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Spring 2022

## Y Seguimos Volando

Gabriela Sabogal  
*Bard College*

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Y Seguimos Volando

Senior Project Submitted to  
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by

Gabriela Sabogal

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Wooooohooooooo :>







## Table of Contents

Part One.....	1
Divide and Conquer.....	2
Twelve Grapes.....	10
R-ah-s.....	16
Arepas.....	25
Supersalad.....	39
The Happy Face.....	47
Soap for Dinner!.....	56
Part Two.....	63
Tums.....	64
Feijoa.....	70
A Black Dress.....	75
Oranges.....	80
El Único Consuelo.....	81
Coca-Cola.....	84





## Part One

*“En Colombia, nunca te vas de la casa.”*



*Divide and Conquer**December 28, 1995**Gadsden, Alabama*

She couldn't hear the cars.

Her eyes focused on the ceiling above her. Stains glossed its beige surface; pale light echoed against the surface. She blinked. The right side of her skull was pounding. She could feel it in her teeth.

She held her breath.

She still couldn't hear them.

Not a single car.

She became aware of the body next to her like an afterthought – like a reminder. His breaths were jutting outwards aggressively. The snores were loudly reverberating against their mattress. Her gaze shifted from the light, and to his face.

His rumbles gave a momentary pause.

She craned her ear towards the window, but no whispers of life approached her.

The snoring erupted against the silence once more.

She exhaled, and pulled her body into a seated position.

As she stood up, a spiral of light reflected from the window. She walked to it, watching the cars tread onward slowly. She leaned forward to hear them, but the rustling of leaves and chirping of birds seemed to be all the world had to offer her.

It was almost as if the cars were being muted by the windowpane.

Maybe the cars here are built differently, she thought.

She spared another glance at the man sleeping, this time studying him.

She looked at his thin frame, black hair; his pale skin was swallowed by the beige wall.

Her feet carried her into the other room, and the emptiness of it twisted her throat into a knot. None of it had really given her a moment's doubt; a hesitating step.

But she was looking at a barren room and couldn't hear the cars and the man who was sleeping was a stranger to her. Doubt started building a home within her.

He knew she was watching him.

He was a light sleeper and felt her move from the mattress. He felt her stand near the window; felt her pausing. When he felt her leave the room, he squinted until his eyes adjusted to the light.

He blinked.

He exhaled.

He felt his stomach groan.

The aching increased as he sat up; as he stretched. It had been his plan but the rumbling of his stomach was seeping regret through him; he could be eating his father's arepas right now. There was nothing in this room, save a window and a bathroom. Their suitcases were laying in the corner. His guitar was propped against the wall.

If he squinted, it looked like another person.

He heard his wife making noises in the other room.

Wife.

The word rang both hollow and true; he hadn't even known her two months ago. He sighed, craving scrambled eggs; craving anything to fill his stomach. He felt his dry lips, and realized he was equally parched. His body was practically empty.

She heard him stand from the mattress; watched him approach tentatively from the other room, eyes red from the traveling. He seated himself next to her on the carpet. He blinked, noticing the small paper in front of her. She was working on a list. He rubbed his eyelids, yawning. She could hear his stomach grumbling.

“Buenos días, Pato,” he said groggily.

Pato smiled, “Buenos días, Gabo.”

The list was split up into multiple categories.

Pato guided her husband through their necessities slowly, pointing to each item with a small pencil. Gabo could only blink and listen; in his mind, he was still dreaming.

*Platos, Cubiertos, Mesa, Carro, Ollas, Mantel, Sofá, Sábanas, Cama, Cojines, Cobijas, Tapete,*

*Cosas de Limpieza, Champú / Acondicionador, Jabón,*

*Plátanos, Queso, Arroz, Huevos, Maicena, Jugo de Naranja, Leche, Café...*

Ay carajo, Gabo thought.

Pato and Gabo walked inside of the store, the air conditioning spreading chills across their skin. Pato rubbed her arms, grabbing a cart from the side and pushing forward. A woman smiled at them from the counter. Gabo nodded, catching up with his wife as she pulled out her list.

The two had never been to a Goodwill before in their lives.

The entrance alone held endless racks of clothing; the shoes had an entire section to themselves. To the right, they could see the home goods portion of the store. Reused books and vinyls and even curtains were shoved together, as though they made up a category.

Gabo gulped at the sheer amount of *things*. His eyes could barely keep up with it all.

The closest thing to it in Bogotá were the markets of “La Pulga,” and that was ordinarily outside in makeshift tents with local jewelry and pottery. Local vendors would come and sell fruits and handmade ceramics and it was nothing like this ventilated recycling store.

Pato and Gabo gazed at their task with fearful determination.

They decided to divide and conquer.

Pato tackled the larger items. She took on the table, the carpet, the couch; she even found them a lamp. She didn't know many words in English, but the little knowledge she possessed seemed to be enough. Pato pointed the items out to the person behind the counter, and he grunted as the items were lifted. Biting the eraser-end of the pencil, she would cross things off or add them whenever she remembered something else. She scrambled back and forth between the items and the cart, where Gabo was compiling his own items.

She gazed at her notepad, frowning. An essential item was missing. As she looked around, gazing beneath picture frames and behind stained armchairs, she spotted it hidden near

the back. Pulling it out with a grunt, she blinked at the foldable table. It was dark blue and seemed good enough for their space.

Gabo searched for the silverware, the table cloths, and the blankets. He wandered down the aisles that smelled vaguely of old soap. He came upon the home section, where old silver spoons and forks lay collecting dust in a glass container. Scooping them into his arms, without checking the price, he hurried back to his wife.

She nodded in approval at the sight of the silverware, so he gently dropped them into their cart.

Little by little, they began collecting small pieces of recycled memories for their new life. It did not fail to escape Gabo how strange it was to hold cups that were not his mother's, or tablecloths without her embroidered flowers. Even the napkins seemed wrong; they were too flimsy. Items he had grown up with his entire life were now suddenly missing and though he knew it was silly, purchasing new silverware was strange to him.

Pato felt the pang in her chest at the sight of the thin table being placed in the backseat of their car – her mother's table was wooden and proud. She had not anticipated missing something so trivial. Her eyes welled with tears; she quickly dismissed the thoughts and pulled out the list again.

As they drove through Gadsden, their eyes peaked in interest.

The town was outstretched with old buildings and shops and restaurants. Gabo sat up straight in his seat, interested in the different stores. He gaped at the endless array of Chinese restaurants, the outlet malls and small coffee shops.

Pato pointed out a pizza place, called Pizza Hut, and they went inside.

After eating a month's share of food, they set off to their apartment.

Their new belongings clattered in the trunk.

“Todavía necesitamos...” Pato began, looking through the trunk as her husband nearly missed a stop sign.

“¿Falta más?” he groaned.

“Pues, si no quieres un sofá, está bien-”

“No seas así,” he muttered, turning left.

“¡Era para la derecha!” Pato shouted, pointing to the turn they missed.

He whirled towards her incredulously. “¡No me dijiste a tiempo!! ¿Cómo se supone que debo saber eso?”

“Pues no puedo hacer todo yo, Gabo,” Pato sighed loudly, searching for another way to turn around.

“¿Tú quieres manejar?” he snapped, pulling into an outlet mall.

Pato glared at him, opening the car door and peering up at the foreign stores around them.

She blinked.

Gabo climbed out as well, crossing his arms; he waited for her rebuttal.

“Mira,” she pointed at a large store in front of them.

They stared curiously, watching a family bring out carts loaded with household items.

Gabo closed his car door.

“¿Qué es Walmart?”



“Okay,” Pato groaned as she lifted the table from the trunk. “No podemos invitar a gente a nuestro apartamento.”

Gabo frowned, “Por qué?”

“Por seguridad. No podemos confiar en nadie, ¿okay?”

His quizzical look intensified. “¿Seguridad de que?”

She closed the trunk, crossing her arms.

“Somos Colombianos, y estamos en los Estados Unidos, Gabo. Si alguien trae droga, o algo, nos podrían regresar a Colombia. Puede ser peligroso, ¿entiendes?”

Gabo glared at his feet as he slipped cup after cup into his open arms. He silently followed her up the stairs of the small apartment complex.

The whole of it was surrounded by a black gate, and even that was a generous word for the unsteady fence. They passed a neighbor, who smiled at them as he lit a cigarette. Pato kicked the door open, and they nearly dropped all of their new belongings on the stained carpet.

They started with the table.

After propping it in the center and covering it with a thin tablecloth, they began unpacking the silverware. Pato washed the forks and knives as Gabo tried to maneuver the couch through the door frame. He hummed a song to himself as he slipped their cleaning products under the sink; Pato tapped her foot as she organized the fridge.

The empty space soon began to flesh itself out into an apartment.

Gabo brought out his camera and began taking pictures, asking his wife to pose with the table and in the kitchen. She laughed, smiling widely as he turned on the flash.

After the couch was placed in front of the table, Gabo began humming a song again. He spotted the list, with most of the items crossed off, and grabbed it. Pato watched as he jotted something at the bottom.

He went into the kitchen for an orange juice, and she peered at the piece of paper.

A drawing of a snail looked up at her.

*Twelve Grapes*

*December 1995  
Gadsden, Alabama*

Gabo reached for the pre-cooked ham, aiming to throw it into the cart from where he was standing.

“¡Oh!” He shouted in excitement as it soared through the air.

Pato watched him with silent impatience as the can ricocheted against the cart and flew through the aisle. It nearly hit a toddler who was ogling at the grown man; she watched her husband glow red and chuckle nervously.

He ran to the fallen delicacy, hands wrapping around the injured can, and rushed it back towards Pato. She had already begun moving on, snatching a can of mashed potatoes and another can of sweet beans. He reordered them by height, nodding in approval. She chuckled, pushing the cart forward.

They continued aisle after aisle, musing silently over the items and checking their prices one time; four times. Gabo was growing bored with the whole affair, so he brought out his camera and told his wife to smile next to the frozen section. It was then that he spotted a few festive paper hats hanging near the produce.

He pointed to them, “¿Qué te parece?”

Pato smiled, “Bueno, rico.”

Gabo tossed them, along with a few red balloons that would go nicely taped to the wall. Maybe he would even hang some from the ceiling.

His eyes studied the brand names around him, sounding out the syllables in his mouth. The words felt heavy and fat. Almost like he was chewing on too much gum; it was a sticky sensation. He still felt at a loss with the conversations echoing and bouncing around him. He leaned into it, trying to hear it and understand it. Any of it at all. But the words were not words at all and so he focused on the letters on the cans and the products.

At least that was something familiar he could cling to.

He paused. There was an entire aisle dedicated to candies and chocolate. Gabo wondered how much fatter he would be if he had grown up here.

Pato felt her mouth water at the chocolates and sweets, the little cookies and packaged cakes with sugar creme fillings. Her mother would have been shocked by the sight of it. Her brothers would have gotten sick stuffing themselves full with handfuls of it. She sighed; she would return and buy some chocolates later.

The two of them crossed through the aisle known as the *International Aisle*.

Gabo quizzically studied the various kinds of noodles, while Pato blinked curiously at something called *kimchi*. Not moments later, they both came across the Goya section.

“Chiquis, ¡mira!” he shouted, pointing at the arepa maizena.

It was in a yellow bag with a woman’s face printed on the front. It was stuffed tightly between Jumex cans of mango juice and tortillas. Gabo excitedly noticed the bag was not terribly expensive; his stomach almost rumbled in anticipation. He had not eaten an arepa in a few days, and his belly was beginning to notice.

“Compremos de una vez, ¿no? Puedo hacerlas mañana si quieres,” Pato exclaimed, equally excited. She grabbed a bag and placed it gingerly within their cart. Gabo propped the cans around it, almost protectively.

As they were checking out, the cashier said something to them and they nodded and smiled. Nodded and smiled.

Gabo’s leg was bouncing as he waited for his wife to finish getting changed. He was wearing his best clothes; an oversized suit and tie. His shoes were freshly polished and hair lightly oiled; he slicked it back and placed a party hat over the curls.

His wife walked out of the bathroom, smiling timidly; she was wearing a cream-colored sweater and dress pants.

“Te ves muy bonita,” he smiled.

