and laughter and I could hear, “Thanks to you, I’m free at last.” Since then, we haven’t heard from her.

\* \* \*

My new room was small but very cozy. It was wide enough for two people to have their privacy. The walls were beige and white. There were two paintings of different landscapes, one seemed to be from my hometown. The nurse helped me get settled: she left my suitcase under my bed and repeated three times that if I needed anything, I should press the button on the wall. I thanked her for the attention and she retired.

-My name is Allium, I’ve been here a year -A young girl’s voice was barely heard. I looked around to locate the source. What’s your name?

-They used to call me Veronica, but now, old or grandmother. I smiled.

-I like you very much, the young woman came out of hiding, jumped over my bed and bounced closer to me. I like her a lot and feel like there’s something common between us.

-Maybe that’s why we’re both here.

-We’re friends, aren’t we? Allium looked at me with the eyes of a curious child.

-Of course, young lady. There was a moment of silence. I still remember when I was your age. I was in love with a young man a little older than me. Mrs. Mcphire said I didn't have the chance to get close, and that I looked like a freak. That no one would want to love a madwoman who didn't even recognize her mother.

-Is that what you called your mother? Mrs. Mcphire? I like it, sounds great, why do I have to say mom when I can call her in other ways that may reflect deeper feelings of affection?

-That’s what I thought. But she never understood.

\* \* \*

Our chocolate cups were almost at their limit and the rain was also decreasing in intensity. My grandmother’s memories were too sharp for her to have what they had diagnosed her with. My mom once told me that when she was a little girl, my grandmother spent hours talking to herself in her room and that sometimes she spent her afternoons writing and throwing letters into the wind, which they lost track of at that moment. My mom never understood my grandmother. She didn’t even give her the chance. Only one person spent more than half of his life watching over my grandmother, although he never got into her world.

-Your poor grandfather Cornelius, said, my grandmother. I never let him rest.

I know my grandfather loved my grandmother enough to stay with her despite her inexplicable and mysterious attitudes. In my mother’s case, she is not so patient and often argues with my grandmother, most of the time for nonsense. The most that happen is that my mother ends up upset and locks herself in her room. My grandmother ends up laughing and between her lips, she says: “I told you, you would understand when you become a mother”.

-Things were just routine in the days after I entered the hospital; I was dying of boredom. We only played cards, monopoly and had a ping pong table. Tell me, do you think my bones can stand this old lady playing ping pong?

-I think so, Grandma. I nodded.

-Well, you’re right. She was the best player that the hospital has had in the last decade.

The rain stopped completely and the cups empty.

-Grandma, your story is interesting, but you still haven’t talked about Dinorah.

-Oh, yes! I almost forgot. It is almost impossible to see her physically and those who do are...

-How, Grandma? Please tell me.

-They’re dead. But it’s very easy to send her letters. I’ve got two drawers full of them. All you have to do is send them to Misshio, the carrier pigeon.

I smiled; my grandmother kept mixing fantasy with reality. I know that in her drawers are only clothes and photographs of her from when she was young; because I filled them before she got home and she didn’t have a bag in her hands when she came back.

-Do you still send her letters, grandma?

-Yes, I got one today; speaking of which, wear a thicker jacket. She told me you'll get the flu tomorrow. In the evening I'll make you tea from Dibango.

-All right, Grandma.

The next day I ended up in bed with the flu.

3

Love does not come from the heart

-How do you feel, daughter?

“My head still hurts a little.” I tried to get up to sit. My grandmother stopped me, arranged the blankets for me and left on my dresser a cup of Abango tea and some cookies. Thank you, grandma; my grandmother lifted my blouse and placed a strong-smelling ointment on my chest.

Grandma, could you tell me a story? That would cheer me up.

My grandmother put a chair next to me without hesitation. I don’t think there was anything she liked more than telling her stories.

-Do you have any special story?

-When I was arranging your things I found a photograph of you with my grandfather when you were young.

-Our first date, It was a complete disaster.

-Tell me, Grandma, tell me how it went.

\* \* \*

That year’s summer was shorter than a wave breaking off the coast, but a week before returning to the usual routine, Veronica had summoned the courage to invite Cornelius on a date. In her letters to Dinorah, she had stated her feelings for that young hazel-eyed man. He was a little older than her. She met him at his first job as an assistant at a news agency. Dinorah’s words repeated that she drives away cowardice and invite him.

-It doesn’t matter if he says no to you. -she encouraged herself.

Veronica believed she had everything to lose, but she wasn’t in Nördlingen. In Virginia, no one knew who she was or where she came from. No one called her crazy or kept their children from speaking to her. In Virginia, she was who she wanted to be and until now everyone believed she was a good person.

-Hello Cornelius, Veronica shyly approached the bench where the young man was sitting.

-Nice summer afternoon, don’t you think? Cornelius looked right into Veronica’s eyes.

She felt her hands sweat, took her glasses and played with the edges nervously.

-Yes, it’s silent in the park this time. Co... Cornelius, I’d like to ask you something. Veronica passed saliva.

Cornelius’ expression was filled with curiosity, moved a little on his bench and invited Veronica to sit down. She thanked with a gesture.

-Tell me.

-You... well, do you like...? would you... would you like to go have coffee with me?

-Of course! There’s a very good one near here.

Veronica felt like dying of happiness. I’ve experienced nothing like this for anyone before. After the passing of the minutes, Veronica felt more confidence, meanwhile, Cornelius was talking about his life in the city, his family, they even talked about his other colleagues. The coffee was just a pretext to hear his melodious voice. The words uttered by Cornelius slipped as musical notes played in a sonata for Veronica.

-You are of a few words and I just don’t close my mouth. Replied Cornelius.

-It's not that, I feel a little nervous. I didn't think you were going to go out with me. Thank you very much.

-Why would anyone say no to you? Cornelius rose from his chair approaching Veronica’s side. This moment deserves something to remember.

\* \* \*

-He asked a gentleman sitting at another table to take a picture of us and that was when he first hugged me. My grandmother let out a sigh.

-But why do you say it was a disaster, grandma?

-After the picture, I accidentally spilled my coffee on him. I wanted the earth to swallow me, but it was because of that we went out again the next day.

-Was Grandpa Cornelius your only boyfriend when he was young?

-Yes, I didn’t have eyes for anyone else and I don’t think your grandfather did either. He wrote me poems and left me chocolates on my desk in the office.

My grandmother was pensive for a moment.

-Grandmother, did my grandfather know about Dinorah? Did he know that you wrote her letters?

-I told him once after I introduced him to my mother when she visited us in Virginia. We had a formal relationship. I remember my mother talking to him about something and it was a month later she sent me to the hospital for the first time. I had already visited hospitals when I was a child, but I never imagine she dared to abandon me. Tears slid down her cheek.

-What happened next?

-My world was falling, I thought Mrs. Mcphire was right: Who would love a woman as crazy as me?

-You’re not crazy, Granny. Maybe you can see things that others can’t, feel things that people think are impossible. A crazy person couldn’t distinguish love. A crazy person couldn’t love as you adore my mother, my grandfather Cornelius and me.

-Your grandfather told me the same thing, he never left me inside the hospital and as soon as they discharged me he asked me to marry him.

My grandparents’ wedding is one of my favorite stories, it was on the shores of Puerto Vallarta. The sea can be smelled from the moment you enter Nayarit. There are trees, jungle areas, rivers, and it absorbs the humid climate through the skin. There was a photograph where my grandmother wore a beautiful beige fabric dress, her hair played with the wind and the sea breeze. My mother was present that day inside my grandmother’s womb.

That reminded me of the occasions I visited those coasts. They were a few times, but I still have in my fingers the sensation of hot sand and the sound of the tide in my ears.

4

Just a visit to the hospital

A week later, my grandmother began to feel chest pains. When I notified my mother on the phone, she came back from work right away, picked us up and we went straight to the cardiologist.

I didn’t understand my mom’s hurry. On the other hand, my grandmother was very calm and hugged me; my head remained in her chest and the sound of her heart was quick. When we got to the hospital, the doctor rushed past my grandmother, turned on a strange machine, and started checking my grandmother. They spoke of terms I didn’t understand, except for the words “You have to admit her immediately.“

We got to the hospital; nurses and doctors quickly took my grandmother to a stretcher and put her inside an emergency room. My mother and I stayed outside.

-Mom? My grandmother hasn’t had a crisis, why does she have to be in the hospital again?

-This isn’t a crisis, honey, let’s just say her heart’s a little tired, but everything will be fine, okay? My mother bent down to my height; You have nothing to worry about.

She was more worried. You could tell she was struggling to keep tears from coming out of her eyes. Time passed slowly, and we were just outside the building, arms crossed. My mom made several phone calls. I imagine she contacted my uncles; they arrived in less than an hour, accompanied by my aunts.

My grandmother had only three children: my mother, who is the eldest; my uncle Arley, two years younger than my mother; and my uncle Damien, four years younger than my uncle Arley. My uncles came hurriedly asking what had happened. They barely saw me and passed by. My aunts greeted each other and went where to I was. They hugged me and then turned their attention to my mother. Two more hours passed, and a doctor came out with a folder in hand, saying that they had to sign a document allowing that in any situation they could intubate. My uncles looked at each other and my mother signed the document when she saw that none of my uncles objected. The night approached slowly and the hours of waiting became a martyrdom without news of my grandmother.

-Child, you will spend the night at your Uncle Arley’s house. I will stay and take care of your grandmother.

-I want to stay and take care of her too.

-I know you do, love, but they don’t let children in.

I bit my lip. They’re taking me away from my grandmother again.

