

AS WE SINK

by Lucas Loredo

Everyone had left Tata's room by two o'clock except Lourdes and me. I took some time for myself out on the balcony—I can only be around Tata so long before I get tired—and sat on a white plastic chair with my feet up on the wooden railing and a Corona in my hand. The wind came off the ocean and skipped across the sand dunes, spiraling up to the seventh floor where it tugged idly at my shorts.

A young girl—maybe ten—burst onto the adjoining balcony, looked me dead in the eye, and threw an egg out into the sand. She laughed and hurried back inside. After a while, she came out again, this time followed by a toddling boy grabbing at her arm and crying, "My turn!"

The girl cocked her arm, and her eyes flashed wildly out at the dunes.

"I want to throw it," the boy said sullenly. "You said."

A moment passed, and she relented. "All right. But throw it good. Make sure it breaks." The boy took the egg and pressed his face between the railing. He concentrated, aimed between the posts, and tossed the egg underhanded. A moment later, I heard the light crack of its impact. The little boy clapped, and the girl looked to me and said, "They're free."

"Who's free?" I asked.

"The chickens," the girl replied. "We're freeing them from their shell oppressors."

After the kids had exhausted their egg supply, I finished my Corona and blew across its mouth for the low, vibrating groan. I put my straw hat back on and went inside. The ghost of the Lord's Prayer still hummed in the dining room where, an hour earlier, my family—all thirteen of us—had eaten lunch. Lourdes was bent down switching Tata's heels for slippers.

"I want to go to the bitch," Tata said to the top of Lourdes's head.

"You can't go to the beach." Lourdes pulled off one heel, then the other. "We get you an Aspirin and your knee stops hurting. And then we can walk you to the patio and you can look out at the water." She fit on the second slipper and looked up. "Entiende usted?"

"Cómo?"

"No beach."

"Mierda," Tata bit off the word. *Shit.*

The rare apparition of Uncle Manuel passed from the kitchen to the dining room. I hadn't known he was still here. He held a paper plate of leftover brisket. "Hey, Manolito," I said. He nodded to me and sat down at the table's end. After his first son, Simon, died of a heart defect, Manolito began haunting the fringes of our family like a specter. I hadn't heard him speak in over a year. Lourdes took away Tata's heels and went to the bathroom. She closed the door. I put my hands on Tata's shoulders. "Oye linda," I said. *Hey pretty.* "I have something for you."

Her fingers searched for mine. "Papa?"

"No." I moved so she could get a good look at my face. "Tu nieto favorito," I said. *Your favorite grandson.*

She traced the thread of my voice to its source. "Danny."

“You said you wanted one.” I handed her my college graduation photograph. “So stop forgetting me all the time, okay?” I cuffed her on the shoulder as light as a breath.

Manolito got up and passed again into the kitchen. I heard the rattling of cookware and the scraping of metal, and he came back with another full plate. For all his eating, he’d still lost weight. He was sallow now, gaunt, like someone had peeled back his husk to reveal the smaller, sicklier man who lived underneath. He sat back down and, chin to chest, consumed brisket.

Tata held the photograph in her hands. “Que lindo,” she cooed. *How handsome.* After a moment the picture sank slowly into her lap, her eyes clouding over. I’d seen photos of Tata when she was my age. Her black hair was kept in close ringlets, and her neck curved soft and elegant like the bow of a ship. Now, though, as I looked down at the collapsing hull of her chest and the exposed, tan leather of her scalp, it was hard to imagine her ever being so young. Now she was brittle, like a grand shipping vessel sunk to the ocean’s bottom, honeycombed by the corrosive salt of years. “Lindo, lindo,” she said again.

The bathroom door opened. Lourdes now had on eyeshadow and lipstick, which didn't do much to soften the severity always riding the lines of her mouth and brow. “We’re out of Aspirin,” she said.

“I can take her to get some,” I offered. “They have it in the office downstairs.”

“She can stay here,” said Lourdes.

For a moment the old Tata flashed bright, and her words had the quick bite of snare drum chatter. “No hables de mí como si no estuviera aquí. Si quiero bajar, lo haré. No soy niña.” *Don't talk about me like I'm not here. If I want to go downstairs, I'll go downstairs. I'm not a little girl.*

Lourdes considered. She closed her eyes; the lids were parrot green. Then she fixed me with her gaze. “No detours,” she said, and the words hung above her head in capital letters like the guiding tenet of her life.