“Tu más,” she laughed. As Pato walked over to the kitchen, Gabo brought out the camera and snapped a few pictures. She giggled at him, their wedding photo just barely making it in the frame. It was propped against the counter.

He took a few more and handed her a party hat. She threw it on as he grabbed the forks and knives. He placed the plastic utensils over the napkins; forks on the left, knives on the right. Just like his mother taught him.

Gabo brought out small streamers and threw them over the table. With a fearful inhale, he blew up the balloons, praying that they wouldn’t pop in his face.

Meanwhile, Pato took the ham out of the oven and began opening the cans of mashed potatoes. She scooped the mush into a pan and started heating it up, listening to her husband retell an old story. She nodded in remembrance, pouring some soda for herself and taking a sip.

A loud popping sound interrupted his words sharply.

“PUTA!” Gabo screamed.

Pato turned, yelping in fear; he was hovering over an overinflated balloon. His fingers trembled as he picked it up, tossing it into the garbage.

“¿Qué te pasa?” she half-shouted, clutching her chest. “Pensé que algo te pasó.”

“Me dan miedo los globos,” he murmured, looking at the only two remaining balloons. They were taped against the wall. It’s missing something, he thought. Gabo scooped one of his pens and began decorating the napkins; he drew little faces, a small snail. He colored flowers on one, and hills on the other.

He sketched a mouse on a spare napkin, placed in the center of the table. That did little to fix the grim setup, but it would have to do.

“¿Me ayudas, porfa?” Pato called.

Gabo nodded, stepping towards her; on the countertop, the premade meals had been heated and were steaming. He poured the canned beans over a small bowl. The premade mashed potatoes were scooped into other bowls, while the premade ham was dropped on a Walmart plate. They carried their New Year's feast toward the table, where the mouse napkin had fallen to the carpet.

Pato sat across from him with a sheepish grin cornering her features. Gabo chuckled as they served themselves small portions, taking tentative bites. Pato frowned at the texture of the ham, and Gabo choked on the sour beans.

They glanced at each other.

“Feliz Año Nuevo,” Gabo said with a chuckle.

Pato laughed along with him, nodding, “Feliz Año Nuevo.”

They poured out champagne and dropped their twelve grapes inside, just like they always did. They wrote a list of resolutions on a small piece of paper.

Pato wondered if the people in her neighborhood back home were walking around the block, suitcase in hand. She wondered if her sister had finally worn the yellow underwear. She wondered what her mother had cooked. Oh, if only she had her mother’s cooking now. Pato sighed and it echoed through her chest. Nothing could have prepared her for the absence of her mother’s food.

Gabo tried picturing his neighbors clutching onto their cash as they celebrated the upcoming year. His mind sketched a portrait of his shy sister, of his brother’s rowdy jokes; he thought of the farmers that were almost his family. What were they doing now, he wondered.

The two took pictures of one another and chewed on the champagne-covered grapes. Pato screamed in laughter as Gabo tried catching them with his open mouth; he rarely caught one.

In the small silences, they thought and remembered.

They thought of Bogotá, and how the streets seemed to tremble as the clock struck twelve. How the houses boomed as families wept and family members drunkenly kissed one another.

The apartment complex was silent as 1995 ended, and a new dawn began to gently surface through their windowpane.



R-ah-s

*March 1996  
Gadsden, Alabama*

“No me jodas estos gringos mamones como tragan-”

“*Hey, can we get some more chips over here?*”

“*Coming!*”

His body was a flurry of motion, white shirt tucked into oversized jeans. Greasy black hair whipped through the kitchen and out again without a second to pause; thin arms carried a tray of plates and drinks. Hot salsa fell on his skin and he did not flinch, because the table of fat Americans were waiting for their Jarritos. His hands tossed out small bowls of guacamole, plates of steaming chimichangas and melted queso. A few minor setbacks along the way included dropping a few chips on a toddler’s head and nearly slamming headfirst into Alejandro, but that was the worst of it.

Table Six is in need of a refill, he thought, eyes scanning the orange room.

The colorful cut out streamers hung too close to his eyelids.

He often thought about tearing them down.

Table One was nearly finished, which was good.

Table Four was taking twenty goddamn years to pick something.

They’ll end up choosing steak, he thought – most of the inexperienced customers picked something universally similar to what they knew.

*“Excuse me!”*

He whirled around, propping open his dazzling smile and approaching Table Three, whom he had unwittingly neglected.

The woman, who he had nicknamed *ostrich*, gazed at him expectantly.

*“We were just wonderin’ if you could tell us what sou-paw-pill-uh is!”*

Her children looked like even smaller ostriches.

One of them had the bluest eyes Gabo had ever seen.

*“Ah, yes, so...paipilla,”* he murmured, racking his brain for an answer; his eyes searched the menu for the usual descriptions, but there was nothing.

Fuck.

*“Well...it is a sort of....one moment, please.”*

He walked toward Daisy, who was busy yelling at one of the cooks from the outside of the kitchen.

*“¿Qué es una sopaipilla?”* he asked her, ignoring the snickers coming from the cooks.

She gave him a look. *“Ay Gabo. Es como un postre que es... Bueno, diles como: ‘A fried pastry.’”*

Gabo nodded, *“Fried....okay okay, gracias.”*

The table of ostriches were waiting with surprising patience, and he cleared his throat.

*“It is a fried pastry.”*

The woman nodded, *“I see, I see. And would you recommend it?”*

He had never eaten a sopaipilla in his entire life. *“Yes, yes, very very good!”*

The woman smiled.

Gabo relayed the order in the kitchen, leaning against the countertop. Far ahead, on the other side, he watched his wife speak to a new incoming couple. She was laughing loudly. He sighed, stretching his aching arms.

“Pinche débil,” one of the cooks laughed at him.

He scoffed, rolling his eyes at them.

“Ya vete a llevarles esto, cabrón. Pa la mesa cinco,” another gruffed, jutting his chin toward the tray. It held five plates. Gabo did not have time to muster another sigh and clumsily shuffled the tray over his shoulder. With a grunt, he managed to stand upright and exited the kitchen, exhaling through his mouth. The tray wobbled slightly, and he cursed under his breath as he reached the table.

If the family noticed his struggling, they did not reveal it.

“*Here....*” Gabo trembled, lowering the tray over the table. It settled gently atop the plastic tablecloths. Unable to wipe the sweat from his brow, he handed them their dishes. Ending with a quick “*Enjoy!*” he began heading back towards the kitchen.

“*Excuse me!*”

Table Four. Finally.

“*Yes, hello! What can I get for you?*” His breathing was winded.

The man cleared his throat, “*Would y'all be able to fix me up a nice salad?*”

Gabo blinked. The customer continued to smile unwaveringly.

He looked up, searching for Pato, but she was speaking to someone. Daisy was nowhere to be seen. Frantic, he brought out his notepad and wrote down *fix up salad*.

“*Yes, yes,*” he nodded, unsure of what that was or how to do it.

“*Great,*” the man smiled. He was red in the cheeks.

“*And, could I have some quesadillas,*” the man’s wife chirped.

“Okay...” Gabo scribbled away.

“*Could I also have some r-ah-s?*”

He blinked. “*What?*”

“*R-ah-s.*”

“*Okay, of course, of course,*” Gabo nodded, jotting down *r-ah-s*.

As he returned toward the kitchen, he saw Daisy headed for the other side of the room.

“Oye!” he half-whispered, but she continued forward.

“Que onda, Gabo,” Rigoberto shouted from the kitchen. The burly man flung a towel over his shoulder, crossing his arms.

“¿Qué significan estas cosas?” Gabo asked, handing him his notepad.

The owner squinted at the paper in slight confusion.

“*Rass? Fix?*”

Gabo nodded, heaving a sigh of relief as Daisy noticed their mirrored glances of confusion.

“¿Qué les pasa?” she asked, smiling at a few customers.

“Ni idea qué quieren,” Gabo repeated, showing his notepad.

Daisy grabbed him by the arm, hauling the thin man toward Table Four once more. The customers glanced up at them in surprise.

“*Hi, sorry, could you repeat the order for me please?*” Daisy asked warmly.

“Sure,” the woman said. “*My husband ordered a salad, and I ordered some quesadillas with a side of r-ah-s.*”

“*Okay, great, thank you!*” Daisy said, leading Gabo back toward the kitchen.

Gabo watched her features form into a gentle smile.

Daisy sighed, “*Pidieron arroz, Gabo.*”

“*¿Qué?*”

“*Rice. Es que es por el acento, no te preocupes. Yo sé que puede ser difícil de entender.*”

Gabo’s ears brimmed with red, “*Y ¿qué significa fix a salad?*”

“*Significa hacer una ensalada. Make a salad. Fix es como make, ¿sabes?*”

She left him with a pat on the back, and he leaned against the wall.

His wife was squinting at him from across the room.

She waved. He waved back.

Gabo glanced at the clock; it was only noon. Six hours to go.

Months earlier, the two had gone to Villa Fiesta for lunch.

The exterior was painted orange, which caught their attention.

They were ravenous.

They had been seated by a friendly woman; their table was settled comfortably in the middle of the room. Pato’s fingers glossed over the plastic menus, which were the large kind that split open in the middle and stretched further than the table did.

The food was foreign to both of their stomachs: burritos, pollo oaxaca, enchiladas chipotle, fajitas. Pato, too hungry to ask what everything was, ordered the Burrito Cancún, which was only \$9.00. Gabo ordered a Burrito Mexicana; that was \$7.00.

“Okay,” Pato began, pulling out a small journal.

Gabo straightened his spine as their table was quickly garnished with a hefty bowl of tortilla chips and guacamole and salsa. He instantly dipped a chip into the sauces, flinging it into his mouth and crunching loudly.

Pato bit the end of her pencil, a narrow shadow forming between her brows.

“¿En dónde pensabas buscar trabajo?” she asked.

Gabo cleared his throat, “Pues no sé, porqué tiene que tener horas flexibles. ¿En el centro comercial? ¿Has visto si tienen trabajos en la iglesia?”

“Pues, no creo que tengan algo ahí, gordo,” she murmured, frowning at their lack of funds. The number underlined at the bottom of the page blocked her senses so strongly that she did not notice the heaping plate of food being settled before her.

It was only as Gabo was nudging her with his elbow that she looked up at him.

“Está bien, Chiquis. Lo vamos a averiguar,” he said in what he thought was a reassuring voice.

She watched him as he calculated how to best eat the Burrito Mexicana, which was, objectively, much too big. It was dipped in green sauce, overflowing in thinly sliced pieces of jalapeño, melted cheese, rice, beans, tomatoes, lettuce, and beef.

She thought it was too much.

And then she noticed her own plate.

The Burrito Cancún was slathered in dark red sauce, stuffed with carne asada and decorated with a heavy drizzle of sour cream.

Pato suddenly forgot the numbers on the paper and grabbed her fork.

It was only when the two had worked their way through the first half of each respective burrito that they heard the accents. They were lingering voices, carrying through from the other end of the room. Pato heard them first. Her spine straightened, she turned in her seat; her eyes wandered until she spotted the culprits.

“Gabo,” she poked his leg.

“No me hagas eso,” he muttered, eyes solely on the food.

“Mira.”

He looked up to where his wife was pointing to, her lips pursed. The accents rang loudly as their chismes were aired around for the entire restaurant to hear. A stout woman walked to them and scolded the two; they instantly silenced, but not without a final giggle.

“Son colombianas,” Pato said.

“Pues sí, eso veo,” Gabo replied, unimpressed.

Sighing, she turned back to her food and the underlined number on the paper caught her attention.

She glanced back up at the Colombians.

Almost instantaneously, Gabo came to the same realization.

“¿Y si trabajamos aquí?”

The nine hour shifts were not every day. But the thought of seating herself in the classroom tomorrow, trying to continue improving her English, didn't leave Pato with anything to look forward to. She smiled as customers passed her; she nodded as they left the restaurant without another word. Sighing, she leaned against the stand; her lower back was prickling angrily.

Behind her, Pato watched her husband's frenzied movements trailing a heavy wind. She liked seeing him work, because he never looked at her when he did it. He was on his own, talking to strangers and making use of his blessed extroverted nature. She liked it when he played the guitar for guests, because they always made extra tips that way. Or when their regulars would show up and Gabo would laugh at their jokes, though Pato knew he didn't understand a thing.