-Your cousins will be happy to see you. My Aunt Hanna was trying to cheer me up.

My Uncle Arley's house was bigger, but his garden was smaller. By the time we got there, four people were waiting at the door. Two of my cousins were older than me and the other two a little younger. They were all mischievous, and I never imagined that the youngest one looked so much like my mother. They had the same tastes and maybe that's why he liked me because I knew how to behave with him.

Even though I spent the afternoon playing, eating the dishes prepared by Aunt Hanna and watching movies, my grandmother’s thought never left my mind. I saw her this morning, and I missed her so much. That night my Uncle Arley laid several quilts for us in the living room and the five of us lay down to play video games.

-Don’t stay up too late; tomorrow we will visit your Grandmother Veronica, said my uncle.

-Yes, Daddy, my cousins answered almost in unison.

\* \* \*

-Smiling man? Is that you?

-I told you my visit would be soon, Veronica. Look how beautiful you’ve become! Those wrinkles on your skin look better than the horrible dresses you wore years ago.

-And then you were a monster with a smile full of fangs, feathers, and giant claws.

The smiling man was standing in front of my bed, wearing a black suit and a bright purple tie. He had a kind of dark skin, but it felt like he had darker scales, with his hair half curly and ruffled. He walked around the room observing the machines tied to me.

-That sound is annoying and more so when the heart stops. His smile became more pronounced. The bright side is that you will no longer hear it.

-Do we have to go now? I asked.

-You’re supposed to, but you’re one of Dinorah’s favorites. She commissioned me to deliver this to you.

I looked at the little envelope. It was adorned with drawings of flowers and happy faces. I couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

-My last letter.

-Before you read it... The smiling man turned on the radio at the table. Would you dance with me? Come on, for old times’ sake.

I left the letter on the side table and the smiling man helped me up. He took me delicately by the waist and grabbed my hand. It was soft; I never thought the smiling man was so attractive. On the radio, there was a waltz that I barely remembered: step, step, and turn. At first, I was a little stiff, afterward, my fingers no longer cracked, my knees didn’t hurt, and my skin was no longer hung.

-Whether or not you are crazy, you are and will always be the most beautiful woman, the most affectionate mother and the young woman with whom I have always been in love.

It surprised me to hear those words, that wasn’t the smiling man. It was...

-Cornelius?

And there I was, dancing in the middle of room number 404 of the state hospital. By the hand of the man of my life, who had died ten years ago; my dear Cornelius.

It was like the first time.

\* \* \*

I woke up earlier than usual. Everyone in my uncle’s house was still snoring and even if we were family, I felt uncomfortable. I was looking forward to seeing my grandmother. I’m sure she’ll be home today. It would be good to prepare a fruit salad with lots of apples because it is her favorite. My aunt Hanna went downstairs and woke up all my cousins. I saw her heading for the kitchen and followed her.

-Good morning! I thought you were still asleep.

-I usually wake up early to prepare breakfast for my grandmother.

-Would you like to help me?

-Yes, aunt.

-How nice! Come, wash your hands; we’ll make pancakes.

My aunt seemed impressed at the agility I had in the kitchen. I served the flour without dropping a pinch, while she melts the butter I measured the cups of milk and mixed the ingredients to achieve a homogeneous mixture. It's an easy recipe, but it also has its spongy joke.

-I always wanted a daughter, but I was lucky with four boys. Right? They all look just like their father.

I smiled; my aunt let me use her shower. The day before I didn’t have time to bathe at home and I felt dirty. My grandmother recommended me to wear a honey and sugar mask, she told me that when she first arrived in Mexico; she met a woman twice her age, gave her an endless number of recipes to take care of her skin. Although my grandmother was never one of the young women who looked flashy, she said that all women are vain but they show it in different ways.

- “Daughter, your grandmother wants to see you.” It was the first thing my mother told me when I arrived at the hospital.

-My mother seems confused, she had told me that children could not enter the hospital, and I confirmed this when I saw a large sign in the corridor with the figure of a child and a cross on top.

All the people who were waiting had their eyes on some lost spot in the hallway. Some mothers breastfed their children, others read the newspaper or whatever they had at hand, including the wrappings of the sweets they had eaten. We got to my grandmother’s room, and a nurse opened the door for me.

-Excuse me, miss, Mrs. Veronica wants to see her granddaughter alone.

-It’s okay. Go, daughter. I’ll wait for you out here.

My grandmother doesn’t seem to sleep in this room; they were lit and full of flowers; there wasn’t time for that today. My grandmother got out of bed and looked at me tenderly. she had a lot of tubes connected to her arms and those thin clothes didn’t look good on her. I’ll remember to bring your red carnation dress the day you’re discharged.

-My daughter, I missed you so much.

I threw myself at my grandmother, her aroma had changed. I wept with joy to see her again. Only one day passed, and I missed her too much.

-Me too, Grandma. I want her back...

-Shh! Listen, my daughter; I have little time, here you go.

My grandmother handed me an envelope adorned with flowers and happy faces, like those that my teachers used to put when my homework was done well.

-What’s this, grandma?

-Promise me you’ll open it when you’re alone. Don’t let anyone see you reading it, not even your mother.

-I promise, Grandma.

-Well, she sighed relieved. Honey, you know very well that I love you and I don’t ask you for anything; but I need you to do something for me. I want you to take care of your mother, at least until I return.

Her voice broke a little.

-That’s what I always do, Grandma.

My grandmother slowly released me. Her strength was no longer the same as the day before.

-Daughter, I want to talk to your mother too. Although she’s mature, she’s still as naughty as when she was your age.

We laughed together.

-We’ll see each other soon. I promise. I promise.

My grandmother took her last breath as soon as I took the first step out of the room.

5

What memories the red carnations bring to me!

\* \* \*

-It wasn't long enough! I've got to get back. The smiling man's arms tied me to him.

I tried to reach my body, but no matter how hard I tried, my strength was fading.

-Veronica, I can’t., you know I didn’t make the rules. We even gave you extra time, you should be grateful.

-I am, but I didn’t have time to say goodbye to my daughter. Although admitted to the hospital again, she is still the tender baby I had in my arms in this same room.

-There are other ways and I can give her the message for you, he whispered in my ear.

\* \* \*

Everything happened too fast: the squeaking sound as soon as I left the room; my mother pulling me with tears in her eyes; my uncles swallowing the knot in the throat; the doctors beating my grandmother’s chest with the defibrillator. It seemed as if time had stood still as if everyone was falling apart and no one in the hospital noticed. I was drowning in tears. My mother’s hugs lost warmth and only the desperation of the moment remained.

I’ll never see my grandmother again. I won’t feel her arms anymore, the warmth of her body, the smell of flowers in her room. she’s gone and though I saw her lifeless body, I still don’t believe it. It’s something I can’t accept.

They said her body would be at the funeral home by 5:00. My mother let me choose my grandmother’s dress. The one with red carnations, I said.

My grandmother loved the carnations in the garden, even when we weren’t together, she tended and watered them. My uncles watched her in a small place; we weren’t a big family, but very close. My uncles used to take turns taking my grandmother for walks on different days or invited her on vacation when they went out. We all loved my grandmother, especially for her great imagination. Acquaintances of my mother and uncles all arrived the time. Most were direct with my mother, they said that she was the most affected, and didn’t have to regret anything, as she was with her at all times and for her. My mother’s cousins, whom I saw rarely, hugged me and told me I had to be strong. I’m strong, now I will take care of my mother as promised my grandmother. But she didn’t keep hers: she promised me she’d be back soon.

I ended up exhausted in an armchair in front of the coffin. It was about two o’clock in the morning, my eyes were slowly closing when a white dress with black circles caught my attention. It was worn by a girl of almost nine years old, with blond hair caught in two ponytails. There was a mocking smile on her face and walked straight to my grandmother’s body. She played with the tips of her hair and ran her tongue through her teeth. She had a red carnation in her hands. In the blink of an eye, I noticed that instead of the girl there was another huge, dark figure that I could barely perceive in the blink of an eye. The girl no longer had the flower in her hands, now she was on the coffin in a position that gave the impression that my grandmother had it in her hands.

She turned and looked at me; her childish smile became more pronounced. She walked without taking her eyes off mine until I lost sight of her among the people walking from one side to the other with coffee in their hands.

It left me with a chill on my back and a bitter taste in my mouth. I looked again at the coffin and went to see my grandmother’s body for the last time. She doesn’t look like my grandmother: her wrinkles stretched and eyes closed as if forced; her jaw was hard and expression cold, as if she wanted to say something but the seams inside her mouth didn’t allow her to emit any sound.

My mom came and took me by the head. I counted three tears that fell from her cheek to my shoulder leaving two wet marks on the sweater I was wearing.

My grandmother ended up in ashes in a marble box adorned with a silver plate on the front. It had her name engraved with a calligraphic typeface and the date of her death. We left her near the dining room in a small makeshift altar covered with her favorite flowers and a photograph where she, my mother and I are between the two, smiling, happy just like a couple of days ago. Grandma, if you realized how much we need you.

My mother cries at night and I cry when alone. I still serve the snack at the same time and prepare the bread with apple jam that I tasted so much, although now instead of feeling satisfied, I end up with a hole in my stomach.

That day, it was colder than usual; I made two cups of tea and left them on the garden table. I went back inside the house for the bread with jam, when I heard the cup impacting delicately with the ceramic saucer. I came out with the bread on the tray, dropping it.

-Hey, did your mom teach you to waste food?

She was the girl in the black circle dress.

-How did you get in here?