Tata smiled, her battle won. “Claro,” she winked at me. *We would never.*

I wheeled Tata out into the open-air hallway. The Gulfstream condominium complex was the shape of a horseshoe. Its monolithic concrete sides hooked around a teardrop pool filled with cannoning shouts and volleys of laughter. The heavy Texas air pushed down on the tops of dead banana trees. Across the compound and two floors down, a mother herded two little girls and a menagerie of pool toys into a room. Above, white seagulls hung suspended in a delicate mobile. The salty scent of brine was so strong you could lick it from the air. As I pushed Tata to the elevator, I looked sideways over the banister and gathered spit. *Freeing my saliva from its oral oppressor.* I judged the distance, then spat.

Tata reached for the rail. “Now me,” she said.

I wheeled her to a stop and pushed her up against the warped, wooden barrier. She pursed her lips and gathered a bead of spit. Slowly she leaned forward, her face poised above the seven-floor drop, head swaying back and forth like the side-to-side meditations of a praying mantis. She spat, and we watched it fall. Her smile was traviesa—*mischievous*. “Watch out for me,” she said.

At the elevator, Tata pushed a withered finger to the call button. While we waited, the egg kids, freshly sunblocked, ran toward us with boogie boards.

“They’re huge!” the girl shouted.

“Good waves?” I asked.

“We saw them,” the boy said.

“From the balcony,” the girl amended.

“How about those eggs?”

“*Chickens*,” the girl said. “They’re all free now.”

The elevator door opened. I wheeled Tata inside, and the kids followed. Tata looked down and noticed her cotton gown for the first time. “Esto es jodido,” she said. *This is fucked.*

“You don’t like your outfit?”

She gave me the eye. “I look like an old lady. And I am cold.”

“Want an extra shirt?”

Tata looked me over. “I like white,” she said.

I peeled off my top, and the kids grew quiet and unmoving as I lay it across Tata’s chest and tucked it between her shoulder blades and the back of her wheelchair. The elevator went down, shuddering at each floor, and when the doors opened at ground level, the two kids bolted.

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In the front office, Randall sat behind a linoleum-topped counter. He had more acne than last year, and he picked at it absentmindedly as he watched the Texas Rangers play ball on a small, static-filled television.

“More Aspirin?” he asked. The picture cut out. He jumped and struck the TV with an open palm.

“Yeah. Achy knee.”

Randall sank back into his chair and opened one drawer, then another, his eyes locked on a pop fly to center field. Only when the ball was safely caught did he look into the drawers.

“Aspirin, Aspirin . . .”

Giggling drifted from the break room, and Allie emerged. Her parents owned the Gulf Stream. She'd been working staff since forever, but lately she seemed to be operating the condos on her own. I'd known her since I was a boy, and I kept a carefully curated exhibit of Allie memories in my brain: When I was four, thirteen-year-old Allie rushed to the beach to rub my thigh with Gojo after a jellyfish wrapped itself around my leg; the summer I saw her trying to catch seagulls under a salad bowl with her boyfriend, she was sixteen; it was a blow when I was ten and she was nineteen and pregnant, but the realization that having children meant sex—and that she must have had it—made her seem different, feline. As I grew up, I watched her. Allie at twenty-one, a pool strainer against her waist, fishing a broad banana leaf from the water. Allie at twenty-three, on the office floor scrubbing grout, a blue bucket at her side. Allie at night last summer, floating on her back in a one-piece bathing suit, her black hair illuminated by the pool light, humming so quietly it could have only been for me.

She put her hand on Randall's shoulder. “Danny,” she smiled. “I was worried I wasn't going to see you.”

Tata held up the photo I had given her so Allie could see. “Mi nieto favorito,” she beamed.

“You remember my grandmother,” I said.

“Tata. Of course I do.” She leaned over the counter and took my grandmother's hand.

“You look beautiful today.”

Tata's eyes widened. She laughed. "I am a movie star." She grabbed my wrist. "And this is my boyfriend."

Allie's eyes were upon me. "And what a boyfriend you have."

"They need Aspirin," Randall cut in.

"You checked the drawers?"

"Yes, I checked the drawers."

Allie checked anyway. As she bent down, I caught sight of the protruding black tongue of her thong. Something painful pulled at my chest's center.

"No Aspirin," she said. The boy rolled his eyes. "I'll get some, and when I do I'll call you."

"You don't have to do that."

"I'm going for beer anyway. What room are you in?"

"Seven nineteen . . . or seven thirteen? I can't remember."

Allie brought out a pad of paper. "Write down your cell." She gave me a pencil, her hand brushing mine. "It's about time I had your number, anyway."