She played a part in it, too.

Pato was a good hostess.

She made sure Gabo got the best customers. She sometimes analyzed their shoes and their watches. Sometimes their bags, only those were hard to spot; fake bags were difficult to tell apart from the rest.

If it meant he had to run around a little more, that was fine with her. He was good at getting them extra tips.

She smiled and welcomed another family that came in. After returning to her spot, she stretched her back some more. Pato hated it when those skinny blonde white women came by, asking for "Gaw-bow" as their waiter. They tipped well, but she loathed their smug grins as he played guitar for them.



It didn't entirely matter, though, because they rarely came by anymore and Pato had bigger things to worry about.

Like what would happen if the Migra came by and saw them working illegally.

The door opened.

Pato smiled.

## Arepas

*May 1996**Gadsden, Alabama*

He had never said it aloud, but his father's tasted differently. They were made thin and left on the burner for half an hour, the cheese melting once they were done cooking. They were crispy near the edges, but softer once his teeth sunk into the middle parts. The good parts. Fresh eggs and steaming hot chocolate with a piece of bread would be placed on the side; he used to drop pieces of cheese into the steaming mug. It tasted better that way, his father always said. The man was right, of course. Sometimes he would drink orange juice if he was craving it. But most often it was hot chocolate. And the arepas. The steaming, hot, arepas. He could always taste his father's cooking if he tried remembering hard enough.

She made them how her mother had taught her: a bowl of warm water, generous amounts of salt tossed within. The flour (de la marca "PAN") was tossed gently until it dissolved to create a soft dough, wet to the touch. She shredded cheese and mixed it into the cornmeal until it was practically a part of the dough. Her hands would knead the mixture until the butter was sizzling. As the cornmeal touched the pan, the smell of her mother's arepas would return her home. For a brief moment, and then the feeling would be gone. Because try as she might, the taste was never the same. She would flip them over the butter, watching the dough begin to cook into a dark yellow; a light orange from the melted cheese. She would serve them with scrambled eggs and orange juice and with every bite, she would feel disappointment. And she would feel home.

The smell of every morning was the smell of arepas.

So, naturally, she made them most days for her and her husband.

Before their English classes at Gadsden Community College, after their fights, before their shifts at Villa Fiesta.

As they took their first bites every day, staring at the carpet and the walls of their small apartment, the reminders of familiarity would burn their fingers from the butter that was still sizzling on the flour. She would wrap one in a napkin and walk to the stove and watch the other two that were still cooking above the medium flame.

And she would wait.

No matter how many times he watched her do it, he could not mimic her method. As he copied her, wrapping his own too-hot arepa in a paper napkin, he would watch her study the ones cooking. He often found that he could not stay still, watching in dreaded anticipation as the fire sputtered beneath the premature arepas. His fingers would twitch at his side. He would stand, trying to flip them because he had already finished the first one and he was hungry for god's sake.

*Leave them alone* she would say, chuckling.

He would sigh – he hated disappointing her.

He always flipped them early. The top would be a raw, doughy mass of white. Not even a crust would be formed around the exterior.

And so, he forced his method to change. For the sake of their breakfasts.

One morning, it dawned on him that he could simply turn up the heat. In his groggy, half-awake mind, he found this logic to be somewhat understandable: more heat meant halving the time of arepas cooking. Which meant more time for more arepas.

So, he turned up the heat to the highest temperature the stove provided. Tapping his foot in excitement at his new discovery, he would take the spatula, and peek underneath to check the progress. And, distracted by his efforts to secure a single arepa to impress his wife, he would wander around their small apartment to do a routine inspection.

He would check the time, change his shoes, add more gel to his hair. Sometimes, he would rearrange a few things in the refrigerator, or even start drawing on the napkins over the countertop.

It was only the smell of burnt butter that jolted him toward the burner, cursing profusely. He would flip the arepa over; the black, burnt flour made his eyes water. His wife would emerge from their bedroom, hand outstretched to take the spatula from him. He would shake his head, telling her to stay away, that he would take care of breakfast; that he absolutely, for whatever reason, did not need her help.

No, he most certainly did not.

Today, the cycle was repeating itself.

Gabo's mouth exhaled dozens of curses, filling up the empty apartment with more life than it had carried in the last couple of days. In the last couple of weeks.

He raked a hand through his black hair, glaring at the stupid stubborn *thing* on the pan. It looked at him almost mockingly, not cooking fast enough. Sighing, he rolled another piece of dough through his fingertips, shaping the premature arepa into a flatlike disc. Mixing too much cheese into it, Gabo lay his second attempt gently over the burner. The cheese began to turn brown almost instantly.

He sniffed the air.

The butter had burnt again.

A small plume of smoke had begun to slowly rise from beneath both arepas. With a start, Gabo lowered the heat in hopes that their breakfast could be salvaged. He did not stop cursing as he slid a spatula beneath the charred dough; did not stop as he flipped it to the other side.

Pato, keeping herself hidden to avoid humiliating her husband further, sat shuddering on their bed. She covered her mouth, silent laughter bringing tears to her eyes. He screamed “JUEMADRE” and a snort escaped her; he softly murmured “puta madre” and she clamped her hands tighter. Pato wished that she could see what he could be doing to cause such a great commotion.

To be fair, it could be pretty much anything.

After a moment, the noise halted altogether and was replaced by a silence that suddenly worried her. She stood from the bed, slowly pulling the doorknob; Pato’s head peaked out from within their room. She watched in silence.

He crossed his arms, glaring at the burnt arepas on the stove.

They were better than the ones he usually made, but that was not saying anything at all. Gabo knew that if he presented nothing for breakfast, Pato would take it upon herself to make something for the two of them. Something edible.

The four burnt arepas lay on two separate plates.

*Pathetic*, he thought.

He wondered what he could do to hide his shameful creations.

Pacing to the fridge, he quickly grabbed the last two eggs remaining in the carton and cracked them over the pan. They began to sizzle almost instantly; the burnt butter’s stench

revisited the apartment. In a panic, Gabo cut a second slice of butter. Running it over the scramble that had begun to spread outward, he began to stir the yellow mess together.

They were cooking quicker than he wanted.

He ran his fingers through the cabinets, searching for the small ceramic bowl.

He sighed, cursed, then cleared his throat. “¿Bebe?”

A beat, then a slightly muffled, “Sí, ¿bebe? ¿Te ayudo con algo?”

“¿En dónde está la sal?”

He knew she was holding in her laughter as she said with a strangled voice, “*On the fridge.*”

*Fridge.*

It was one of the damned words he never remembered, and she knew it.

He sighed, then shouted “¿En dónde?”

Pato put her notecards aside for a moment, looking at the window in front of their bed. Outside, she could just barely hear the cars. They were so soft from inside her bedroom. Her husband cleared his throat once more. She knew that she was aggravating him, but if he could remember English words like *fridge* during a moment of crisis, then maybe they were not completely lost.

“Encima...del...*fridge*,” she said, slowly.

She heard a muffled curse from the other room.

“Pato, no me jodas, ayúdame porfa.”

Pato sighed, defeated; “*Refrigerator.*”

“*Ahhh jes jes, refree-ger-er-torr,*” Gabo mumbled to himself, locating the small container and sprinkling too much salt over the overcooked eggs. Turning off the burner, he slid the pale scramble over each plate.

Something was missing.

Pato, growing bored, continued to sort through her flashcards.

Enthusiasm. “*Entusiasmo,*” she murmured to herself, nodding in satisfaction when the answer was correct. It usually was, but she still liked the surprise of it.

*Proud.* “*Orgullosa.*”

*Happiness.* “*Felicidad.*”

*Disappointment.* “*D...*”

Her voice trailed off, eyeing the word in annoyance. There were too many letters in it. It was a big one. She squinted, wondering if this would reveal the definition in a special secret ink that only gringos could see. Her stomach groaned.

She suddenly heard her husband walking toward the room.

*Finally.*

The door opened. “*Ya está listo el desayuno,*” Gabo said, studying Pato’s face as she climbed from the bed and walked past him.

The foldout table was covered with their beige tablecloth; two paper plates with steaming eggs hid the little doughy arepas beneath it. Pato could smell their burnt skin from the doorway. In front of the plate, a small menu had been scribbled out on a piece of paper. His illegible handwriting signaled their fine dining was to commence with the greatest and most mouth-watering arepas in the world.

At the bottom of the paper, the drawing of a snail holding a flower lay tucked gently.

Gabo thought it was quite endearing.

Pato turned to his hopeful eyes, unable to keep a giggle hidden as she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Almost immediately after praising his drawing, she walked to the fridge and grabbed the carton of orange juice. She swiftly tucked two cups beneath her arm, and her free hand carried forks. As she settled the items on the table, Gabo sat down and waited.

After she had seated herself, they said a quick prayer and began to eat.

He frowned at the eggs. They're too dry, he thought.

She sat across from him, taking a forkful of egg and chucking it into her mouth. They could have been dirt filled with worms and she would have praised him, so when she said they were good, he did not trust a word from her mouth.

But he appreciated her attempts at swallowing the cardboard-like-overly-salty scramble.

Pato had done well to hide her amusement, she really had.

It was not until they reached the burnt arepas hidden beneath the eggs that she dropped her fork on the table, bending over in heaps of booming laughter. She leaned back, then to the side, then back again. Her laughter trembled through her, through the apartment, and so she could not help but move with it.

The pieces of dough were uneven; some sides more burnt than others. He had forgotten to salt the water, so they were tasteless. She bit the side of the arepa, her laughs increasing in weight and volume as she forced the bite down her throat.

Gabo buried his face into his hands, his own yips of hilarity mere hiccups when placed next to her eruption of voice.



“Yaaa Pato,” he chuckled, watching tears reach her eyes as she picked up the burnt arepa.

“Ay no Gabo no puedo no puedo, ow ow,” she held her stomach.

A knock raptured their laughter into quiet chuckles.

Gabo took another bite of his burnt arepa, thick brows turning downwards at the flavor; the second knock made him flinch.

They silenced almost instantly.

They never invited people over to their apartment.

It was one of their rules they had continuously enforced.

Pato shrugged at the question forming on his face; she knew as little as he did.

She forced down another hard piece of dough, drowning it in orange juice as a voice emerged from the other end of their front door.

*“I know y’all are in there, I can smell something burning!”*

“Ay no,” Gabo whispered.

Pato would have laughed in a normal circumstance, but the voice was familiar enough to warrant a deeper and more terrified silence.

It was Martha.

Months ago, when they had moved into the apartment and they had just begun their English classes, they met Martha. Her southern accent had taken time to decipher, but Pato had slowly managed to understand the woman. They were continuously invited to attend her Baptist Church; both of them being Catholic, they had been hesitant.

But after the services, churchgoers were rewarded with free food.

Free, delicious, mouth-watering food.

And so, every Sunday, Gabo and Pato would take the bus and sit in front of the cross and eat plate after plate of endless southern delicacies.

But today, neither of them felt like attending.

“¿Qué hacemos?” Gabo asked, fearful as the knocks grew louder.

“Cálmate,” Pato hissed, growing impatient with his loud outbursts.

Gabo glared at her, “¿Por qué me tienes que hablar así?”

“Gabo, solo cállate,” Pato murmured offhandedly; she couldn’t think when he was speaking.

His mouth popped open, “Que te pasa-“

“Gabo, no empieces-“

“¿En serio?-“

The knocking increased and they both gasped. She stood, pointing to their bedroom. Silently, the two crept to the other room and sat on the bed.

Gabo was glaring at his hands.

Pato was waiting cautiously.

The knocks slowly diminished, until the apartment was quiet once more.

“Perdón por hablarte así,” she murmured, not as sorry as she sounded.

Her husband shrugged.

Their Saturday shift from the night before usually ended at around 9:00; Pato’s hair always smelled like cheese. She would spend hours in the shower, scrubbing in an anguished sort of frenzy. No matter how hard she tried, the restaurant clung to her nape and cheeks and hair.