-All you can ask me is the first thing you can think of? What a naive girl! You look just like your grandmother when she was your age.

-The little girl drank a cup of tea with a sip. Give me more, please.

I filled the mysterious girl’s cup while she played with the tips of her hair.

-I’ll go make more bread with jam. I said

-No, give me those that fell on the floor.

I was a little confused and only passed the plate with the bread. It seemed like she hadn’t eaten in days. She’d dive three out of a bite and pass them without chewing.

-You’re not a normal girl who are you? How do you know my grandmother? I asked curiously.

-You haven’t read the letter, right?

I put my hand in my pants pocket. How could I forget something as important as that?

-Read it out loud, please, said the girl cleaning the jam that lay at the corner of her lips.

I opened the envelope and there were two sheets folded into four. I unfolded the little one and cleared my voice to read.

My dear child,

It doesn’t look like 78 years have passed since I wrote you the first letter. Unfortunately, this has to be the last one. You’ve grown up and learned so many things that even you don’t realize it. Also, thanks to you I understood more about humans; well, the three of us learned a lot about you.

I can’t offer you anything else, my little one, just fulfill a little whim that you had told me about in your previous letter. Your departure from the earth will be painless and I long to have you under my lap again. Cornelius keeps asking about you and Thomson misses playing hide-and-seek with you. We look forward to your coming.

With affection.

Dinorah

-Dinorah...

-You’re missing another one.

I hope you heard me and you're reading this alone. My daughter, I asked Dinorah to let you read the letters I was receiving from her. I know you didn't believe my words, but you trusted my love. This could get you in trouble with your mother if she finds out. I wish you wouldn't bother me; maybe I should have told you I wouldn't be coming back but was afraid I'd break your little heart…

My voice began to cut and the knot in my throat became more intense.

It hurts me so much to leave, but it’s not something I can decide. Dinorah is an old friend, and I’d like her to be yours too. Now you’ll see the world the way I did. You will know the smiling man; he was curious to know what you were like since I told him so much about you. Don’t trust his words, he will never lie to you but knows how to use them and make everything end up against you. The scarlet-eyed man is still a mystery to me, but you should be afraid of him. Even the smiling man flees from the shadows when he is in his presence.

-Veronica knows me well. The girl began to laugh.

I won’t tell you about Dinorah because now it’s your turn to meet her. Take care of yourself, fulfill all your dreams, I know we’ll see each other soon and hopefully not so soon. Build experiences and live, live so that later you have stories you can tell your future children and grandchildren. You’ll enjoy it, believe me; the same way I loved telling you my stories.

With love,

Veronica

A chill passed through my body.

-I have to warn you, girl: don’t think it will be something wonderful to have the same gift as Veronica. It’s more horrible than you think. All the people who have gone through it suffer from nightmares, have ended their lives, perish alone or end up in white walls. Does that remind you of anyone?

- The girl rose from her chair, I imagine you have any doubts, but you will have to solve them yourself.

-What is new that I will see? I asked.

-Remember your grandmother’s “crisis” two years ago? She didn’t attack the boy because she was crazy, as you say. That child was an inhabitant of Hickerland, escaped and the only way he has to survive among humans is to devour part of his essence. Your grandmother saved you; that kid almost devoured you.

-What is Hickerland?

- It’s not what, but where. The girl pronounced her smile more. I’ll give you a hint: your grandmother’s drawer.

The girl took more bread and jam and ran until I lost sight of her when she turned the corner of the house. What a strange girl!

I sat for a moment thinking and re-reading the letter; Smiley man, scarlet-eyed man, Dinorah. What do they have to do with my grandmother? What do they have to do with people? The girl did not speak as if she were a little girl, her words were cold, direct and full of strange sincerity. Why did she call herself the smiling man if she was only a little girl? My head will explode.

There’s only one way to clear my doubts, I went straight to my grandmother’s room. I was in front of her door when I stopped dry and knocked three times.

-Grandma, I’m coming in.

I turned the knob and a warm air passed by me. Everything was just as she had left it: a handful of cookies on the side of her television set; her cup of jug water; a glass where she placed her teeth, and some coins piled near her brushes. It still had the scent of perfume. My eyes were filled with tears just remembering that my grandmother was gone. I meandered through her room and knelt by her dresser drawer. I don’t know what I expected to find if all they had were photos and clothes. When I opened it, many letters came out in piles and left the drawer filling me around with old papers.

6

Creatures of Hickerland

It's been several hours or maybe it's been all afternoon. I lost track of time while reading letter after letter. The stories my grandmother told me sounded prettier than they are. My grandmother was in psychiatric hospitals from a young age; there were more occasions than she talked about. My great-grandmother abandoned her by sending her to the United States to her fate when she was only fifteen years old. She lived on the street for a while and survived as she could, accepting jobs that ruined her hands and others that I didn't even know were jobs. Now I know why my grandmother fell in love with my grandfather Cornelius: he offered her a job, a roof over her head and a chance to get out of the bad luck she was carrying. My great-grandmother found out and went to visit her. It happened only when she thought he cured her. Seeing that this was not the case, she tried to convince Cornelius to put her back in another hospital and somehow it worked. My grandmother was right, Dinorah saved her from the silent death of the hospital, the smiling man stalked her daily. My grandmother never lost her mind, no matter how much they told her she was crazy. In her letters she doesn't tell if she was sad or if she was angry because of what my great-grandmother did to her, she clarifies that all humans are afraid of what they don't know. No one knows Dinorah and the few who speak to her hide her existence.

-Why, Grandma? Why did you disguise your life with fantasies for a girl? I said to myself.

-Because they’re children’s stories.

The mysterious girl had returned. He lay face down on my grandmother’s bed.

-Veronica's life was not sad she was fortunate. She's the only one who has ever met Dinorah in person.

-The girl had a lock of hair in her mouth.

- I don’t understand, I said.

-I’ll tell you in a way that you’ll understand: All beings that die end up in Hickerland. It is not a paradise, and it is not hell as you think, it is only a world in which the living do not enter. But your grandmother, Veronica, was there when she was just a small, insignificant brat. There’s a little story about what happened, but it would take a long time to tell you and I think it’ll be better some other time.

-But...

-Your mother will be here soon. If I were you, I’d settle this whole mess. And one more thing before I go: I recommend you not to tell anyone about me. No one sees me the same way you do. To you, I’m a harmless child, but to others, I may be the worst of their nightmares.

-She took me by the face and kissed me on the cheek.

-That’s from your grandmother.

The girl disappeared under the bed.

I put my grandmother’s things in order and left the room without a trace of my presence. My mother arrived with a bag of fried chicken. I put tablecloths on the table and sat down to dinner with her. It’s been a long time since we had dinner together. When she arrived, she usually served herself a bowl of cereal and went up to her room to watch the television. We ate in silence.

-Forgive me, daughter. I dropped my cutlery when I heard that.

-What are you talking about, Mom?

-I don’t think I’m a good mother. I spend all my life at work, even when you were a baby, your grandmother was the one who took care of you. Forgive me, please.

-My mother was crying.

-I have nothing to forgive you, Mama. You’ve done everything you did for our good.

-I got up and hugged her.

-I’ll change; I promise and will spend more time with you. I’ll always be at home for lunch and dinner together. On weekends, we’ll go for a walk with your cousins and plan a big vacation once a year.

-It’s okay, Mom, but don’t try too hard either, okay? I love you, Mommy.

That night we stayed in my mother’s bed watching a movie. Mom was already tired and fell asleep right at the best part. I was more than awake and watched her for a moment. I got up and turned off the TV.

I heard a sigh behind me and my soul froze; everything was in the dark. I didn’t get to scream or even turn around to see what was behind me.

-I’m... hungry.

-Who are you? -I whispered.

-Can you... listen to me? The breath of that thing became very pronounced.

-No longer... is here... no ... will protect you...

I don’t know where I got the courage to move and try to turn on the light, but when I touched the switch something covered with slime took my hand and pulled me into the gloom. My eyes barely got used to the darkness when I had that creature in front of me, cornering me between the kitchen wall and its heavy, mold-smelling body.

I screamed, and the creature put something on my forehead, I felt weak. I saw the light in my mom’s room turn on and got to see the creature.

I saw the figure of a man; the skin looked like melted plastic and there were tentacles small and fine like the thread that tied me up. My mother ran out of the room shouting my name.

-Daughter, what are you doing?

-She can’t... see me the disfigured man made a sound like a laugh.

-Stop playing games, daughter! You’re scaring me.

I couldn’t move my body and no words came out. I couldn’t feel my fingers anymore and began to get dizzy until I lost consciousness.

Everything was dark, there was a very penetrating sound, an alarm maybe. I was so cold, tried to open my eyes.

-She’s awake, I barely listened.

My fingers were frozen, It seemed as if moving them would break them.

-She’s a newcomer! We have to welcome her properly.

-Watch Thomson!

Thomson? I opened my eyes wide. There were many people around me. They looked at me curiously: some smiled, others greeted me, and some whispered things to each other.

-Welcome to Hickerland!

7

Best friends are not measured in size

People were strangely cheerful, there was not a drop of sadness in the air. It was confusing to see children talking like adults; young people behaving like old people; adults acting like children and some animals more social than the people themselves. The women were beautiful but somehow very similar to each other, and they reminded me of celebrities in movies.

-Where are you from?

-What’s your name?

-Is everything still the same as ten years ago?

They bombarded me with questions I couldn’t exactly answer. A small figure stood in front of the crowd.

-Leave her alone! Everyone get back to your personal affairs.

They all began to dissipate without complaint. The little man looked at me seriously and took a deep breath.