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On the way back to the elevator, Tata said, "Bonita."

"She's too old," I said.

"Old?" Tata's hands retreated under the shirt I'd laid across her. "*I* am old."

As we passed the beach entryway, Tata reached out and grabbed her left brake. The wheelchair spun, and we were looking out toward the ocean. I bent down to release the brake, but Tata pushed my wrist away. "Wait," she said.

“Tata, we need to get back to the room.”

“I want to go to the bitch.”

I reached again for the brake release, but she swatted me. “Lourdes would never let me hear the end of it.” I thought of her floating credo: *No detours*. “She’d quit.”

Tata looked out the slatted-wood door that framed the sea. “I will quit,” she said. The sound of the ocean rolled through the open-air hallway. She breathed in slowly, then hacked twice. “Hijole,” she cursed. *Damnit*. The sound of the waves pulled away, then rushed again, and a single thought rose like a buoy in my mind: Lourdes, I decided, could get hosed.

“Okay,” I said. I took my sunglasses from my shorts pocket and slid them over her ears. “Let’s go to the beach.”

Her hands rose to her face. “Qué haces?”

I lifted the straw hat from my head and placed it on hers. “I’m making you into a movie star. Also, I don’t want your head to get sunburned.”

“Ah,” she said, the fog lifting. She pulled the brim down on her sunglasses and looked at me coyly. “Quién soy?” she asked. *Who am I?*

“Who do you want to be?”

“Someone famous,” she said.

“Dolly Parton.”

“No. *Cubana*.”

I wracked my brain for the most beautiful Cuban I could think of. “Celia Cruz,” I decided.

“That is the one.” She stuck her fingers out from her breasts like imaginary nipples.

“Celia.”

I released Tata’s brake and pushed her toward the beach entryway. The door, made heavy to resist the constant, battering winds of the sea, closed on her chair as we tried to pass through. “Coño,” she said. *Fuck*. I tried to open the door, but it closed on her again. “Coño.” I braced my right arm against the door and leaned into it. I reached back to push Tata through with my left hand, but I couldn’t get purchase. Tata jerked forward and back in a feeble scooting motion, trying to get the wheels to give.

“Push,” she said.

“I am.”

“But *push*.”

“I am!”

“No seas mariquita,” she said. *Don’t be a pussy*.

I dug my hand into the wheelchair grip and heaved, Tata scooted, and the wheel gave a quarter turn. I set my feet. I dug in again. I heaved. The wheels whined and then revolved, and as we slipped through, the entryway door crashed closed behind us. Tata yipped and clapped her hands as we careened out onto the pathway leading to the cement boardwalk.

“We are fugitivos,” Tata said. She smiled traviesa again. “They will not catch us now.”

I wheeled Tata along the boardwalk to the stairs that led down to the sand. I put on her brake. The cement was hot, and I was barefoot. “Wait here,” I said.

“Where could I go?” she said.

“True.”

“Where are you going?”

“The cement’s too hot for my feet.”

“Cómo?”

“Hace calor,” I said. “I’ll be right back.” I left her there at the top of the stairs. She tried to watch me leave, but after a moment she turned toward the ocean. I was an idiot for not bringing my flip-flops. I walked quickly to the foot rinse, sat down on the grass, and bathed my feet in cool water, hoping I’d buy myself enough time to get Tata to the shoreline. When I returned, Tata had taken off the hat and sunglasses. I plucked them from her lap. “Why’d you do that?” I asked, replacing them.

“Cuba,” she said.

I followed her gaze. “I don’t think you can see it from here.”

“Vamos.” She took hold of her armrests and tried to stand.

“Hold on.” I placed my hands on her shoulders until, like a pigeon being coaxed gently back into its coop, she settled back into her wheelchair. I hadn’t thought this through. Tata could barely walk on flat ground, let alone down a flight of stairs, and then there was the issue of rolling her wheelchair across the open sand. And how would I get her back up the stairs? Would she sit at the top while I brought up the wheelchair? Could she even sit on something as hard as concrete?

“You see the beach?” I said.

“No.”

“Sure you do—it’s all here.” I opened my arms. “Right here.”

“But *down*.” She pointed to the shoreline.

“Your knee hurts.”

She waved me away. “Knees are for walking.” She gave them an exploratory tap. “You see?”

“Lourdes will kill me.”

She raised a trembling fist. “I will kill you.”