This morning, as they finished eating the burnt arepas, Pato noticed the lingering scent deep in her black curls. She pushed her hair back self consciously as her husband finished his coffee, wiping his mouth with the palm of his hand.

“¿Qué tenemos que hacer hoy?” Gabo asked her out of habit. Their earlier days had required many schedules and lists; there was always something to do.

“*In English,*” she murmured, watching his face contort in silent discomfort.

“Pero-”

“*English!*” She exclaimed, turning on the shower.

He huffed, “*What we do today?*”

“*Supermarket and laundry .*”

They had meant to leave the apartment two hours ago, but Gabo could not find his good pants. He insisted they were his good pants because they were loose and the perfect length to cuff at the bottom. He liked it when people could see his socks. They were often blue.

“¿Por qué importa? Tenemos mucho que hacer, gordo, de verdad,” Pato threw her arms to the side, pacing the expanse of the kitchen. A curse emerged in the other room, and her husband walked into the kitchen wearing the same pair of pants from the day before. His work pants. She could smell the cheese from where she stood. It was his only other pair at the moment.

“No importa,” she murmured as he frowned in helpless anguish.

The door slammed behind them as they carried their laundry down the steps to the first floor. The apartment complex was quiet, as it was only half past nine on a Sunday. The structure was old and deteriorating beneath the humid summer air.

The humidity was new for them. They had only ever really felt it in the coastal regions of Colombia: Barranquilla, Cartagena, San Andrés. The beaches there were always accompanied by arroz de coco and arepa de huevo; being outside of Bogotá had always felt like a blessing. Pato had adored the warmth when she went on her class trip in college, and Gabo's pale skin burnt as he lay against the sand; just as he liked it.

But this was not the beach, and their skin did not smell like sunscreen.

Alabamian heat brought mosquitos the size of their thumbs and wasps that hid in the corner of every wall. The black ones trickled shivers down Gabo's spine; he wasn't used to seeing such wretched insects.

Gringo-insectos, he thought, popping the trunk of the car.

They drove off to do their errands.

The laundromat was nearly full.

Gabo groaned.

The two piled in load after load, shoving quarters into the machine until it started. They waited in the car with the windows kept open. Pato stuck her legs out, fanning her face with an old newspaper they had forgotten to throw out. Gabo took a nap.

And then, it was time for the dryers.

As they headed back home, Gabo spotted a Starbucks on the side of the road. He pulled over, sweeping a hand through his curls before turning to his wife.

“¿Quieres algo?”

She nodded, “Sí, vamos.”

Inside, the smell of coffee was coated in heavy notes of sugar and cinnamon. Pink pastries gathered dust behind the glass counter and workers with blonde hair and pursed lips watched them in great boredom.

Gabo squinted at the large menu on the wall, but knew he wanted a cappuccino.

His wife was watching him, eyeing him in that way she did when she was studying something. He pretended to look through the options, then nodded as his eyes spotted what he knew he wanted. He hoped she was impressed.

“¿Te pido un cappuccino, entonces?” she asked.

He nodded, “Sí, pero bebe, ¿me dejas decirles algo?”

She blinked, surprised. Impressed. “Bueno, ¿qué quieres decir?”

“Le digo que gracias, ¿no?”

She smiled, “Okay. Acuérdate, se dice *Thank you*.”

He rolled his eyes, “*I know that*.”

“Okay, okay,” Pato shrugged.

“Th.....”

He hated the language more than he knew how to express it. Deep in his gut, which he liked to believe was always right, he found nothing more degrading than juggling foreign letters in front of strangers. Strangers that, the minute he opened his mouth, simply knew he was not one of them. And he didn't want to be clumped into their mass. But he had not anticipated the difficulty of elongating his vowels, of making himself understood.

He hadn't anticipated any of that, really.

“Th...”

Fuck.

The sound was unnatural against his tongue and teeth; he broke into a sweat. He knew the words; he wasn't an idiot. But the *th* sound was ruining everything for him. It was too late to back out now.

He followed his wife through the line until they reached a woman by the name of Brenda. She nicely took their orders, horrible slabs of red stuck to her nails making Gabo's spine erupt into chills. They were very bright. The lights above him emitted white fluorescence that made his skin feel too hot. He felt the woman's eyes upon him.

"*Th...ank you,*" he practiced under his breath as Pato paid.

That sounded okay.

"*Th...th...*" he whispered as she received change.

"*Th....*" he stammered as she was handed their receipt.

Pato began to walk to the other end of the aisle. Her shoes squeaked and he knew it was time. Gabo took a deep breath as Brenda peered at him, waiting.

He cleared his throat, and exclaimed: "*Thecond!*"

Brenda frowned, and Gabo burst into the deepest shade of red.

"*I mean, thank you. Thank you,*" he said a few times, walking to his wife who was watching him with a glance of pity.

"Gabo-"

"*Ya déjame,*" he murmured, feeling defeated as they waited for their coffees.

He knew the words. He knew them.

They were there, just waiting to be comprehended; waiting to be spoken.

Pato kept silent as they waited.

She could see him overthinking in that fuming way of his; in that stubborn way. She knew he was learning, and he was trying; he tried harder than anyone she knew. Pato wrapped her hand around his arm, and he did not pull away. Instead, he gave her a grim smile.

We'll laugh about this someday, she thought.

When they parked in the apartment complex, it was nearly dark. They began unloading their laundry baskets when a sound stopped them.

Pato glanced up, forcing her features into a smile as Martha gazed at them from the steps.

Gabo noticed his wife had stilled; he followed her stare, then cursed under his breath.

God might be able to forgive them, but who knew if Martha the Baptist would.

The woman gave a dramatic shake of the head, exclaiming, "*I am very disappointed in you!*"

Pato heard the word and recognized it, but she was tired and a headache had been blossoming all afternoon.

Gabo glanced at her, to see if recognition would spark behind her eyes.

Instead, his wife turned to Martha, and, in mild confusion, shouted, "*Thank you!*"

Gabo followed suit, nodding and smiling.

Martha frowned deeply.

## Supersalad

*August 1996*

*Gadsden, Alabama*

Jacksonville State University did not pause for them.

Unlike the quiet comforts of Gadsden Community College, where their English lessons had been geared directly towards international students, Jacksonville State moved with unwavering stamina. Its professors carried the streams of conversation at a quickened pace, forcing the two to stumble to keep up.

Learning English, the two had decided, couldn't be enough for them.

And so, they moved forward and entered the world of business and economics.

Pato knew the content. She understood the mechanics of logical thinking, of numbers and graphs and charts. She felt her mind often worked in a similar way, with a ticking that articulated facts and ran on lists. The content was no more difficult than the classes she had taken in Colombia, and even though it was in a different language, she found she could keep up now.

Most of the time.

But she couldn't, for the life of her, decode her professor's accent.

Pato would lean forward on her desk, watch the graphs and draw them with careful precision. Next to her, Gabo would color-code and make little descriptions at the bottom of every drawing.

The two would spend sleepless nights decoding the lessons, discussing the marketing strategies the professor had outlined the day before.



And as soon as Pato arrived at her classes, she would feel pulled away from the path of understanding by the man's drawled words.

In Spanish, Gabo had written love poems and sonnets and songs and articles. The words settled comfortably at the tip of his tongue and threw themselves at crowds during concerts; they soothed children at church meetings and flew out of him in arguments. He screamed in Spanish. He wept in it.

But with English, he felt like he was halfway through the door. Never quite there yet. Not six months ago, and not now, as he squinted and squirmed in an effort to understand.

On one particular occasion, he began to lose interest in the lesson being taught.

Pato scribbled incessantly to his right, lines burrowing the skin between her brows.

Gabo sketched in his notebook as the lecture carried on.

"*The Y...*" the man said, voice trailing off as he turned to draw on the board.

Gabo nodded, drawing a tipsy wine glass in his notebook. He colored the glass with red pencil.

"*...and X axis are meant to help us understand...*" the Professor continued.

Gabo sketched a fried egg next to the wine.

So the demand for eggs and wine is correlated, he thought. He labeled both drawings at the bottom of each: *Eggs* and *Wine*.

Perfect, he mused. That makes complete sense.

As the class promptly ended, he felt Pato's finger poke his side.

He jolted, glaring at his wife; she knew he hated pokes.

"¿Qué pasó?" he began to scoop his belongings.

She sighed, “No entendí absolutamente nada de lo que dijo al final. ¿Me lo puedes explicar?”

He felt the rare and certainly exquisite joys of pride. His wife, notoriously better at him in every aspect, never asked for his help. It seemed, he noticed with a smug smile, *that* was about to change.

Gabo opened his notebook.

“*So the eggs,*” he pointed to his drawing, “*and the wine,*” a gesture to the wine, “*are important to understand-*”

“Espera, ¿qué? *Eggs y wine?*” Pato questioned, grabbing his notebook.

Gabo nodded expertly, watching for her features to shift into recognition and, hopefully, admiration. Instead, they settled on what he knew to be amusement.

Pato’s laughter, which he ordinarily adored, struck deep irritation deep in him.

¿Por qué te ríes?” he snapped, closing the notebook and gathering his things.

“Era *X y Y*. Cómo el gráfico que se usa para ver la relación entre el precio y la cantidad.”

She gestured to the notes she had taken, and he blinked, wondering how he could have missed that. Where had he heard eggs and wine?

He felt his neck splinter with red as they walked into the hallway.

Pato turned to him sympathetically, “Esta bien-”

“Ya, por favor. No importa, ¿okay? Es que no me parece bien que te burles de mi-”

Pato frowned, “No me estoy burlando.”

They walked outside and toward their car; the humid summer air carried a scent of freshly mowed grass. The college carried hundreds of local students, their upturned noses and youthful faces pink from the Sun. Gabo huffed in exhaustion, leaning against the side of the car.

He sighed, “No estaba poniendo atención, ¿okay?”

He wasn't an idiot, he wanted to say. He knew what he was doing.

He wanted her to know that.

Pato pulled her long curls into a ponytail; it did little to stop sweat from gathering at the nape of her neck.

“*We need to practice more,*” she murmured.

“*Yes,*” Gabo said, voice quiet. “*A lot of practice.*”

When they arrived at their apartment, Gabo collapsed on the bed with a muffled whimper.

Pato leaned against the opened fridge before settling on a glass of orange juice. The label for the milk had fallen off. She grabbed the sticky note, taping it back to the milk. Everything in the fridge was labeled, and although it had worked for a while, the sharpie was starting to bleed off from the condensation. Pato had tried to label other things around the house, like *toothbrush* and *hair dryer* but those had been lost amidst their day to day routine. She pressed hard against the sticky note, nodding with satisfaction as it stayed on the carton.

She grabbed a piece of sliced cheese and found the spare bocadillo she had saved for later behind her wedding photograph. Quickly wrapping the guava paste in the cheese, she popped the snack into her mouth and sprawled herself over the couch.

Her eyes met the unfoldable table.

It was beginning to peel, right near the left corner. Blinking, she tried ignoring it, but her eyes could not unfocus from the peel.

It was small, but there. Beginning to spread.

She stood, fingers hovering just above it.

Pato sighed, resisting the urge; they couldn't afford another table.

“¿Quieres ir a comer?” Gabo called from the other room, bored. He was staring at the wall, listening to an old couple speak loudly from the room below.

His wife was silent, and after a moment, he called her name again.

She responded a quiet *Yes*. He stood, looking for his shoes.

As they drove to the restaurant, the two peered outside of the car and into the streets and trees surrounding them. It had been almost a year since they had arrived and the striking features surrounding them still caused aching throbs deep in their chests.

It was a funny thing, being far from home.

Gabo thought about his parents but did not particularly feel drawn to tears at the thought anymore.

Sometimes, he thought of his father's eyes. His father had an analytical look, and where it had once been harsh it had steadily calmed. Like a waning tide, his father's temper had shrunk into a calculated demeanor that his son found refreshing and strange.

They drove past an Applebee's.

Gabo often wished he could show his father the small library on campus, the movie theaters they rarely went to; he wanted him to taste the food. It was not better or worse than Colombian, but it was a different thing altogether.

Pato pointed out a new Chinese restaurant around the corner; someone in her class had said it was good.