-I’m not here to take care of children anymore, but hey, my name is Thomson.

-Thomson? You appeared in my grandmother’s letters.

-Eh? Your grandmother? Wait for a second, Thomson thought a little, are you Veronica’s granddaughter?

I nodded and Thomson looked at me from top to bottom, trying to find some similarity between the two of us.

-What the hell are you doing here?

-There was a trace of anger and doubt on his face. He took off his hat and scratched his head.

-I don’t know what happened to me. A strange creature attacked me and then only appeared in this place. In Hickerland.

I stood up and looked around. It looked like a city covered with lights, parties, and food. The air was sweet and people could change their appearance in the blink of an eye.

-How do they change shape?

-When you’re dead, you can see yourself any way you want, but don’t change the subject, child. What happened to you is serious, you have to talk to Dinorah right away.

-Okay.

Thomson climbed on my shoulder and I walked for a long time. There are no clocks here, no meaning of day or night. It’s like time is frozen for everyone. I could say the same about distance, when I looked back the landscape changed constantly: forests, meadows, jungles, cities of different sizes. It was as if I was touring the world in just a moment. Thomson seemed calm, but you could tell something was bothering him; Am I the reason?

I tried to recapitulate what had happened. What happened to my mother? I’m worried that she’s had the same fate as me. I took a few more steps when my foot got stuck in between brown and green mass.

-The swamp, follow the stone path and be careful; If we fall, we can’t get out of the mud.

It looked like a level of a platform video game, all that was missing was the villain following the hero, traps and would suggest a few checkpoints areas. Some branches protruded from the mud; If only I could, I’d jump on them and cross the spot.

-But if we’re already dead, what can happen? I asked.

-We would get to the lands of the scarlet eyes man. You don’t want to be there, believe me.

-My grandmother also warned me about him, “Why are you so afraid of him?”

-He jumped from stone to stone trying not to slip. Some became more pointed and others smaller.

-I don’t know how to explain it, child. He is just someone you wouldn’t want to deal with.

The floor started to shake a little.

- Don’t move, said Thomson. “Do you like whales?”

The mud from the swamp began to bubble. I trembled and ended up falling on my knees trying to hold on to the rock I was standing on. In the distance, a huge figure came out of the mud: it was a whale in pink tones that stirred everything in its path. Its body moved up and down, creating curves and pushing the mud. I was singing inside; It had a very melodious sound and a rhythm that was so ingrained in my mind that I began to hum it. I got the impression that the whale heard me and followed the song: it lifted its tail and slowly swam towards us. The song grew louder as it approached.

-Keep singing, girl. I think the whale likes it.

I raised my voice and continued the melody. It reminded me of my grandmother’s lullaby. I began to sing the lyrics:

In a swamp in the afternoon at six,

Fairies dressed in fur played,

Looking for creatures of bread and honey,

They stalk the cribs moving the carrier.

Soft shadows that steal the light

As fear looms with them

Don’t shout little girl, the fairies listen.

They could devour my little bread.

So sweet that the honey overflows

From those tears that fall

Like pearls in the sea, weep no more.

You’ll be safe.

When it was over, the whale opened its mouth. It was so big; I thought it would swallow us with a bite.

-How did you know that song?

-My grandmother sang it at night, I smiled.

Thomson looked down and was serious for a moment. I overheard him whispering, “You look a lot like Veronica.” I didn’t know what to say. Every time my grandmother’s name was in the air, it made me remember her and every trace of joy disappeared at that moment.

The whale submerged leaving its back uncovered by our side. Thomson signaled me to go up; I had a little mistrust. A pink whale swimming in mud as if it were water and singing in chords that sounded like the music emitted by the cellos. Doubtful, I climbed the whale, its skin was thick and although covered with mud it was pleasant to the touch. When my grandmother wrote about new experiences, I don’t know if she meant something like that, but I can’t wait to tell someone about it. Our whale trip ended on a coast of stone, coal, and crystals.

-Thank you very much for the ride Thomson thanked the whale.

-Good, child. Put me down, please. I put Thomson on a crystal overhang.

-Where to now, Thomson?

-All we have to do is wait.

-What? I can’t keep my arms crossed. We have to call her.

-She’s everywhere, all you have to do is wait till I get to the right place.

-There has to be another way.

-Ha! Do you think Dinorah invokes herself or something?

I was pensive for a moment.

-Just be patient, he calmed me down.

A wave of feelings passed through my body, all the way to just sit and wait. Meanwhile, I don’t know what happened to my mother or the creature that brought me to Hickerland.

-DINORAH! -I screamed and repeated Dinorah’s name until I couldn’t take it anymore. Thomson paled and tried to shut me up.

-Stop it, girl!

-DINORAH!

Suddenly an arm came out of the earth, taking me by the face, I tried to escape in vain. My feet didn’t touch the ground and suddenly it threw me hard to the rocks. I felt suffocated.

-This is bad, terrible. -Thomson ran to me, helping me up a little.

-What was that?!

Another arm came out at the other end of the coastline, pulling the rocks and creating thunders when they hit the ground.

The scarlet-eyed man has heard you.

8

The Scarlet Eyed Man

The coal ignited, fire and flames spread all over the coast and branches were ashes on contact. The giant arms settled down pulling the ground and a kind of shadow began to come out throwing flaming rocks around us. We ended up cornered and Thomson was shaking and grabbing my hair. The shadows took the form of a giant person. When I thought it couldn’t get any scarier, he opened a pair of eyes without a pupil

-Who dares to call Dinorah that way?!

The voice that came from the shadow was scratchy and echoed in my ears.

-Se... sir, excuse me. E... she’s a newcomer.

-Shut up, Thomson!

-The flames grew and the giant shadow approached threateningly. Who are you? He pointed at me.

“I’m Veronica’s granddaughter.” I could barely catch my breath after he threw me; I tried to sound safe.

-Veronica? He growled.

-I don’t understand what makes that woman so special. What reason do you have to request an audience with Dinorah? Do you feel so important to yell at her like that?

-His voice was filled with anger.

-Sir, let me explain, Thomson, lowered his head shyly, removing his hat. It was the fault of an inhabitant of Hickerland. Apparently, one who escaped and is now wreaking havoc on the earth.

-Are you saying I’m not doing my job right?!

-Angry! Are you still trying to torment the inhabitants with that look?

There was laughter, the tone of that voice sounded very familiar.

-This is none of your business, puppy.

The fire went out and the giant shadow slowly shrank to twice my height. The scarlet-eyed man was a very attractive young man. His hair was black, long below the neck. His eyes were bright and had a look with which I felt hundreds of knives piercing my heart.

-Girl? The smiling man looked like a butler from the Victorian era. He groomed his white hair backward and stopped smiling for a second. You’re not supposed to be here. I mean, how the hell did you end up here?

-That’s what I want to explain to Dinorah.

-Dinorah will punish me if she knows this.

-The smiling man seemed worried. You mustn’t be dead, it’s not your time.

-Dinorah? Punish you? Please! If you have done worse and the most serious thing that can happen to you is to remain locked in your domains. Like the time you threw a burning rock into the earth millions of years ago

- The scarlet-eyed man clenched his teeth.

That was an accident! The smiling man blushed with shame. Besides, if it hadn’t been for me, things wouldn’t be as they are now. Those giant reptiles weren’t very polite, nor intelligent, he looked away.

-That’s the problem, today is a disaster! exclaimed the scarlet-eyed man.

The smiling man and the scarlet-eyed man argued over historical issues which I would never have thought they were the cause. In the history books they mention facts that have no explanation and now everything makes sense: ancient cultures that ruled over others thanks to the shared knowledge of the scarlet-eyed man; ancient temples dedicated to gods that were representations of the smiling man; and sculptures of muses that resemble an impossible beauty among humans that were vague ideas of how they saw Dinorah. No one would believe me if I told them about this.

Thomson was still a little restless; being in front of those two gave me the creeps.

-We’ll get nowhere with absurd arguments. The scarlet-eyed man turned his back on the smiling man.

-You always say that and you’re the first to start them.

The scarlet-eyed man approached me. Without saying a word, he took me by the head and hit my face on his body. Everything went dark again.

I had a sensation similar to when a part of the body was numbed, like an annoying tickle. What is that sound? A heartbeat? It’s a very weak one, the body attempts to keep it alive.

-I’m so sorry, madam. For now, that’s all we can do.

I can’t see anything, I don’t know who’s talking.

-She’s just a girl. How could that happen to her?

Is that my mom’s voice?

-Please! Wake up, daughter! Mommy needs you!, Mommy’s crying.

-Mami, I’m fine. I’m awake. Listen to me! I tried to scream with all my might.

-I don’t want to lose you.

-Mom! Here I am!

“Hello, little girl.” That voice was very sweet but harsh. I’m sorry if the gentlemen were rude to you.

I opened my eyes slowly, barely getting used to the strange light. I felt a hand on my forehead and when I could see perfectly, was amaze at that moment.

“I’m glad you opened your eyes, my girl.” Let me introduce myself: my name is Dinorah.

9

Memories are not kept in the mind

Three times my height, a female figure of black skins so hard it looked covered in Obsidian. Her head didn’t touch her neck and floated like her torso. Her limbs were long and legs ended in sharp points. Her hands looked like marble claws and eyes: it was the most tender look I had ever seen in my life. Just looking at her, I forgot all my worries. There was so much tranquility and warmth in her being, despite her strange appearance, no one felt any sign of fear or distrust.

-Tell me, little girl, when your grandmother was talking about me, did you imagine something like this?