I looked out over the sand for a family member—there were too many of us for no one else to be on the beach—but it was a zoo. Tents met in small colonies—A&M flags, Longhorn flags, and Tech flags displayed proudly like troupe crests—and girls lay out on the glittering sand like salmon, oiled and baking. Their male counterparts rifled footballs and tackled each other, spraying sweat. Out in the distance, two fishermen wandered the shallows in their waders, a beer in their front rubber chest pockets, casting their lines. I didn't recognize a single face.

“Do you think you can get on my back?” I asked.

“Cómo?”

“I don't know, Tata. The water's far. Maybe I can carry you.”

“I can see it. I can walk.”

“Let's just watch from up here. Isn't this pretty nice, just like this?”

“No me trates como una niña,” she said. *Don't treat me like a child.*

I registered faintly that the water soaking my feet was evaporating. If we were going to make it, we'd have to hurry. I bent down and put the locks on the wheelchair. “I hope your hat's on tight.”

She pulled it down and modeled for me. “I look good?”

“Como una reina,” I said. *Like a queen.* I wrapped my right arm around Tata's waist and put my head under her armpit, my ear against her shoulder. My nose picked up the fermented-apple scent of her perfume. I grabbed her left hand with mine. “Can you stand?” In response she leaned forward, her face suddenly grim, holding onto me. “Ready?” I said. She nodded. “Okay. One. Two. *Three!*” She pushed, I pulled, and we tried to gain enough momentum to rise. The machinery of her body groaned and sputtered. Rust crumbled away. Ball sockets and hinged joints whined at the unfamiliar stress of locomotion. Her frame shuddered and for a moment threatened collapse, but she let out a final gasp of steam and, almost without knowing it, we were up.

“Híjole,” she cussed.

We took a moment there. I was aware of my feet now. “One step at a time,” I said.

“Sí.”

“Ready?”

“Sí.”

I moved down one step, and her body, suddenly unmoored, swayed in the wind. She lifted her slippered right foot and prodded the air. My phone buzzed in my pocket.

“Teléfono?”

“Keep stepping.”

“Tu novia.”

“I don't have a girlfriend.” Her foot reached down and held, and her trailing left foot followed. We were down one step. She reached for my pocket. “Tata, come on.”

“It could be your girlfriend.”

“I said I don’t have a girlfriend.” With my free hand I wrestled out my phone. It was Allie: *I found aspirin! And now you have my number. Come and get it.*

“Quién es?”

“They got your Aspirin.”

“She is beautiful.”

“Let’s keep stepping.”

In the time it took us to navigate two more steps, the water had totally evaporated. “My feet are burning,” I said. “Like, really burning. I have to carry you.”

“You cannot carry me.”

“If I don’t carry you there’s no way we’re making it to the water.”

“No.”

I exhaled. “Why not, Tata?”

“My dress. People will see up.”

“Tata.” I was begging now.

She cast her foot out again, baiting the air for an anchor. My phone buzzed with another text. Allie again: *I’d love to see you tonight. Coronas?* My brain went quiet. Then, slowly, like a single shimmering pocket of air rising through the silent, black depths of the ocean, an image revealed itself: Allie and me in the office that night alone, the glow of the refrigerator cutting a triangle of light across the break room floor; her reaching for beers, and, later, for my hand; a swell, a tide steadily rising; after, her humming that sweet siren song, and a new Allie memory to be kept under lock and key in a golden vault. What I couldn’t see in all this was my face—in the vision, it was some other Danny doing these things, and as the image faded I knew that if Allie

called on me—even if she sent up a flare to light my way—I would not have the courage to follow.

The needling sting of the concrete brought me back. The bottoms of my feet, I knew, were taking serious damage. My sweaty side stuck to Tata's white, cotton gown. I gripped my grandmother's waist, hard, and for a moment I wished she would evaporate from my life. "No one wants to see your fucking underwear, Tata. Okay?"

She looked at me, her slippered foot still hung out in the air, and right then I think I destroyed the last levee guarding her mind from the brackish water surrounding it. "¿Dónde está Papa?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry."

"¿Quién eres tú?"

"I'm sorry."

"¿Quién?"

"Danny." I was barely audible. "I'm Danny."

"Oh," Tata said. "I forgot you."

Manolito was upon us before I realized he'd spoken. "What in the hell're you doing?" he asked.

My feet hurt too bad for questions. "Hold her," I said, and ran up the stairs to the foot rinse. I twisted the handle and bathed my feet in cool water. The burning intensified, then subsided. I sat down on the grass and let the water run a while longer, then a little longer still. As my feet cooled, blisters rose. I looked up to check on Tata and saw Manolito standing beside her, his arm around her waist. I found an abandoned toy bucket near the wash and filled it with water.