Gabo often wondered if Alabamian tastebuds were less keen on tasting the flavor of things, and more of the proportions. He wanted his father to see how much these Americans could eat; how you could buy a large coca-cola for less than a dollar. Those were the things that fascinated him most. He knew his father would laugh at the sight of the large burgers and immediately order one for himself. He would lick his fingers and smile and be content.

He looked at the sky, growing more hungry by the moment.

The restaurant soon came into view.

Olive Garden was particularly quiet today, save for another couple sitting at the bar. Their eyes were pulled away from one another.

*“Hi folks, how are y’all doing tonight?”* their waiter asked, handing them their menus.

*“Good, thank you,”* Gabo smiled.

*“Excellent,”* the waiter bobbed his head.

*“I think we know what we want,”* Gabo said, checking with his wife. She nodded.

*“Alrighty,”* the waiter pulled out his notepad, pen at the ready.

*“I will have the lasagna,”* Pato said.

*“And can I have the chicken alfredo, please,”* Gabo nodded, grabbing a bread stick.

*“Great!”* The man took their menus. *“And, with any of our meals, you can have soup or salad.”*

Gabo gasped in excitement *“Ah yes!! One supersalad, please.”*

Pato nodded, “Yes, one for me too!”

Gabo checked the mail once they arrived home. Pato headed upstairs with a laugh as they remembered the look on the waiter’s face.

He opened the mailbox, blinking at the sight of a new letter.

It had been a while.

His fingers tore open the envelope, retrieving the small slip of paper from within. He lifted it towards the fluorescent light that was covered in mosquitos.

*Querido Gabito,*

*¿Cómo está funcionando el carro? Ya está mejorando, ¿verdad? Aquí en casa todo está medio igual. El clima no ha mejorado. Está lloviendo casi todos los días, y la niebla ha estado descendiendo desde el horizonte. Nada especial. ¿Cómo está Pato? Su inglés ha mejorado mucho por lo que me haz contado.*

*¿Cómo vas con tu inglés? ¿Y los estudios? Tu mamá te extraña mucho, y tu hermano también. El está muy ocupado en el hospital, y trabaja hasta tarde. Ese fue su sueño, ¿no?*

*Mientras te escribo, me imagino a ti en tus clases, en tu trabajo. Te imagino cocinando, manejando, limpiando, en un mundo completamente diferente del que tú conoces. No es por decir que ya no conozcas a Colombia. Pero fue tu sueño irte, y tienes que cumplirlo mi Gabito.*

*Aprende lo más que puedas, porque estas oportunidades no se dan fácilmente. Te mando un abrazo muy grande, y espero poder verte muy pronto.*

*Escribe de regreso cuando puedas.*

*- Papá*

## The Happy Face

*February 1997*  
*Gadsden, Alabama*

*“Okay, so,”* Pato began as they began driving their usual route.

Gabo sighed; English practice haunted his every nerve.

*“Yes yes,”* he sighed, turning left.

*“How are you?”* she asked.

*“I’m good,”* he replied.

*“Just good?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“What is the weather today?”*

*“Sunny.”*

Pato sighed, *“And?”*

*“With Sun,”* Gabo glared at the driver to his left.

*“How do you feel?”* she prompted as he stopped at the light.

*“Fine.”*

*“Just fine?”*

Gabo huffed, *“Okay.”*

*“Where are we going today?”*

*“We are buying clothes for- ”*

*“Sí, muy bien,”* Pato nodded.



Pato did most of her shopping at Goodwill.

Sometimes Marshalls if she was feeling festive.

Her wardrobe did not consist of anything particularly interesting. Most of her blouses and skirts were from Colombia; she had been gifted some of her mother's jewelry, and some of the wedding money had allowed for one or two nice dresses. But besides that, she didn't try to spend money on anything frivolous.

It seemed ridiculous to her.

It *was* ridiculous.

Only when she went to church did Pato allow herself to dress up, but even then it felt silly. She had her work jeans and many button downs. She had flats and a pair of tennis shoes. She wore her socks high and had a pair of cargo shorts that flared outward in a way she liked. She liked colorful things but usually settled for blacks and whites. She never really knew why that happened.

Her hair, at this point, was something she had tried and failed to control. It spewed out in fat tendrils and frizzy curls. It carried down her back and settled just below her shoulders. She didn't try to tame it, because she didn't know that she could. So it usually swayed in her face or stayed back in a ponytail. She was pretty and was told more than twice that she looked like an old Miss Colombia. Pato liked to tell people that. But the indulgences, the little spendings she sometimes craved, very rarely reached the surface anymore.

One morning, she parked at an outdoor outlet with Gabo at her side. Her hair was tied back, eyes plain, clothes beige.

The two of them had the morning off.

There was very little for them to do on their moments off. They had no family to visit, no friends to spend endless hours with; besides church and their after school meetings, they were left with the whole of Gadsden to their amusement.

And so, they went to Marshalls.

Pato loved the smell of Marshalls.

She always wanted to ask what brand of cleaning sprays they used. The floor was always shining when her shoes clicked against it. She liked hearing the clicks as she rummaged through the racks, sorting through sweaters she could not afford.

They walked inside, Gabo trailing behind her. They directed themselves silently toward the clothing section that was divided by sizes. Her husband plucked a few options, displaying them to her with a raise of the brows. She shook her head at most of them, scrunching her brow. He sighed; some people simply did not have taste, it seemed.

Around her, the store was mainly occupied by middle aged women; they eyed her and she eyed them but neither spared the other anything more.

“Y ¿ésta?” he asked, showing her a tight dark dress.

“¿Quién crees que soy?” she laughed, shaking her head and continuing forward.

“Pues no sé, pero tenemos que apurarnos, Pato. Vamos a llegar tarde,” he sighed.

“Bueno, bueno,” she murmured.

“Hubiéramos hecho esto ayer-”

“¡Mira! ¿Qué te parece éste?”

She brought out a dark skirt that would hover just above the knee. It was plain and formal, but cheap enough to warrant a purchase.

“Está simpático,” Gabo nodded in approval. “Cómpratelo.”

They arrived ten minutes late to the International Culture Festival. Their college was, surprisingly enough, home to a wide variety of international students. As they bolted from their car, outfits in hand, Pato and Gabo surveyed the setups around them.

The gym held dozens of small tables with various flags taped to the front of each. They waved to some of their friends sitting behind the Japanese table; there were tables for China, India, Korea, and even Brazil.

Pato ran to the back of the room and quickly changed into her outfit. Gabo said a quick goodbye to her and ran to the Multipurpose room to begin setting up. The voices within the gym carried outward in a chorus of laughter and chatter. Pato listened to them speak as she finished slipping on her second shoe, touching the ruffled sleeves and skirt of the dress.

It was traditional in Colombia.

She stepped out into the gym, watching the people around her donned in their own traditional clothing. A few people were wearing kimonos; some were donned in colorful saris. She spotted a few Brazilians wearing those large Mexican hats; she hid a smile as she saw her table. There were only a handful of other Colombian students, and they waved at her as she joined them at their spot.

Pato grabbed the small label her husband had made for their table. She propped it near the front. It read: *Hi! I am Pato, The Happy Face of Colombia.*

The arepas she had made had gone cold already, but no one needed to know that they weren't originally eaten that way. She spread out the paper plates on the counter and sat on the unfoldable chair, watching the crowd move. Many non-international students, with their pink cheeks and gentle voices, roamed the gym and spoke to those wearing the vibrant clothing.

Pato explained the food before her, smiling as the arepas began to disappear. She explained her country to foreign ears, who nodded and smiled in curiosity and amazement.

Her sister would have laughed at her.

But Pato felt a certain comfort in explaining something that often needed no explanation in her house. She felt herself grow closer to herself, to her husband, as she explained what they did on Christmas. As she explained the night of the 24th, as she explained ajiaco and buñuelos and el día de los tres reyes magos.

To her great relief, not a single person asked where in Colombia the drugs were from.

Once the main festival was over, Pato quickly slipped out of her traditional dress and slipped on some jeans. She looped a dark belt around her waist and tucked on a white long sleeve. Applying a fresh coat of lipstick and running her hands through her frizzy hair, she began to slowly jog toward the Multipurpose Room.

Gabo saw his wife emerge from the entrance just as he finished setting up the last of the mics. The other Colombians, those from her table and others, were beginning to stand in their places. He smiled at Olguita and Samantha, at Roberto and Julián. Pato joined the ranks next to the others and they waited for the audience to enter.

“Acuérdense,” Gabo murmured to them. “Acuérdense que estamos cantando por nuestra Colombia. Por nosotros y nuestras familias. Es nuestra oportunidad de educar a esta gente. Acuérdense de la alegría que es ser Colombiano..”

They began to sing when the final seat was filled.

Gabo on the guitar, the choir of students behind him. His wife sang and smiled as someone took their picture. They filled the entire room with their songs, with their laughter as Gabo made jokes to the audience. The applause was brief as they finished, and Pato smiled at her husband; he was thinking about Chinata.

The next morning, after they had performed twice (once on campus, then at a mall), they drove by Marshalls once more.

Gabo swerved back around, pausing in front of the store. Pato blinked, mouth popping open.

There was a 50% off sale on all women’s clothing.

The couple glanced at one another.

A few hours later, they returned with the skirt they had bought the previous day. They returned the skirt and re-purchased it within minutes.

Pato’s new skirt was now 50% off.

She waved goodbye as Gabo went to buy them groceries; the payphone stood a mere few feet in front of her.

The payphone took quarters, and collect calls to Colombia were expensive.

Pato tried to call her mother every two weeks.

Her fingers mechanically slid the coins into the machine, static on the other end of the line growing. A beep, and then a woman's voice came on. Pato spoke, tapping her foot. Outside, the wind was ruffling the leaves of a few smaller trees. This part of Gadsden, she did like.

Another beep, this time one with a lower tonality.

And then, the click.

“¿Hola?”

It was sort of like a soft breeze that ran through her body; or like a wave. It rushed through her legs, arms, and ended at the tips of her eyelashes. She struggled against the breath of excitement that threatened to reveal just how much she needed to hear her mother's voice.

Today, she focused on the trees; their steady rhythm, their invisible yet mirrored dance. She could look at them and feel the soles of her feet connected to the ground. She could hold herself steady.

“Hola Mami,” Pato said, the sound of her mother's breath undoing any work to keep her spine rigid. She leaned against the glass, closing her eyes. Trying to imagine her mother.

“Ay, mi hijita linda,” Teresa said excitedly, and it was like Pato could see her.

The stout woman would be wearing one of her favorite sweaters, no doubt. Maybe the green one. That one smelled most like her. She did her makeup only sometimes, but mostly her tan skin was left unblemished and perfect.

“¿Cómo estás?” Pato asked, wondering if her brothers were back from military service. She didn't hear from them often.

Her mother sighed, “Pues bien, normal. Tu papá sigue trabajando como un loco. Y Nancy está medio ocupada, pero está feliz. Tus hermanos ahí andan, con sus cosas. Tú sabes. No han regresado todavía, no tengo ni idea cuándo les dejan venir a la casita.”

“Qué bien,” Pato murmured, wondering if her sister was still seeing that boy.

“Y ¿cómo estás, mi hijita? ¿Cómo va el inglés? ¿Tus estudios?”

“Bien,” Pato lied.

The trees had ceased their swaying as the wind took a momentary pause. Outside, she could see a few clouds rolling over Gadsden, settling just above the horizon. Their shade clouded the heated cement, the cars, the stores.

“¿Cómo vas con Gabito?” Teresa continued, the sounds of cars and traffic trailing into Pato’s ear. She could hear vendors shouting through the phone, the honking only briefly interrupting the voices.

She had forgotten how loud the city was.

“Bien, ahí voy. A Gabo como que le falta mucho más de práctica, pero también le está yendo bien.”

“Y ¿cómo va el trabajo?”

“Bien,” Pato repeated.

Her mother paused.

Pato inhaled as the clouds moved past, and the sun returned. And with it, the wind began to sway the trees and their leaves; she waited.

“¿Estás feliz?”

Teresa's voice was always gentle, with strength attached to the end of it almost like an afterthought. Pato would often daydream about cradling within her mother's voice. And it was in these words that she could hear all of it. The yearning they both felt, the longing to be reunited, was tucked within that single question.