-No, I passed saliva; I thought you’d be something... hmmm... more human. I remained appreciating the quartz embedded on her forehead.

Dinorah smiled; she sat next to me and stroked my cheeks. I felt like a puppy in the arms of a child. Her hands ran roughly through my skin and became entangled in parts of my hair, running across my face and then down my neck. Dinorah’s smile faded softly as she placed a few strands of hair behind my ear.

“Little one, know something important.” I looked her straight in the eye. You are in grave danger.

Dinorah led me behind walls covered in carved stone. I couldn’t distinguish the illustrated figures, they reminded me of the ancient Egyptian forms of writing but with a combination of Roman figures. We came to a passage full of vines and flowers that I had never seen on Earth. The floor was covered with white sand and shells that one finds on the coasts of the sea. My feet sank and the softness of the sand relaxed me.

“Look, little one: that’s you.”

From the sand flowed water that made figures in the air. Then, through the water, I saw a person: it was me; my body was on a hospital bed and my mom was sleeping next to me.

-Your mother is very worried about you. Thomson told me a little about the incident and I want you to know that I'm very sorry this happened to you. Even with the power that concerns us, some things are beyond our control. Dinorah knelt and looked down, I beg your pardon, little one.

I was speechless and more when the smiling man and the scarlet-eyed man came in through the vines. The scarlet-eyed man boiled in rage.

-It wasn’t your fault, Dinorah, I should have taken care of souls. That is my purpose and I failed you; the scarlet-eyed man crouched approaching Dinorah.

-How could I blame my most beautiful and precious creation?

Dinorah took the scarlet-eyed man by the hands.

-Little girl, are you mad at us? Our mistakes have taken your life.

I stayed a thoughtful moment. “A mistake” Since when is death a mistake? Isn’t it supposed to be a fate that can’t be avoided?

“We all make mistakes, Dinorah.” But I doubt this is so, so don’t worry. The smiling man said it wasn’t my time yet, so could you amend it?

The eyes of Dinorah and the scarlet-eyed man shone. The smiling man studied the scene by running his tongue through his teeth. I’m sure there was something very perverse behind that smile.

-Dinorah, I think we should take the child’s word. The least we can do is correct what the fugitive has caused.

- The scarlet-eyed man helped Dinorah stand up.

“You’re right,” Dinorah nodded.

-Now that I think about it, I don’t agree. The smiling man interrupted.

-What nonsense are you talking, puppy?

-Child, do you want to go home to your mother?

I nodded my head affirmatively

-So, how about a little game?

I was a little blank; I thought they’d just return me to my body, and it’d all be over right now. For a moment I envisioned a future in which I kept sending letters to Dinorah just like my grandmother, keeping secrets from my mother and the people around me, even a nice romance when I grew up, but now...

- Hickerland is not inhabited only by the souls of the living but also by their memories. One of my responsibilities is to keep those memories in the places designated for each one. It’s a very boring job, you know? The smiling man cleared his voice and continued. I want you to find Veronica’s memories, those are very important to Dinorah because they are the first where her living image appears. You have exactly three human days before your heart stops beating. Otherwise, you will spend all eternity in Hickerland and leave your mother alone on earth. You won’t be able to keep the promise made to your grandmother. Imagine how she’ll feel when she finds out. The smiling man faked sadness.

-But Hickerland is enormous, how will I know exactly where to look?

-I’ll give you some help, replied Thomson and a surprise await you outside the gardens. But first, do you agree with the terms?

The smiling man reached out to me and I took it without hesitation. I’m not abandoning my mother.

-Excellent! One more thing: time can become your worst enemy.

-Dinorah, will you allow it? The scarlet-eyed man blushed with courage.

-I mustn’t intervene and you know it, Dinorah took the scarlet-eyed man in her arms. This will leave that girl with good memories about Hickerland and you know where those memories are kept.

The scarlet-eyed man closed his eyes and was carried away by the warmth of Dinorah’s chest.

I walked hand in hand with the smiling man as I watched Dinorah pamper the man with scarlet eyes.

-How cute they look together! Don’t you think? The smiling man noticed my curiosity.

-Dinorah seems to love him very much.

-Too much, if Dinorah had to choose between the Little Red and the entire existence of the Universe, I think you would already know the answer. We arrived at the entrance to the garden. So, back to our business, kid.

Outside the garden, there was a young girl with her back, her hair was short.

-Remember I told you I would surprise you?

The young woman turned and a large smile erupted from her lips. Thomson was on her shoulder and waved at me. The young woman ran and hugged me without me able to react.

-I missed you so much, honey! You don’t know how much!

-Who are you?

-I’m Veronica, my child. I’m your grandmother.

10

The city

I wanted to run, scream, dance desperately. I couldn’t believe to have my grandmother in front of my eyes. She looked younger, smile brighter, and with the same scent. I started crying in her arms.

-Don’t waste time, you have a lot to go through and memories to find. Before your journey begins, I must warn you. My grandmother let me paid attention to the smiling man’s words. You will go through the same dangers that Veronica went through. Your memories are in the three places you changed the first time you were in Hickerland. You’ll be pleased to know that many missed you, though not in a good way.

My grandmother spit and Thomson was just perplexed.

-What do I see on your face? Guilt, perhaps?

-My daughter, we have to go. My grandmother took me by the shoulders and turned me around. She pushed me a bit to walk.

We passed other paths I didn’t recognize. My grandmother’s footsteps were firm, although she claimed that in Hickerland you don’t pass through the same place twice unless you want to.

-Do you know where we’re going? I asked.

-Not exactly, sweetheart.

-The smiling man spoke of three places you changed on your visit to Hickerland years ago.

-I think I have the answer, said Thomson. “We have to make a stop at the weeping willow.”

My grandmother and Thomson talked about situations they lived together. I was a little jealous; it was like he knew her better than me. I do not deny it; I am only twelve years old, of which my memory only remembers since I was eight years old and only a few special moments with my family.

-That makes me think of the moment we crossed the city. My child, would you like to hear a story?

\* \* \*

Veronica argued with Mrs. Mcphire every time she came home. She took her food in silence, thanked her for the food and went up to her room to answer Dinorah‘s letters. She threw herself on the bed, leaving her shoes on.

-Where is it? Where the hell did I leave it?

Veronica leaned out cautiously at the sound of that voice. Looks like it was under her bed.

-AAAGH! Why did I take this job? Everything was easier in the garden!

-Hello?

-Human!

Veronica reached in to catch the little creature.

-Let go of me, you filthy beast! The little man screamed and kicked.

He looked like a man 30 centimeters tall. He had green eyes and orange-red hair that glowed with the light of my room. There was dirt on all his clothes. When I lifted him, his hat fell to the floor. He could barely hold it with the size of his little arms.

-I want to help you.

The creature stopped fighting for a moment.

-You, help me? Please don’t make me laugh, brat! You couldn’t do anything, not even Dinorah’s powers affect this.

-Do you know Dinorah?

-Do I know her? I work for her, child! Can you put me down?

Veronica left the little man on her bed and watched him closely.

-Tell me what you’re looking for and maybe I can help you get it.

- The Poux’s box

-What’s it like?

-It’s a box about the size of your hand, covered with ropes and wooden locks. It has an inscription on the front with the name of the sender and only one piece of shiny metal on the lid.

-Hmmm... I don’t remember seeing anything like that in my life. How did you lose it?

-I was a few tongues away from the weeping willow and slipped through a hole. That way I ended up here, underneath this big, musty-smelling thing.

-That thing is my bed. I sleep there every night.

-Well, it’s weird; we used to sleep hugging underground, but that’s not the point. The box was with me, it’s got to be around here.

Veronica and the little man moved everything in the room. Dolls, sheets of paper accumulated with drawings of years ago made with crayons. Every time she saw her old stuff, she started to feel

melancholy. She had some fuzzy memories of people in white robes and pills that Mrs. Mcphire made her take. Maybe her life wasn’t so bad, it was all a misunderstanding and that’s how Dinorah said in her letter: no one can see the same way as her.

A glow blinded her for a moment from the books stacked in a corner. Veronica moved the pile and found a small box. The Poux’s box.

It was more beautiful than the little man described; it had on all sides images of little people and winged beings. It was quite a work of art, especially the wooden locks. She touched the metal part and automatically the strings began to yield, the little locks turned and with a click, the box was ready to open.

-Hey, girl, did you find it? The little man approached.

Veronica didn’t listen when he called her, she took the lid and began to open the box slowly.

—NO! OH GIRL, LET GO OF THAT!

When opened completely, a black thickness invaded the room, revolved around Veronica and entered wildly through her mouth. Veronica wanted to scream, the pain was unbearable. It felt like her throat was burning and eyes wanted to come out of its sockets. She lost consciousness having felt a liquid slipped her face and ended up on the floor. The little man closed the box preventing all the contents from being emptied into the girl.

-Oh no. Girl, girl! Hey, you can’t do this to me! Girl!

-He climbed on her trying to find some signs of life in Veronica’s inert body.

Open your eyes. My child, open them a little. He sighed.

Veronica felt her body heavy, there was a feeling of dirt and grass between her fingers. She tried to get up; the last thing she remembered was the little man and a strange box.

- You’re finally awake! The little man threw a little sack on the ground. Try not to move much, I still don’t know how much damage the box did to you.

-The box of Poux. Where is it? Where are we?

-Now it’s just a broken and empty box, but that doesn’t matter anymore. Welcome to Hickerland! The little man gestured, pointing around. How do you feel?

-A little dizzy.

-Here, have some to eat, the little man gave her the jacket.