I dumped it across the concrete until it inked a thick line between me and the stairs. I filled the bucket again, brought it to where Tata and Manolito were waiting, and sent water down the steps.

“Why is she down here?” Manolito asked. Despite his thinness, his voice had gained a new gravity in the year since I'd last heard it, as if it had been returned to the earth. “This isn't any place for her.”

“Papa is taking me to the bitch,” Tata said.

“Papa?” Manolito asked.

“We need help,” I said.

Manolito looked at the stairs, assessing options. “Let's get her back to the chair.”

We moved slowly back up the steps, one of us on each side of my grandmother. When she realized we were taking her back to the wheelchair, she started to cuss. “Mierda,” she said. *Shit*. “Jodida. Coño. Come mierda.” *This is fucked. Dammit. Shitheads*. We sat her down in the chair. I lay my shirt back across her chest. She hid her hands under it. “*Jodida*,” she repeated slowly, relishing the word.

“We'll carry her,” Manolito said.

“In the chair?”

“Grab the wheels, low.”

Manolito checked the parking brake and took the right wheel in his hands. I grabbed the left wheel. He said, “Okay—go,” and together we lifted my grandmother into the air. We carried Tata in her wheelchair down the stairs, across the sand, past the troupe crests, through the shimmering rows of salmon girls, and out onto the shoreline. My arms almost came off, but

Manolito seemed fine, just sweating a little, jaw set. At one point, Tata raised her arms in the air and said, “La reina.”

We put her down close to the water. She took off her sunglasses, but I was too tired to make her put them back on. After a while, Manolito said, “What’s wrong with you?”

“She said she wanted to go to the beach.”

“So? You don’t give a child what she wants all the time.”

I was quiet.

“Well, we’re here,” he said. Then he surprised me; he sat down on the sand. So I sat down, too. Every so often a thin sheet of ocean slid under our heels. The fishermen were off to our left now, two blue herons picking through the shallows. I spotted the egg kids out in the waves, the girl helping push her little brother and his boogie board down the glassy face of a thick breaker.

“How’s Thomas?” I asked. Thomas was the second, final son.

“College, you know.” We were talking across Tata’s lap. “Doing all sorts of shit. He thinks I don’t know he smokes weed. Like my nose doesn’t work.”

More time sat down between us.

“Mr. Graduation,” he finally said. “Big time. What’s the plan?”

I slowly bored a hole in the sand with my finger. “I’m running around an office for now, but just for my resume. I want to do space, you know—space shuttles.”

“I know a guy, studied aerospace engineering like you. He got a real good job designing airline seats. I bet you’ve sat in them. How much they recline, you know, tray tables, seat belts, all that. You should talk to him.”

“That’s not exactly spaceships.”

“But it’s useful. Can you go to Florida in a spaceship? Can you pay bills with a spaceship?”

“Well, maybe.”

He rubbed the plastic nub of Tata’s brake handle. “You know what I used to do? I worked on job sites. I wore a hardhat. Now I’m a project manager, and we live in a bigger house. We do more and buy more and my truck’s bigger.”

“When did you become a manager?”

“After Simon died.”

I hadn’t heard that name in a while. “But you could work on job sites again, couldn’t you? You could if you wanted to.”

“It’s not that way. That’s what I’m saying. You want to build spaceships, okay. I want to be Frank Lloyd Wright. But it’s not what you *like*, it’s the way you live. You can’t stop it. Life’s this big machine that gets bigger and bigger and needs more and more gas. And the only new job I’m getting is one higher up with more money, and the only way I’m seeing a construction site again is if I get an office with a window. There’s Frank Lloyd Wright and then there’s everyone else, and I’m everyone else. And probably you are, too.”

Manolito's eyes traced the path of years in front of him and saw how his life would be. For a brief moment, I saw the shape of the tea leaves predicting my life, too. I shivered.

Tata took my white shirt off her chest and lifted it up, signaling to someone across the water. She looked down at me, her eyes the last blue sip of milk at the bottom of a glass. “Papa,” she said. “Veas a Cuba?”

“This is your *grandson*,” Manolito said. “*Danny*.”

“Eh?”

“Tu nieto favorito,” I reminded her.

She pointed out at the oil rigs dotting the horizon. “Cuba.”

I touched her shoulder. “Texas.”

She shook her head and repeated, gently, as if to a child: “*Cuba*.”