Pato nodded, but she couldn't bring herself to answer.

"Te extraño, Mami."

"Yo más. Cuídate."

The phone buzzed as their time finished, and the dull ringing settled in her ears. It was like an incessant lullaby.

Pato hung up, blinking; her eyes were wet.

The trees were swaying.



## Soap for Dinner!

April, 1997

Gadsden, Alabama

The two went to mass almost every Sunday.

One evening, the bus picked them up from their apartment, where other International students sat quietly with their hands folded over their laps. Some were younger, others were much older. Pato said hello to someone she recognized and they seated themselves near the back.

As it lurched forward, Pato watched the space beyond the window move onward and onward until it was too blurry for her eyes to focus. She looked away to avoid another migraine, and instead thought of her sister.

The First Baptist Church appeared more like a temple than anything else, Gabo thought. High rising columns with three different doors all stood at the top of an overwhelmingly large amount of stairs. The stairs were the worst of it. He always felt a sweat growing on him as he reached the top. As the bus pulled to a stopping point, he fixated on the church's strange color. It was almost a light cream. Dirty white. The grass was perfectly trimmed; his mother would like that, he thought.

Gabo nearly slipped from the bus, tugging on his collar as he and Pato walked up the steps. He glared at them, then turned and glared at the Sun.

Inside, it smelled of burnt incense and strong perfumes. The rows of seated elderly men and women glanced at the foreign students that slipped through their masses to find an open space. They already knew most of them, so smiles and nods of recognition were exchanged as the organ began to play. Pato and Gabo found a spot near the middle, scrunching their noses at

the lavender infused building. The woman next to Pato smiled at her, wrinkles sagging her pale skin downward. Gabo swallowed his discomfort.

*“Let us pray,”* the priest murmured from the front row. The cross glistened in silver, slightly crooked. A statue of Jesús was propped there, painted blood trickling from the crown of thorns pushed into his skull. Gabo looked away in disgust.

Pato knew her husband didn't care for many of the words, let alone in English, but the gentle murmur of Father no-sé-qué lulled her into a state of tranquility. She was not religious like the white people in the rows and rows neighboring her. She was not even Baptist. Pato liked to think of Catholicism as her companion, a comfortable and warm voice within her chest. She leaned her head back, remembering the old smells of her church in Bogotá.

The incense there was deeper, with more of a sour twinge that reminded her of coffee. Sometimes of smoke. The room was darker, with a stained glass ceiling and deep brown wooden pews. They were always uncomfortable to sit in. Sometimes she wondered if that was to keep the kids awake. The standing, sitting, kneeling was her least favorite part, so she had learned to appreciate the simple seated nature of the Baptists listening intently. Communion here was different, too. She liked the little sips of wine, praying in silence at the end. The rituality of it all was a comfort to her, and she never quite understood why. Her family was religious in the sense that they regarded God as an older brother. They referred to him when cursing, when discussing the day. The church-going had been her idea entirely, and as Pato sat in the dimmed white chapel, she felt a soft sorrow that could not be shaken.

Not as they repeated the words back to the man, nor when they sang hymns.

It was not the same.

Gabo disliked most of it. The church was stuffed with hot air; the chairs were squeaky and foldable. He wondered, if he leaned back hard enough, would his chair break? That would be the most interesting thing to happen during mass. A murmur of "Praise God" enveloped the church; the organ began to play again. The choir began to sing.

At least they sing well, he thought.

Gabo was suddenly convinced he no longer liked the church.

His mother would despise the way his thoughts pulled away from the prayer, but it was not what he wanted.

Not here, not like this.

He wanted the prayer to brighten the night sky beneath a bed of stars, rolling hills and mountains smelling of smoke and fire. He wanted to pray with his friends, with the farmers who sat with him in the rain as they finished the rosary. He wanted to hear the cows and chickens and the river and the voice of God along with it all. He did not want these empty soulless words in this pale church, because he couldn't feel anything in it.

Gabo slumped deeper into his chair, knowing greatly that God was not in this church.

God was in Chinata.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..."

The voices began, the organ's slightly flat pitch making Gabo flinch.

Pato tried reading along with the small pamphlet, but they were singing too fast. Gabo admired her persistence.

He had given up trying a long time ago.

What the two had been waiting for throughout the entire mass arrived once the praying ended. Most of those who were seated headed towards the break room; the delicious smell was already beginning to reach Pato as she followed the crowd. Heaping trays of food were brought out in the small room, where comfortable couches and foldable tables were propped in the center.

Pato and Gabo silently piled their paper plates with anything they thought looked remotely edible. They glanced at one another, cheeks red in excitement. Pato's mouth watered at the sight of mashed potatoes, while he eyed the roasted chicken in quiet hunger. The two settled themselves at a table near the end, taking sips of coffee between large bites of food. They did not feel particularly guilty about attending the church for the food. It was free, and they went to the mass - it was only fair, really.

*"That was a good mass,"* Pato said.

Gabo rolled his eyes - a rule had been agreed upon that, outside of their home, they could only speak in English. Gabo could not quite remember agreeing to it.

*"Yes, yes,"* he replied. It was his favorite word.

*"Cómo se dice..."* she pointed to the potatoes.

How stupid did she think he was, he wondered.

*"Pota...ah...toes. Obviamente,"* he snapped.

She sighed, taking another sip from her coffee.

*"Coffee,"* he pointed at her drink with his fork.

Pato nodded, not quite paying attention to him anymore. She studied her nails.

*"White,"* Gabo giggled, signaling to the old men grouping together in the corner of the room.

*“Hey there, son!”* one of them smiled at him, waving for him to join them.

Gabo paled, turning to his wife in panic.

She shrugged, struggling to hide the smile willing itself over her features.

*“Ayúdame,”* he whispered as the other old men began telling Gabo to sit with them.

There was a free chair near the end of the table.

*“Go!”* Pato stood, heading towards the trays of food for seconds.

He hated his life, he thought, as he begrudgingly stood and sat down with the men who smelled like carpets.

*“So, Ben over here tells me you’re from Col-uh-mbia!”* one of them exclaimed.

The fear in him was dulled over, smoothed like a sanded table.

It no longer prodded at him in discomfort, but felt more like a pulsing headache: on and off again. Gabo swallowed, remembering that he no longer had to be fearful of being Colombian. At least, not right now.

*“Tell us about it!”* another said.

He could not, for the life of him, tell them apart.

He knew Ben, but only briefly; he was pretty sure it was the man with the glasses.

*“Ah, yes,”* Gabo started, racking his brain for any word. Any word at all.

*“Colombia is very cold,”* he said, *“and with a lot of clouds.”*

*“Fog?”*

*“Yes yes,”* he nodded.

What was fog?

*“That’s real surprising to me, I coulda sworn Columbia was on the coast. Or at least, somewhere tropical. You know, with lots of Sun and stuff like that.”*

“Yes, yes,” he could only nod.

*“And I’m guessin’ it’s really different from these parts. I guess I don’t really know where it is. I mean, hell, it’s in South America! Even the languages are different.”*

“Yes, it’s very different. A lot of languages in South America,” he managed.

“*What kind of food do y’all eat?*” one of the men asked, leaning forward in interest.

Gabo felt a jolt of excitement. Food, he knew. He could talk food.

“*Ah yes!*” he started, smiling. “*In Colombia, we have the best soap!*”

The men surrounding him frowned, wrinkles drooping forward from the gravity of their movement.

Ben cleared his throat, quizzical look on his features. “*Y’all eat soap?*”

Gabo nodded enthusiastically, “*Yes yes! With avocado, and potatoes. And rice! And corn.*”

Pato watched him proudly from the other side of the room. His hands flared outward, the men leaning forward in interest. One of them began asking questions, and her husband answered with a bob of the head. They seemed very impressed with what he was saying, as they shook their heads incredulously, mouths gaping open. Pride surged through her.

A few moments later, they were seated on the bus in the quiet fullness that came after devouring the church’s food. Pato leaned on Gabo’s shoulder, the streets whirring past in the dark.

“¿De qué estaban hablando?” she asked him, picturing the old men.

Feeling confident, Gabo cleared his throat, “Colombia.”

“*What about it?*” she murmured.

“*Food.*”

“*What did you say?*”

“*I told them about our soap.*”

Pato blinked, “¿Qué?”

“Les hablé sobre nuestra sopa. *Soap! Ajiaco!*” he said, wondering if, for once, he knew a word she did not.

She tried. She really did. But it had been a long day, and Pato found it quite impossible to hide a small chuckle. As the bus pulled them to their apartment, her shriek-like laughter filled the seats with enough warmth it almost felt like they were home.

*Part Two*

“...Siempre nos vamos a mover...”





Tums

*August 1997*

*Gadsden, Alabama*

It had been less than two years since they had arrived.

Pato had stopped noticing the silenced cars, the new restaurants; they were all the same, now.

She made arepas regularly, with scrambled egg on the side. Sometimes hot chocolate with cheese dipped inside. Sometimes bread with jam and slices of more cheese. They could never have enough of it, it seemed.

The two were set to graduate from Jacksonville State in a few months, and neither was prepared for the inevitable. Their student visas were set to end, and with it, the chance to stay.

They weren't very keen on the option of staying illegally.

Through the months of June and July, while they continued working at Villa Fiesta full time, they sent out two hundred and fifty job applications to various positions.

Pato and Gabo sent applications through emails and printed hundreds of resumes that were slipped into envelopes; they made phone calls and faxed information from company to company. Gabo piled the sealed envelopes next to his coffee, hands trembling as he searched for the next one. Pato crossed various names off of her lists, brows furrowing in concentration; always calculating.

And through the sorting and the sending, they mused at the idea of returning home. They spoke English, which guaranteed safety; it welcomed a stability they had always searched for. And yet, neither felt quite ready to return.

One fateful morning, they received a formal envelope from a company known as Ralph Lauren.

Pato screamed as she held the paper in her hands, and Gabo began to envision a life of luxury in New York City. He was already imagining the polished shoes.

His phone call interview ended in a prompt ten minutes.

It began with a man's voice murmuring a quick "Hello" as he dove into a set of intricate questions. Gabo felt the sweat begin to seep into his pajama shirt; he chewed on his nails before answering, his wife watching in anxiousness.

"And so...Gabriel, can you tell me some characteristics about yourself?"

He nodded, "Why of course! I am very unique, and have many characteristics."

Pato swallowed.

"I am very kind, and work very hard. I am a very hard working person. I am very organized. And I am also very creative."

The man on the other line was silent for a moment before continuing with the questions.

Gabo didn't get the job.

Now as August began rolling through, they hadn't heard back from a single company.

There had been a few spare interviews here and there, but they would end and neither would hear from them again. There was a crazed momentum that existed for the two of them at that point. There was a goal in sight, just barely in their line of sight.

Pato ordinarily liked to find some kind of purpose in everything, but there was a dejected air beneath her strides as they headed to classes and drove back home. Gabo couldn't find a job,

no matter how hard he searched. They felt every single rejection deep within them as they took notes, as they worked their shifts, as they called their parents.

One morning, while her husband went ahead to his classes, Pato walked to the phone booth.

The trees were still, since the summer winds were dying down into a tamer heat. She took a sip from her water bottle, fanning her face with her fingers. Pato watched the leaves stay perfectly quiet as she dialed, tapping her foot. She hummed, looking up; the ceiling had pieces of gum stuck to it.

Twirling a curl around her finger, she smiled as the beeper buzzed to life and she heard her mother's voice.

“¡Hola Mami!” she said, eager.

“Hola Mi Patito hermosa,” Teresa said, her gentle voice smoothing over the calloused edges of Pato's anxieties. A single word from her mother, and she felt as though she were a nurtured child again.

“¿Cómo has estado, mamita?” Pato asked, leaning against the booth.

“Pues, bien.”

There was a pause, but that was nothing new. Her mother often paused when thinking things over, musing over which gossip she wanted to spill for her daughter. Pato patiently waited.

“Tu padre sigue igual, como te imaginas. Ha estado haciendo unos gastos... bueno, no te aburro con eso.”

Pato frowned, “Perdón. Quisiera poder hacer algo.”