Veronica took out some seeds and berries of various colors. It reminded her of when Mrs. Mcphire bought her packets of lunettes; Veronica emptied them in her mouth and created a mixture of chocolate and saliva.

-I never formally introduced myself: My name is Thomson.

-I’m Veronica.

-It’s a pleasure, I think; although, it wasn’t pleasant for us to have met in a tragedy.

— Dinorah once wrote to me that best friendships come from bad things, Veronica smiled.

-Well, that was enough rest, let’s go.

— Where are we going? I don’t even know how you brought me here.

-I’ll just tell you weigh more than you look and that your bones protrude through your knees a lot. We’ll go south, find the sender of the box.

Thomson shook the dirt that permeated his pants, they had a very peculiar opaque green color. Occasionally, Thomson went unnoticed when working in the garden. Veronica got up with some effort, she still didn’t feel herself, at all. She began to feel a strange tingling in her right arm after a while turned into pain. She walked ignoring the feeling.

-Honestly, Veronica, I can’t see anything from here, would it bother you if... WOA!

Veronica was on the ground face up, from her eyes emanated a dark air that penetrated the skin of her arm; branches began to come out, her skin broken, and blood flowed everywhere. Thomson didn't know what to do. He tried to approach and cover the wounds, but his efforts were in vain with his size compared to hers. Veronica's cries drowned in her tears; the branches stopped growing and the pain slowly disappeared, though not completely.

-See... Veronica?

-Thomson, it hurts.

Branches of a tree beyond human knowledge had consumed Veronica’s arm. They grew out of nowhere and made their way between muscle and skin. It was not as thick as an acre, nor as dark as the cocoa tree.

-Can you walk?

-I think so.

-We have to hurry; Thomson climbed Veronica’s clothes.

-That way, we’ll go through the town first.

The city was lit with thousands of tiny lights. It looked like a forest full of fireflies.

-What are you looking at? Thomson growled. Come on, if we don’t hurry, I don’t know what might happen to you. You’ve never seen a city at night?

-Not this kind of cities; Veronica had a hard time walking. The branches of her arms dragged and sometimes got stuck with some roots that sprouted from the ground. Thomson was on the girl’s shoulder.

-It seems you don’t get out of the house much. Thomson held tightly to her brown hair.

-I have never left Nördlingen.

-Is that your birthplace?

-No, Mom said I was born in a hospital.

-A hospital? Hmmm... And what’s that place like?

Veronica looked down.

-It’s one of those places you don’t want to remember.

-Thomson carefully observed Veronica’s reaction.

-Oh, look! We’re almost there.

They reached a wall a little bigger than Veronica, she could climb without problems. It looked concrete with inlaid colored stones and some with unnatural shapes that compared to the size of the citizens, you’d think it took years of work.

-Stop! What’s a human doing here? A little citizen in shiny armor stood up to Veronica.

-I...

-Make way for the great Veronica, good man! Thomson recited from his comfortable view. We have come from the human world looking for Dinorah. As you can see, Veronica is under the effects of the Poux box and needs quick help.

The branch of Veronica’s arm grew a little more, they were opening more way through the flesh. Veronica complained about the pain. It shocked the guard looking at the girl’s arm. Poux’s box

was well known, no one had dared to look at it, wondering how such an instrument had ended up in the child’s hands.

— What is a citizen doing with a human?

-The name of this humble citizen is Thomson; I’m a meadow gardener. Our Lady Dinorah entrusted me with bringing the box of Poux to the scarlet-eyed man, but my carelessness led to horrible consequences for this human.

In that city, the citizens were small. There were many just like Thomson of different colors and sizes. They looked strangely at those gigantic feet that went down and up with great delicacy and care. Some burst out laughing, believing the giant was dancing; who dances without music?

For citizens, dancing without music was one of the best jokes you could act. Act?

The citizens kept coming out of their homes; the children shouted to get Veronica’s attention. Sometimes she turned and waved her branches as a sign of greeting.

-No one had ever welcomed me like this.

-Concentrate, child.

Thomson tied a lock of Veronica’s hair around his waist. The way he shook himself, Thomson lost his balance and was afraid to fall from where he was.

-This is nothing compared to what awaits you in Hickerland. Thomson looked at the sky, It was reddish.

-The scarlet-eyed man is already at work.

-Who’s this man you always talk about?

-He’s the sender of the box; I don’t know how to talk to you about him, I can’t describe him because we all see him in different ways.

-And in what way have you seen him?

Thomson looked away looking for a place to spend the night.

-Of the being, I love the most.

-And how do you distinguish the scarlet-eyed man and the being you love the most?

-You just answered that, by his scarlet eyes. Besides the fear that permeates my skin every time I’m in his presence, Thomson sighed. Go to those fields, We’ll rest there until dawn.

In the camps, there were communities of three households. It was usual for three generations of the family to live together. They come in three colors and all in order from the lightest to the darkest. The lights faded with time, leaving Veronica to depend on the Moon. She dropped herself on the trail.

-Hey! Take it easy.

-Sorry, I’m too tired, I walked too much.

Veronica looked at the sky trying to remember at least what she had done that morning before ending up in Hickerland. Maybe she was doing the same thing now, remembering; like those moments when Mom took her to school. She sighed, closed her eyes and went to sleep.

It’s been hours, minutes, It blinked and on the dark stage, a tiny spark appeared; a quiet, twinkling star.

-It looks like me.

It’s bright and surrounded by others like her. But despite that company, everyone is unknown and loneliness was turning off the light inside her.

\* \* \*

-Thomson was the one who led me to Hickerland. My grandmother pushed the brush aside, allowing me to pass. If it hadn’t been for him, I don’t even want to think about how it would have ended.

-The city seems a very nice and cozy place, I said.

-Only at night, lately, there have been many parties since the disappearance of the witch. Thomson clarified.

“Witch?” Every word that came out of my grandmother’s mouth made me felt like we were on a different tune. There are still a lot of things I don’t understand. I didn‘t feel like on the verge of death anymore, I began to believe that I was on some kind of set where they were shooting a movie with a title like The Wizard of Oz. I could be Dorothy, although my grandmother and Thomson didn’t match the other characters.

We ended up on the foothills of several hills arranged from the smallest to the tallest, which had the shapes of ice cream when you put your tongue over the tip. “The hill of the north.” That’s what Thomson called it. In a story about my grandmother, she talked about a similar place: it was about a baby abducted from her family. They lived in a small and prosperous village and when the incident occurred, all the surroundings began to perish. The fields remained infertile, the trees fell one by one and the river stopped following its course. It was a sad story, “There are no villains,” my grandmother used to say. An old woman was the one who took the baby with the pretext that the parents should not have her, taking her to a distant land where she grew up and given a different name from what the parents had given her. If I remember correctly, her name was the same as the wife of the river-god Estrimmon, from Greek mythology. An unusual name, but after saying it several times there was a sweet sensation on the lips. My grandmother told me that the name was like the place her parents had conceived her.

It was tiring to climb to the top; I ended up panting and covered in sweat. The earth was muddy and slippery, which made it even more difficult to travel. There was a lot of vegetation in our path until we reached a point where there was a clear division on the earth. It became softer and darker and the rocks were disappearing. The ground rose in various reliefs; some strange giant roots twisted around. From our position, we could see the weeping willow. It was like three trunks tied together, had not a single leaf and the bark seemed gnawed by insects. Traces of mold grew on the lower part of the trunks and some fungi appeared on several extremities.

-Veronica, the willow separated slowly, making the branches squeak. Veronica’s back.

-I’m so glad to see you again, my grandmother walked towards the willow, touching the branches that approached her.

The willow tree trunk transformed into three people: a man with many wrinkles, a woman with pronounced hips and a girl among them. Their faces were sculpted in the bark and tears flowed from their eyes like waterfalls. Small insects came out of the corners of the bark and ran through the movement.

-Why are they smiling and crying at the same time? I asked Thomson discreetly.

-The weeping willow can’t stop crying, making him maintains the constant flow of energy from Hickerland.

-There are things I still don’t understand.

-Not even Dinorah has all the answers. Thomson beckoned me to turn my attention to my grandmother. It was like everything happened because it had to happen.

The willow woman stood out a little more.

-We don’t know how to thank you for what you did for us. Our family is united forever.

-Now that you mention it, I need help, Willow. We’re looking for my memories and I’m sure there’s one around here.

-Oh, Veronica! The willow girl shone her eyes, your memories were inside my heart. The girl’s chest opened, showing only a hole. The witch knew that eventually you would look for them and she snatched it from me in one of her anger attacks. She said no one will ever put their hands on them.

-The witch? It surprised my grandmother; I thought I burned it.

-You can’t kill someone twice, Veronica, Thomson interrupted. Many think the same as you and the smiling man forbade me to tell the truth about the witch.

11

Perfect beings are easily corrupted.

The first day was ending. The sun was slowly hiding creating a soft tone in the sky and the tension among us increased. The only thing I understood of the situation was that this “Witch” was a bad omen. We stayed on the weeping willow’s lap and a cold sensation ran through the air.

-I thought the witch would never cause trouble again and that Hickerland could be a quiet place.

-Don’t be mortified, Veronica Thomson encouraged my grandmother.

-What will happen to my granddaughter? I’m so sorry, honey. My grandmother looked down and Thomson remained silent thinking. The girl in the weeping willow crossed her arms and approached softly.

-All is not lost, Veronica. Do you remember that afternoon when you found me wandering the coast? At that moment I didn’t know my name, I forgot the most important thing I had. I couldn’t even remember how the wind felt in my face. You found my identity on earth and returned me to my biological parents in Hickerland; Remember what you called me?

-Neera, you had a twin sister, a mother who taught you how to prepare the best stews, and a boy who fell in love with the light in your eyes. I still have your story in my memory, It’s one of my favorites.

-And now I’ll try to do something for you.

The roots of the Weeping Willow began to shake, you could see blue lights running through each part. It was like blood running in the veins; it connects the Willow to all of Hickerland, so I imagine that anything out of place he is the first to find out.

-Neera, what do you see? Thomson looked curious.

-Parfait, they have one of your memories, apparently, the witch didn’t get it.

-The Parfaits? Who are they? I asked.

My grandmother hugged me and kissed me on the forehead.

-It’s a tribe that lives in the south, they are an experiment of the scarlet-eyed man. Now I realize that not all my memories are painted in sugar.

-What do you mean, Grandma?

-Go to sleep, girl. We can’t waste time, I’ll give you details tomorrow.

-It’s okay, goodnight, everybody I curled up under my grandmother’s arm. Thomson lay on my stomach and used my blouse as a sheet; I wish I could have taken a picture of him.

The second day and the first news I received was that we had to walk a long way to get to where the Parfaits live. Although Thomson said the trip would be shorter than I thought, my feet already hurt.

The trip felt eternal; my grandmother no longer spoke, Thomson meditated, and I tried not to complain out loud.

-Something bothering you, Grandma?

-It’s nothing, honey.

We reached an area with colorful vegetation. The red fruits seemed to burn in flames, the blue ones shone and the green ones beat like a heart. All the colors contrasted in such a way that even the stones seemed edible: yellow hanging vines, blue and orange flowers, green barks and some branches that disjointed with their turquoise blue.

-We’re on their land, we just need to find one to take us to his village.

-Hmmm... Veronica, speaking of that... I think I forgot to tell you a little detail. Let’s say that since your unpleasant farewell with the Parfaits no one is well received here and...

My foot got stuck between some rocks and some kind of rope pulled me by hanging on one leg.

-Grandma!

-Calm down, honey!

-That’s them! This is not a good idea, Veronica.

My grandmother looked in all directions for signs of movement. She quickly approached the rope looking for where it came from, noticing a crooked trunk with somewhat chilling features. She was about to untie the rope when claws came out intending to tear off her skin or doing worse damage.

-You’re back, we knew you’d come. The witch predicted it.

Out of the weeds came a leg covered with scars, then a huge head that stopped in front of me. Her breathing was in my face. It was a Parfait; the skin was greenish with blue freckles but didn’t understand how careless she looked as if many years had passed since the last shower she took. My grandmother looked scared and confused at the same time. Thomson didn’t take a second to hide in my grandmother’s hair.

-What happened to them? Bianca... it can’t be, your face!

-Are you surprised? Is it envy that I’m prettier than you?

Bianca ran her fingers across her pink face, scars, and scabs that still had blood on them. She ended up taking one of the few white feathers from her face and pulled it with little effort. The skin of her face was a lighter green, which created a strange contrast to dry blood stains and very marked pores. There were some feathers left near the badly braided hair. Every time she spoke a rotten stench comes out of her mouth.

-Who is this little creature? The Parfait sniffed me and before I knew it, gave me a lick that left my hair as if I had put a bottle of gel on my head.

-Ugh! -I exclaimed disgustedly.

-She’s my granddaughter. Please, Bianca, put her down.

-How rude, Veronica! You didn’t even deign to introduce me to your little girl. You know what? Sheburashka has been waiting a long time for you. It would be vulgar not to introduce your granddaughter. Parfait’s laughter was grim, It sounded like a badly tuned violin orchestra.

Bianca ripped the ropes with her claws and carried me into her fist. It agitated her a lot and more when she started running. The sound of her footsteps and restless breathing echoed in my head, so much that a twinge of pain stunned my ears.

-Wait! I barely heard my grandmother’s pleas.

Bianca’s laughter was sharp, I realized she was looking at me sideways. I had a shivering sensation on my back, but it got lost with the dizziness the trip caused me. I didn’t know when we got to a village. There were no houses or buildings, they were tents made of hides, branches, and hand-woven ropes.

-Brothers! Bianca raised me in her fist, Veronica has returned and brought us a small toy!

All the Parfaits approached curiously. Some stood out with feline features; others had a coyote-like snout; eyes of different colors and feathers on different parts of their bodies. The saliva was coming out of their forked lips, some had torn the corners of their mouths. They licked each other’s wounds and spit yellowish liquids. They ripped the feathers off their faces and transformed them into ornaments and a kind of clothing tied to their body with vines. The Parfaits passed me as if

they shared a plastic figurine, sniffed and licked me, moved my clothes and touched the texture of my hair.

-We should cut his hair; the crowd was gleeful.

-No! Better yet: take out her left eye, asymmetrical things are beautiful!

-DROP MY GRANDDAUGHTER RIGHT NOW! The Parfaits stopped dry and lowered me delicately.

-Are you okay, honey? My grandmother took me by the shoulders.

-Yes, Grandma, I’m fine.

The Parfaits raised their ears and lined up in two rows. They all looked in the same direction and some beat their body like drums.

A Parfait much taller than the others, the body thin and the skin covered with live cuts. His hair braided behind, he had dead butterflies and some entangled bugs. Despite the tremors in his arms, his steps were firm and gaze was to be feared.

-Sheburashka?

-Veronica! Sheburashka’s voice echoed in the village. Tell me one reason not to give you to the witch right now.

My grandmother kept quiet.

-I knew you wouldn’t have any, do you realize the damage you did to us?

-I didn’t know this would happen.

-IT’S YOUR FAULT! -Sheburashka wrinkled his nose and showed his fangs.

-It’s not Veronica’s fault! Thomson interrupted.

-Thomson, what happened here? I asked with some fear.

-When Veronica met the Parfaits, they were a perfect tribe. They adapted to their environment; they were strong and fast. They weren’t prejudiced and weren’t human. Veronica told them about the people, gave them meanings that you use in your daily life, however, these corrupted the Parfait. Dinorah told me everything, Thomson looked at my grandmother. When you told them about beauty, greed, shame, and lies, the Parfaits did not know how to process these feelings. They were so excited at the idea of looking like humans that they tried to imbibe those ideologies.

-I don’t know what to do, Thomson. I feel bad, My grandmother covered her face.

-I’ll tell you what to do. This is hopeless and if there has to be a culprit, it was the scarlet-eyed man who did it when he tried to convince Dinorah to wipe out life on earth.

-We’ll take the memory and get out of here, Thomson’s words were soft.

I doubt anyone would have heard.

-Think, Veronica, what did you change? What is it you don’t see and was there before?

My grandmother looked in all directions. I did the same without knowing what to look for. I stopped for a moment on Sheburashka’s face. He had three eyes, but the one on his forehead was the basin empty.

-Grandma, Sheburashka’s forehead.

-You’re a very good observer, My grandmother smiled and patted me on the back.

-Bianca, call the witch. Sheburashka sat on a kind of throne made of bones. I can’t erase you forever, but she can.

My grandmother looked down. I tried to think about where the eye might be and ended up focusing on the strange necklace that Bianca had on her neck. Bianca smiled gladly when she heard Sheburashka’s words and began to walk into the vine thickets. Something inside drove me to run, I need to get that memory.

My grandmother noticed my reaction and looked for a way to distract the other Parfaits. I took one rope hanging from Bianca’s clothes, apparently didn’t realize I was following her. I pulled the rope and stood behind a tree, using it as a pulley. The feathered strings got stuck in Bianca’s legs, causing her to stumble. I got as close as I could and ripped the necklace off. The eyes of the Parfait watched me, murderers, I didn’t need another clue to realize that I had to escape. I ran dodging Bianca’s attempts to catch me. I didn’t know which way to run until I saw my grandmother running at full speed. A shower of stones, branches, and bones was trying to bring us down. It was just a matter of luck that none of them hit the target. Bianca was furious, I don’t know how things would end if they had put their hands on us.

-Come back! THIEF! THIEF!

We took a detour by a river that crossed the lands of the Parfaits. I heard screams and the sound of several blows. I knew they were on our heels, so I didn’t dare look back.

-Are you afraid of heights? My grandmother shouted.

-No!

-Well, Jump!

That feeling when you feel you’re falling into a dream was just what happened to me at that moment, only I couldn’t wake up. My grandmother wouldn’t let go of my hand and tried to prepare me for the impact. Just when I thought it would be porridge, a shadow appeared from nowhere and took us both by the shoulders.

-Do you... sir? Thomson took a breath.

The scarlet-eyed man was on us. He took us to a valley and dropped us three feet away before touching the floor.

-They will never understand how much I despise humans, especially you, Veronica.

-The scarlet-eyed man looked at us coldly. But the Parfaits are my creation, they cannot intervene with humans by order of Dinorah.

The man with scarlet eyes landed in front of us, looked up and sighed.

-I see you got the memory, he pointed out.

My grandmother took it off my hands and opened it hurriedly. She relaxed a little and took out Sheburashka’s eye. It amazed her for a moment. It was huge; it was still wet, and it felt like Sheburashka could still see us. It was tempting to keep looking, that variety of colors that reflected the iris caused me strange sensations. My grandmother held it with both hands and it was heavy. It wasn’t easy for me to escape Bianca with it.

-Thank you so much for saving us. She exclaimed.

The scarlet-eyed man averted his eyes and beckoned us to leave. We walked away with a smile of satisfaction on our faces. The second day ended and things weren’t so bad.