“Tú no te preocupes, mi niña linda. Nancy sigue toda ocupadita, pero vino el otro día y me dio una risa,” Teresa laughed, and it was a joyous thing. Pato momentarily forgot she was standing in a phone booth. “Ay no, cómo las amo a mis bebés,” her mother murmured gently.

“Yo más, mami.”

A beat of silence echoed through the phone.

“Fui al doctor,” Teresa began. Her voice was no less cheery than when she had laughed.

And even so, the word “doctor” made Pato’s own smile falter slightly.

Her mother continued, “Y me encontraron unas bolitas, pero no es nada. No te tienes que preocupar para nada, mi linda.”

Pato frowned; they had found...balls? Lumps?

“¿Cómo así?” she asked.

“Pues, me dijeron que tengo algo ahí medio raro. No sé, pero no importa. Ya me dieron medicina para tratarlo.”

“¿Qué medicina?” Pato asked, eyes wide in panic.

“Tums.”

When she arrived home, Pato called her sister from their landline. She leaned against her pillows, legs crossed underneath her. In the other room, Gabo was preparing himself a sandwich. She listened to the phone ring once, twice, thrice.

Her sister picked up.

“¿Hola?”

“¿Qué pasó con mami?”

She heard her sister sigh.

“Pues, no sabemos Patico,” Nancy replied.

“¿Qué significa eso?” Pato asked, voice hitching.

“No han hecho un examen oficial todavía, entonces no se sabe nada. Pensaban que no era grave, pero... no sé. Yo creo que es algo serio.”

Pato’s chest felt light, “Y ¿por qué no me dijeron nada?”

“Hasta ahora nos dimos cuenta. La vamos a llevar al doctor pronto-”

“Yo voy a la casa. Te veo pronto.”

Pato hung up the phone, breathing hard.

Outside her window, the trees were still. There was not a sign of wind.

Breath heavy, she stood from her spot on the bed. She felt it miraculous that her legs did not give way beneath her; she felt unsteady as she crossed into the other room. Gabo was busy humming to himself, eating his sandwich. He watched her silently make her way to him.

He instantly knew something was wrong.

Her lips were pressed into a thin line as she sat in front of him, eyes not focusing on anything in particular.

“Es mi mami,” she managed. Her voice was small.

Gabo waited, though it was difficult; his knee was bouncing.

“Está enferma,” she murmured, and she finally looked at him.

The next morning, as Gabo tried finding the cheapest flight ticket home, Pato walked through the crowded hallways of Jacksonville State. She pleaded her case with each professor,

earning tight nods with even tighter expressions. *You can take classes from home*, they said, promising to fax or electronically send her whatever work she was going to miss.

Meanwhile, Gabo found a flight that would leave in the next few days. He grabbed Pato's suitcase, and felt himself falter. The last time they had used it, it had been together. Never before had either traveled without the other. Not home, not here.

He sighed, searching for her favorite sweaters.

When she arrived at their apartment, she helped him finish packing a few of her things. The two were silent as they folded sweaters and shirts; they were quiet as they ate their lunch and sipped their water. The Alabamian summer air was seeping itself into their walls with a humidity that struck deep. But neither could feel it. Neither could draw themselves out of their heads long enough to smell it. Their food tasted of cardboard and their voices were hoarse.

Their voices were quiet.

Gabo glanced up at Pato, who was seated across from him. She could barely touch her food. He nudged her with his foot, and her eyes fluttered toward him; it was almost like she forgot he was there.

"Te quiero," he murmured.

She nodded, "Yo también."

She left the next morning.

## Feijoa

*August - December, 1997**Bogotá, Colombia*

Talking about it now, she remembers very little.

Or all of it at once.

What happened, she tells me over the phone, happened so fast.

Pato sat on the plane home, her belongings packed; behind her, she left an apartment and a husband. She peered at the clouds and the sky and drank Sprite from the small plastic cups they handed out. Her headaches worsened as the flight continued.

When the plane landed, she stared at her shoes.

Her sister, who had cut her hair short, picked her up from the airport. They drove through the busy streets of Bogotá. The unchanging noises of the horns were blurred out by the closed windows. Pato leaned against the window, watching the familiar streets blur past in their frenzy. The vendors along the side, with fruit stands and sweets; the children walking home in their navy uniforms. She spotted her old school, the restaurants she used to eat at; the mountains in the horizon, past the skyscrapers.

Nancy was speaking to Pato about their mother, and Pato was earnestly listening.

But her eyes were unfocused, as if in a daze. The world beyond the car seemed unchanged, yet the air around her carried a hint of something she couldn't name.

They arrived at her house, the same one she had always lived in. Her fingers grazed over the door, and she inhaled the smell of the kitchen as she entered the altered space. Everything was where it had once been. Pato's stomach plunged at the sight of her father.

They said hello to each other, in the formal way they always had.

She walked further into the hallway.

Her mother's stout figure aligned the couch.

“¿Patico?”

It was almost like she had never left, and the radiance with which she always painted her mother graced her – as it always had. Teresa's cheeks were full and red with joy as she smiled her gummy smile, running into her daughter's arms. Pato inhaled the scent of her mother's hair and laughed; the tightened bits of her chest relaxed and exhaled.

For the briefest of moments, all was well.

The next morning, they went to the doctor in Usaqueén to look at the *bolitas*, at the *lumps* that had been treated with tums.

The office was quiet; the waiting room was cold.

Pato tapped her heel on the floor in slight impatience, watching her mother from the corner of her eye.

Teresa smiled at her, “Te quiero, mi Patico.”

Their names were called.



Once the exams were done, the word *cáncer* was placed into the conversation. It was like an undissolved pill that settled at the bottom of Pato's stomach. It was a sour thing that plagued her nightmares as she slept in her childhood bed.

But her mother, it seemed, had other ideas.

They turned to natural medicine since, as the doctor had put it: "There is nothing we can do." Within the Church of the Carmelitas, they visited an old man that gave Teresa a wide variety of exercises; in theory, they were meant to lift her emotional burdens.

That should fix her physical ones, the man often said reassuringly.

One exercise involved a boat. An imaginary boat. You were meant to place all of your burdens on it and picture the boat floating away into the horizon, along with your troubles. Pato did this and placed the disease on the boat. She placed the distance between her and Gabo. She placed their stress on finding a job.

She never asked what her mother put on it.

When she lay awake at night, after finishing her studies, she would think about her small apartment in Gadsden. She thought of Gabo and how he was getting along without her. She thought of their English, of the job applications and of Villa Fiesta. She thought of their degree. Of their graduation day.

She would call him and they would talk about their lives. They would discuss his classes, and how he was trying his hardest to understand his professor without her. He gave her gossip from their coworkers at Villa Fiesta's, and listed out the foods he had eaten at church. His voice

never ceased to soothe her, and she pictured himself living without her. She imagined him pacing the length of their living room; laying in bed with the windows open.

It had been a month since she had been home and all she could truly do was create vivid pictures in her mind. That, and spend time with her mother; take her to her appointments.

That was all she could do, really.

One night, as she lay in her childhood bedroom, she realized she was tired of hearing doctors repeat themselves appointment after the next. We can't do anything, they would say. There's nothing to be done, they would repeat.

Pato sat up.

Blinking, she brought out her notebook; she leaned into her bedside table for a pen.

And Pato did what she did best.

She organized.

More specifically, she organized a trip.

Teresa and Pato spent an indiscernible amount of time traveling along Colombia. They spoke about everything, feeling like tourists in their own country.

That's the beautiful thing about home, Pato realized; not all of it is ever really yours.

Later, Pato would remember the ice cream she tried for the first time: Feijoa flavored. She would remember meeting people and finding new towns and eating an endless amount of food. Through their travels, they both fought to enjoy their country and enjoy each other. Neither of them spoke of the illness, or of what it could mean.

All they knew was that nothing could be done about it.

So they traveled.

Gabo returned to Colombia for Christmas that December.

It had been four months since Pato and Gabo had seen each other. She wept when she saw him, throwing her arms around him.

They planned on returning to Gadsden to finish their last semester.

As they were leaving, Pato gazed into her mother's face, not even trying to memorize it.

She knew she would see her soon.

Her mother smiled. "Tú no te preocupes, Patico. Yo estaré en tu grado, te lo prometo,"

## A Black Dress

*July 1998**Gadsden, Alabama*

They ended up graduating without their family.

Gabo searched through his notes, trying to find his resume.

Teresa had been too sick, and it was too complicated for his own parents to attend.

He found the piece of paper, sticking out from beneath the pile.

And so, when Gabo had climbed onto the stage, he only had Pato to wave to.

And Pato had only smiled at him.

After finding his resume, he began shuffling around for a pen when the landline received a message. He blinked back his surprise. He stood, pressing on the PLAY button instantly.

*Dear Gabriel,*

*Thank you for your interest in Richardson Electronics. We would like to see you for an interview in our Illinois office at your earliest convenience. Following are the interview dates-*

He leapt to his feet, howling with laughter.

“¡PATO!” he screamed, waiting for her to respond. The shower was still running. He ran up to the door and knocked loudly.

“¡YA SALGO!” Pato shouted from inside.

“¡VENTE YA!” he exclaimed, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“UN MOMENTO, GABO,” she screamed.

He sighed, leaning against the wall with a huff.

A few moments later, she came out dressed in her restaurant uniform.

“¿Qué pasó?” she asked, drying her hair with the towel as he led her into the living room.

“Escucha,” he grinned, pressing play to the voicemail again.

Her eyes widened as the man’s voice filled their apartment.

“No me jodas,” she whispered, smiling widely.

That evening, as they finished their Chinese food leftovers, Pato brought out a stack of post it notes. Gabo stopped chewing, gazing at his wife incredulously as she began to sort through them, stacking them against their table.

*“We have to practice for the interview,”* she said, her tone serious.

Gabo sighed with the knowledge that he would be forced to practice until the day he died.

*“How are you doing today?”* Pato asked him, reading off of the first card.

*“I am doing great, how about you?”* he replied.

*“Good, good,”* she murmured, a hint of a smile slipping through.

*“How are you?”* he asked.

*“Alright,”* Pato said, showing off the fancy vocabulary words she knew.

He rolled his eyes.

*“Why do you want this position?”* she asked.

As he opened his mouth to answer, he found that he didn’t want the position. He didn’t want anything more than to return to his home, run around in the mountains. He missed Don

David. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen his friends, the people he cared about. Those were the things he truly wanted.

But he knew he had tendencies to over-dramatize things and so he tried not to dwell on that too much.

After all, wanting the job wasn't relevant; he needed it.

*“Well, I think this company would be an excellent fit for someone like me. Let me tell you why. I work very hard-”*

The phone began to ring.

Pato dropped the cards on the table and walked over to the landline, picking up the receiving end. Gabo continued practicing his response quietly to himself.

He didn't know how, but there was suddenly a definite shift; a change in the atmosphere. He turned to look at his wife, and felt himself study her.

He was waiting for something.

Gabo watched her body stiffen. Watched her shoulders lower in a tremor; watched her hang up the phone. He waited, breath caught in the center of his throat.

She turned to him, finally. Her face was unreadable.

Gabo wanted to ask, wanted to shove the phone away and protect her ears from whatever she had just heard. But it was too late, he could see, as silent tears peeled themselves from her dark eyes. She gazed at him with a look he would never forget.

“Es mi mami.”

“Nena, mi Mamá te necesita. Te tienes que venir lo antes que puedas.”

Those were the words her sister had said to her on the phone.

And they rang so hollow Pato didn't know what to feel.

She couldn't feel anything at all.

Behind her, she knew Gabo was watching her every move. Her silence was an agony to him, she knew that. But she knew that speaking it would shatter the illusion she had painted for herself. The illusion of health, of a happy life; of having her mother forever. If she spoke it, she knew it would tumble and collapse and she would be left with an uncertain future in a country she did not love. In a country she did not know, where the language still felt heavy on her tongue.

She would have nothing to go back home for.

"Es mi Mami," she murmured, and her husband wrapped his arms around her.

She couldn't feel his touch; she was too busy planning.

As she packed her things in the other room, Gabo called the airlines. He was frantic, speaking broken English and repeating himself hundreds of times. Without caring or knowing how much it cost, he managed to book one that flew out that night. It would stop at Venezuela before making its way to their home.

Gabo would stay here, he knew that. He knew he could not go with her.

And yet, a part of him was being torn to shreds. Before, back in August, he could do it without her. Sure, he had lost a little weight and forgotten some of his English, but that was nothing. This time, it was different.

He had an interview, and with that, the knowledge that everything could change in an instant.

He sighed, filled with shame. His wife was in the other room packing, and he was thinking about a job. He wasn't sure if he could do it without her, again.

But, if he didn't stay and get the position, they would *both* be on the next plane back.

Gabo looked at the table in the center of the kitchen; it was starting to peel.

Pato sat on her bed, gazing at the filled suitcase.

It carried her sweaters, two pairs of jeans. Her tennis shoes. The new skirt she had bought just months ago. A pair of sunglasses, in case they could go to the beach.

She was just a body, it seemed.

Her legs forced her to stand, and she walked over to the small cabinet where they kept the rest of their clothes.

She spotted what she was looking for.

She stood in front of it for what seemed like hours.

Finally, the decision came to a close.

Her fingers wrapped around the dress, and she threw it into the suitcase as more tears began to follow.

The dress was black.



## Oranges

*July 1998**Bogotá, Colombia*

Later on in life, there would be small details that she would picture and remember and pinpoint.

Small things, like the flight to Bogotá on a Tuesday that landed at 10:00 AM exactly.

Like passing through Venezuela.

Like the sight of her mother, sleeping in her childhood bed; the bed she had been raised in.

Like the oranges.

Oranges were the only food her mother had requested to eat; had craved. Later, when Pato had grown into adulthood, she remembered screaming for someone to get her mother oranges. She remembered sitting with her sister and her mother at the dining table, eating the bright fruit in silence. At that moment, she was content. Her mother was eating.

She remembered those things because they dug into her memory; they latched themselves to her being. She remembered them because they stuck and did not unmold themselves of their eternal rigidity.

But Pato could not remember the funeral.

The coughing of blood, the driving to the hospital, the funeral dress: these were things she did.

But the funeral would forever stay covered by a thin veil; it continued to blur her eyesight.

Her memory.

And after it all, she could only feel a bittered shadow covering her sight of God.

It would take many years before this rage settled into a watered down sorrow.

## El Único Consuelo

*August 1998**Chicago, Illinois*

When he finally caught sight of her, he almost didn't recognize her.

He had arrived at the airport an hour ago, not wanting to miss her landing. The weather was pleasant, and the sky was the color it always was, but his heart was unsteady. His breathing was hitched and he wrung his hands together, pacing. Waiting.

Pacing, and waiting.

He had bought a coffee, thanked the woman behind the counter and burnt his tongue instantly. Cursing under his breath, he blew on the steaming mug and watched the trail of passengers arrive at an excruciatingly slow pace.

He checked his watch.

He glanced up at the arrivals.

He paced.

*"Excuse me?"*

Gabo turned around, eyeing a middle aged man suspiciously.

*"Yes?"*

The man cleared his throat, *"Do you know how to get to Terminal C?"*

Gabo frowned, *"I think you have to take the airtrain. But I am not sure where that is."*

The stranger nodded, then walked off.

He took another sip of his coffee.

And then he saw her.

Her hair had been cut short, just above the shoulders; it was leaning against her tight jaw.

Her skin was pale; almost gray.

He watched her searching for him, and when her eyes landed on his own, he had to blink away the surprise.

The sight of her like this took him aback. Her eyes suddenly became puffy and red and she burst into tears. Lips quivering, he reached her and wrapped his arms around her; he cried with her.

Around them, the airport was filled with murmurs from families and loved ones. A woman screamed with joy as her daughter returned home from college. A young child leapt into her father's arms. Pato watched them all in silence, the studying look cornering her face in that familiar way it did.

Gabo watched her.

Her brows were firm, a small line crossing the skin between them. Her cheeks were pale, and almost tight against her bones.

It had been over a month and he felt like a stranger to her, almost.

And in many ways, he felt so close to her.

They drove out of the airport and there were never so few words between them. Where he would usually make a joke, he stayed silent, watching her. Always watching and waiting.

Watching the quiet, hollow nature of the woman sitting next to him.

He felt like he hadn't changed nearly enough to be seated next to her.

He had changed, of course, but only in small ways.

He had landed the job without her.

Richardson Electronics had hired him while her mother was dying. He had handled the moving process without her; the paperwork, the packing, the ridiculous boxes. The moving truckers. All of it. He had taken care of their things, of their possessions. Of their foldable table.

He had found them a temporary place in the suburbs; it was near the office. Maybe once he started making money, they could afford a house.

That seemed like an approaching possibility to him.

Pato leaned against her window and watched the Illinois landscape move past her. She could spot the city. The skyscrapers were beautiful and tall.

Alabama seemed like a distant memory now.

Gabo turned on the radio; weather forecasters began predicting rain in the next week or so. They cracked jokes to one another, their Illinois accents plain and covered in sarcasm.

He drove them from the city, and the buildings soon turned into smaller residential neighborhoods. An endless array of pleasant white houses surrounded them.

They drove into Geneva, and Gabo parked.

There was a small ice cream store across the street from where they sat. To their left, a large warehouse. A few kids ran around, screaming. It was warm. The air smelled sweet.

Pato sighed, “¿Qué vamos a hacer ahora?”

They both sat in the car, looking at the kids.

A bell chimed somewhere, and Gabo perked in his seat. He spotted a young couple walking into a small building. The door had a meatball painted over it.

Gabo felt his stomach grumble. He turned to his wife.

“¿Quieres comer pasta?”

## Coca-Cola

*December 27, 1995**Gadsden, Alabama*

The coca-cola was different.

This should not have been the first thought in Pato's mind, but it was not what she was expecting. It was neither better nor worse, but the flavor was different. Less fizzy. Maybe with less sugar, or duller in some way. It was strange to have something so ordinary taste so different from what she was accustomed to. She let the drink sit in her mouth, trying to pinpoint what was different about it.

Something definitely was.

The empty Ruby Tuesday's was playing an American song; it echoed in her ears and she tried to ignore it. Her migraine was slowly growing behind her eyelids.

Pato continued to take gentle and calculating sips of the fizzing beverage, studying the foreign airport. A group of flight attendants were rushing forward, polished fingernails brushing through wisps of sleek hair. Their uniforms were dark blue. Pilots dipped their white hats toward the women. They giggled themselves silly.

Across from her, on the other end of the table, her husband was oblivious to the passerbyers. She blinked in surprise at herself; he was her husband now, it seemed. She watched him take an abnormally large bite from his burger. Pato wanted to tell him to slow down, but she stayed quiet. Her head was beginning to ache.

She took another sip from the coca-cola.

Their two suitcases, guitar, and camera were leaning against the rocking table, almost hiding from the view of speeding Americans with dark suits. She watched the suits go by, and marveled at how dark they were; how clean and well-fitted they were. Her body had never felt so small. Overhead speakers spoke rapidly; unfamiliar faces whirred past them without pausing to take a breath.

Did they look too Colombian, she thought. She scanned the crowd, eyeing a policeman in his uniform leaning against the wall. She smoothed out her long hair, snatching her lipstick from her purse. In a quick motion, she applied another dark layer, hoping she looked kind.

Meanwhile, Gabo continued to devour his dinner, oblivious to everything. She watched him watch his food. It was all he could focus on, it seemed.

Pato glanced at the cops once more, remembering the advice her mother gave her. She bit back another sigh, already missing her family.

He's going to be sick later, she thought, watching Gabo finish his burger with a final bite. He started on the french fries silently.

The fries were greasier than he would have liked, he thought to himself. He could hear the clamor around him, and sometimes, he would spot a businessman carrying a small suitcase. The Americans were notably fatter than he thought they would be, he mused, throwing another fry into his mouth. Their voices were strange, and he could not understand any of it. He tried catching glimpses of the language as he ate, but it was too quick. Too fleeting.

Across from him, his wife was quiet.

He nearly choked on his fries as he looked at her ring.

It had all happened so fast.

They had only dated for a week, after all.

He himself felt strangely out of place beneath the title of *husband* but neither of them could change that now. They were already here.

Their tickets, crumbling from the tight-gripped journey they had encountered, lay flat against the table. Pato picked at her nails, silently watching her hunger disappear only to be replaced by an inescapable urge to buy a one-way ticket back.

The distance was already palpable.

“¿Ahora qué?” Gabo asked, taking a sip from her soda. His temperament was unreadable; his eyes were distracted, skin pale.

“Tenemos que tomar un camión para llegar a Gadsden,” Pato murmured, pulling out the list she had written out only hours before.

“Okay, pues vámonos ¿no?”

“Vamos.”

They paid the bill and carried their belongings to the nearest bus stop, hesitantly climbing aboard. The bus driver said something the two could not understand and they lurched forward.

As he peered outside at their new home, Gabo was frankly unimpressed.

The buildings were not as tall as he was used to. He didn't know why that mattered, but it did. Maybe it was because, for thirty years, he had walked along a different set of busy roads. He had sat in the horrible traffic that did not end for hours. He could feel a strange difference in the composition of the air. The smell was void of anything familiar. He searched the expanse of the

landscape they drove by, and marveled at the lack of sounds. It was empty and quiet and seemed to be drained of a population.

When she slept on his shoulder, she did not dream of anything. The soft rocking of the bus lulled her into a deeper sleep than she had experienced in the last couple of days. The days leading up to their arrival, where she had wept more than she could have imagined. Her eyes, now gently closed, fluttered every so often, but she did not wake.

A few hours later, she jolted into consciousness as the bus bumped the passengers upwards. Pato half expected to be in her bed at home, the smell of coffee and breakfast lingering.

Instead, she squinted at the red sign at the front of the bus.

*Atlanta, Georgia.*

“¡Putá, Gabo!!! ¡Gabo!”

Her husband was asleep, leaning back into his chair, his mouth propped open.

She pinched his arm, and he cursed, glaring at her deeply.

“¡Nos pasamos de Gadsden! Estamos en Atlanta.”

He frowned, “¿Qué?”

Pato huffed, exasperada, “Estamos. En. Atlanta.”

“No me hables así-”

“Estamos lejos de Gadsden, Gabo. Dile al señor que pare!!!”

“No, dile tú.”

“No puedes hacer nada, en serio,” she snapped angrily, pushing past him and leaning on the metal handlebars overhead. Walking clumsily toward the driver, she took a shaky breath and



cleared her throat. The man did not spare her a glance, gray mustache twitching as he scratched his nose.

*“Excuse me-”*

*“Next stop is in thirty, honey. Nothin’ I can do about it now. Take a seat.”*

She grumbled as she found her seat once more, glaring at the floor.

“¿Qué te dijo?”

“Pues que la próxima parada es en media hora.”

“Hijuemadre. Y ¿por qué no le dijiste que nos tenemos que bajar?”

“Gabo, ya te conté lo que dijo el señor.”

“Ay pues no, perdón entonces,” he muttered angrily, crossing his arms.

The two stared hard in front of them as the bus carried them further and further from their destination.

At the stop, they carried their suitcases off of the bus and stood in silence for a few moments. The man drove away. They had no idea where they were.

“¿Ahora qué?” Gabo asked.

Figure it out yourself, she wanted to tell him, but that was unfair. It wasn’t his fault he didn’t know a word of English, let alone how to do anything without her input.

She blamed his mother.

Squinting at the large map in front of them, the two managed to find a bus that would redirect them toward Gadsden, Alabama. They didn’t know much about the geography of the United States, but they had not anticipated the cold. Deep into the month of December, they found the air frigidly slipping through their thin sweaters and coats; Gabo particularly hated the

cold. Teeth trembling, Pato checked the small bag of money they had been carrying since leaving Bogotá. Swallowing hard, Pato watched in slight reassurance as the new bus began driving toward their stop.

The drive back felt endless, and Gabo's stomach soon began to grumble once more. He resisted the urge to ask Pato if she had snacks in her bag, because they would most likely need them later. They sat silently as the buildings rushed past them, unwilling to state the obvious fact that they were both feeling strong waves of fear for the unknown.

It's okay, Gabo thought to himself. We're only staying here for six months, after all.