-You shouldn’t be so happy, the smiling man came out of the rocks of the road. There’s only one thing left to do, and it won’t be pretty.

-At least we got one; Tomorrow my granddaughter will return home and everything will go on as usual.

-Really? The smiling man asked sarcastically. I hope the witch thinks the same and gives you the other two memories.

The smiling man passed between my grandmother and me, took me by the shoulders and whispered in my ear. I hope you’re eager to meet her because she’s already waiting for you.

12

The witch.

I had a very deep feeling of a different fear from the one I had usually experienced, perhaps fear of the unknown.

-So, may I? The smiling man stretched out his hand waiting for my grandmother to give him Sheburashka’s eye. My grandmother gave it to him with a strange grimace.

-Well, I have to go, I must take this to Dinorah. I'd love to record her expression when she sees it. Maybe she'll give me a nice, strong bear hug, he raised his voice as if trying to get the attention of the scarlet-eyed man; Or better yet, kiss me. I'll ask her to give it to me on my lips, humans enjoy that kind of affection very much.

Though the scarlet-eyed man tried to ignore him, he could not hide the rage. His skin turned red every time anger passed through him.

The smiling man disappeared proudly, yet the scarlet-eyed man remained where he was. He hadn’t moved a single muscle since he made his appearance.

My grandmother and I looked at each other without knowing what was going on in the scarlet-eyed man’s mind. We lay down on the grass, but our expression “we don’t know what’s going on between those two” became more pronounced. We spent the time watching it get dark. The moon in Hickerland didn’t change like on earth, it was always full moon and it looked so huge that when I put my hand in front of me it gave the feeling that I was carrying it. We had absurd conversations and with every nonsense, we made Thomson laughed. We searched for figures in the stars until a moment came when I fell deeply asleep.

\* \* \*

-They told me about school today, honey.

I could feel my mother’s warm hand in mine.

-I had to report the situation you were in: they didn’t believe me. Not even I facing you, believe it. You wouldn’t understand how I feel, my child. It tears my soul to see you like this, inert and cold. I don’t know if you’ll be hot or cold. Sometimes you sweat and last night you didn’t stop shedding tears. I wonder if you hear me; I wonder what you’ll feel and then I felt useless. Maybe I’m failing as a mother, I don’t know how to protect you. I’m trying to do what I can, I’ve lost count of how many rosaries I’ve prayed with. I don’t know what else to do. The doctors keep telling me I have to wait, but I don’t want to. I just want to have my daughter smiling. I just want to see you play one more time.

I listened to my mother's groans of anguish. She lumped in her throat.

-You need a little rest. I’ll take care of her at night, that was my uncle Damien.

-My daughter, My little girl, my mother kept sobbing.

\* \* \*

The third day began, my grandmother woke me and handed me an apple.

-Try them, they’re the juiciest we’ve found, my grandmother bites her apple.

-Only those who work in the garden know about it, Thomson gave himself credit.

-How modest, Thomson! my grandmother blew him in the face making his hat fall.

-Hey!

I bent down, picked the little green hat and passed it to him.

-Honey, are you all right?

-Yes, grandma Why?

- Nothing.

-Tell her the truth, Veronica, yesterday we heard you crying.

-If she doesn’t want to say it, you don’t have to push her, Thomson.

I got a little thinking.

-I think I feel what’s going on with my body on earth. I listened to my mom...

-I get it, honey; Come on, let’s get the memories back as soon as possible. You need to go home.

\* \* \*

-Are you sure it’s here, Grandma?

It was a small, neglected hut. The wind blew a sign that hung from a chain in the entrance. You could read “NE... ROM... ER”, the other letters were blurred. Thomson passed saliva and hugged my hair. We had the time on us, we spent more than half a day looking for the witch’s cabin. It is funny that this witch lives in something so cliché: in the films, I saw on television, they also live in caves, cabins and always in the middle of the forest.

My grandmother hesitated a bit, however, ended up opening the door with a kick. I think she’s got the adrenaline rush. We entered cautiously, from what I see is a witch somewhat different from those I know; this one is immaculate. The cabin inside differs greatly from what you see outside. A light came on in the kitchen. My grandmother shook my hand, and we walked around trying to guess what we’d find.

-Hey? Thomson was surprised.

-What kind of joke is this?

There was a table adorned with a red tablecloth and golden details that glowed with candlelight. It was covered completely with food: steaming cuts of meat, mashed potatoes, jugs with fruit juices, cooked vegetables and a hand full of pure desserts: cakes, candies, waffles, Neapolitan flan, lemon pie and a big teapot that sounded like the whistle of a train every time a cup of tea was served.

-Surprise!

A woman came out of the gloom. She had a knee-length hair, red cheeks, and crimson lips. She wore a loose-fitting dress that covered her neck and opened from the sides, revealing her legs and bare feet.

-I’m so glad to see you, Veronica! To think the brat that caused a fuss in Hickerland has become a beautiful young woman. You must be exhausted, please be seated, dinner is served.

My stomach began to roar and mouth-watering. I haven’t eaten well in two days, but still, I was never as hungry as I was then. Something pushed me to sit at the table.

-My daughter, get up, don’t touch that.

I heard my grandmother’s voice from afar; I didn’t obey her; I sat admiring the cymbals.

-Leave her alone, Veronica. At least your dear granddaughter appreciates my food. Come on, little girl, help yourself.

My grandmother took my shoulders and tried to prevent me from touching the food. Suddenly I saw that the woman intervened throwing my grandmother and Thomson to the wall.

-The girl will only eat a little, stop being so childish and join us for dinner.

-Grandma! I ran to help my grandmother.

-Don’t you dare lay a hand on her?

-I already did, child. The woman walked away and walked around the table. I, who try to be polite and help the neediest, but I see people are very ungrateful.

-Stop deceiving us, Witch! This isn’t real. Thomson confronted her.

-You're right, this is just a distraction. This is what's going on, my grandmother was chained to a wall and Thomson inside a shiny bubble. The table was nothing more than gnawed wood; the candlelight dimmed and with it the image of the witch. Her long hair became brittle, changed color to white and covered her face. The dress dragged, and the skin hung.

-Everything was an illusion, my dear.

-Please, we just need the memories. Your problem is with me, not with my granddaughter.

-What do you think I was trying to do? There is no better punishment than the pain of seeing loved ones fall away. The witch took her hair and let the bowls of her empty eyes be seen.

Some worms came out of her nostrils and lips were so dry that when she closed her mouth, they couldn’t cover what was left of her teeth. The witch took out of a drawer a jar with dark content.

-Don’t look, daughter! Whatever you do, just don’t look.

I closed my eyes at that moment, heard the jar open and a foul scent rent the air.

-What’s wrong with eating a snack? I just realized you are running out of time.

I heard the witch chew something, creaked at every bite. I opened my eyes a little, trying to appreciate what was going on. The witch placed on the table a heart covered with branches, still beating and shining like the weeping willow. She left a key next to her; it was big compared to the one we used in my house. It was rusty and as soon as it touched the wood on the table a cloud of dust spread in the air.

-Do you want the memories? Go ahead, take them. The witch sat on a rocking chair. I won anyway.

Ten.

My grandmother struggled to get rid of the rusty chains.

Nine.

The witch began to laugh and behind her, you could see the image of my body in the hospital. My mother was shaking me and some people were taking her out of the room.

Eight.

My grandmother struggled to let go and threw herself into the memories.

-We have to go. Thomson, call the smiling man!

Seven.

The witch took me by the back and put her hands on my face. She kept pulling me into the dim light.

Six.

My grandmother was desperately trying to reach me.

Five.

-Grandma!

Four.

I stretched my arm.

Three.

Thomson’s face was covered in tears.

Two.

I began to lose track of it.

One.

13

Reality

I woke up on the floor of my grandmother’s room. The drawer where the cards were supposed to be, was empty. Everything was half dark, I turned on the lights in my house and looked for something to tell me that what happened was not just an illusion. The lock began to move and my mother came through the front door. Was it all a dream?

-Daughter, what happened to you? Your hair’s all messed up.

-Mommy! I threw myself at her.

Her image crying for me in the hospital came back to my mind. My mom was surprised and put her arms around me.

-I love you, mom.

-I love you too.

Since that night I have had strange dreams: my grandmother appears in them, however, not the one I know, but the little girl who caused the uproar in Hickerland many years ago.

My mother noticed that I don't sleep well and frequently tried to persuade me to visit a doctor. I'm afraid she'll find out what's going on with me. I'm afraid of the simple fact that she mentions the word hospital.

The day before, my mom made me take sleeping pills. As much as I tried not to close my eyes, they fell, and I sank into a dark, heavy dream.

-I have a big problem, Rojito will try to lock me up again, I heard a voice nearby, but it was worth it. It was a lot of fun, don’t you think?

-Smiley man?

To you, my dear little reader:

I hope you enjoyed this story the same way I enjoyed pulling the strings to create it. You might ask: What do I have to do with this? What did I do to provoke it? The answer is very simple, and I think you should pay attention to every word in this book. Can you guess who I am now?

I’m locked up as a punishment for something I just did to hang out. Rojito is more than furious now and will be angrier if he knows that I kept the memories inside that little girl’s head. I think Dinorah can hear my laughter from here. You should laugh with me, wouldn’t you like to hear more stories? Well, now pay attention to your life, because that’s a new story of which you’re the main character. Don’t be afraid, I won’t put my spoon in this time (or maybe I will). But I assure you will never be bored again now that you know that no matter where you go or do, I will always be there…

Enjoy it before he comes for you and ends up in Hickerland.

With affection,

The smiling man.