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2004

‘**A** *milpa*,’ I said.

I stood up on my chair in the dining room and said, ‘A proper, traditional *milpa*, with corn and beans and squash. I could plant it myself, right next to the picnic table.’

I drew a great circle in the air with my hands and proclaimed, ‘Like our forefathers.’

The three of us looked out of the sliding door to the yard where the picnic table lives. Once upon a time it was folding and portable. The benches on either side slot underneath like the retracting feet of a turtle, and the whole thing transformed into a neat aluminum travel case. Not anymore. It’d probably still fold up, but no one seems keen on picnics these days. Around the table there’s just gray cement (dirty gray), and a row of flowerpots full of dry soil, the remains of some bushes, a broken bucket. It’s a colorless, urban yard. If you spot something green, it’s moss you’re looking at; something red and it’ll be rust.

‘And herbs,’ I told them. ‘Parsley, cilantro, tomatillos, and chili for the green salsa Dad makes when we have people over.’

Dad bought into the idea straight away. He asked for some of those knobby tomatoes he once ate on tour in California. But Mom, the one who supposedly loves plants, wasn't having any of it. She went to her room before I'd even got off the chair, and only agreed to the deal three days later. We wrote the full agreement on a napkin, then signed it, making one small change to appeal to Mom's gringo sensibility: 'a *milpa* with some grass on it'. A *milpa*-garden, if you will. There's a history of *milpas* in our little development, Belldrop Mews. I'm not the first to try it. But anyway, now it's official: 'In exchange for plowing, planting, and tending the yard, Ana is excused from summer camp and may spend her vacation at home.'

My own home, I might add. Doesn't this essentially mean I'm paying rent? Other people might see it that way. Not my parents. They're really into fair trade. Fair trade and nature. Mom grew up next to a lake. She gets nostalgic about dragonflies.

In Mom's head, summer camp = privileged childhood. But in this case camp is just a coded way of saying that my siblings and I spend two months with her stepmother, Grandma Emma, swimming among the weeds and feeding pebbles to the ducks in the lake by her house. Mom equates a passion for these kinds of activities with a healthy constitution; something like drinking a glass of milk a day or waking up with the birds. She brought us up in Mexico City, and yet she doesn't want us to be city-kids, which is exactly what we are. She's been living here twenty years and still ties a hippie scarf around her head: her personal take on the national flags other expats hang from their windows. Uprooted. This is how Mom refers to herself when we have visitors and she's drinking red wine

and her teeth and tongue start turning black. When I was little, I imagined wiry roots growing out of her feet, filling her bed with soil.

Protestant is another way Mom describes herself. And the word comes with a specific gesture: a slow flick of her wrist, a kind of curtsy of the hand; as much to defend as to mock herself. Within the family the mere gesture has come to mean Protestant. It's our way of laughing at Mom's neuroses: for a job well done; for punctuality. When someone flicks their wrist it's like they're dusting off the invisible cobwebs of Mexico's Catholicism. Or it means it's time to go to the airport, even if it's too early. No matter who does it, the rest of us will translate the wrist-flick as 'Behold, the Protestant ethic.'

The truth is there's a Walmart next to her childhood lake now. But it's not wise to bring that up. Neither that nor the suggestion that she too could go visit Emma. Mom tends to forget that the uprooting was her own doing. Sometimes I think I should do the same. Pack my things and get out of here the moment I hit fourteen. But I won't, because she would just love that: her eldest daughter following in her footsteps. That'd be the family's interpretation, no doubt about it. Mom twists things with the same firm delicacy she uses to fold our clothes and wring out the mop. I've seen pictures of her from when she was fifteen, with her cello between her legs and no shoes on. It was easy to vanish when you looked like that. Easy to float up and away. When I sit down my thighs meet, and there's always something spilling out from the waistband of my pants, or my chair, or my mouth. And I'm a lost cause when it comes to rhythm. Same with adventures. I suspect if I ever ran away, I'd only end up coming back.

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Now we have two sacks of ‘optimized’ soil. The owner of the garden center convinced me that our soil, the stuff that’s already there in the yard, won’t do. He told us it’s contaminated with lead. He told us that throughout the whole of Cuauhtémoc, the whole of Benito Juárez, and the whole of the city center, there are 1,300 micrograms of lead for every kilo of soil. I’m not sure I believe him, but in any case I bought some of his. Really I bought it so that my best friend Pina and I could get the heck out of there. He didn’t stare at our titties or anything, but he did sink his hands slowly into the sack of soil, all the way up to his forearm, while lecturing us about terrains and fertilizers. At that point, Pina, who’d only come on the condition that I buy her a half-liter of *horchata* afterward, dug her elbow into me.

‘Buy the soil,’ she said. ‘There’s enough shit in our tuna already.’

After we left, we hung out at La Michoacana, an establishment that by all appearances survives solely off our business.

‘You think he was a pervert?’ I asked Pina.

Pi licked her lips, stroked one of the sacks and moaned, ‘Mm, soil.’

Then she put her hand between her legs.

‘Mm, a little lead worm!’

Sometimes I truly resent having to be seen with her in public. The rest of the time I just feel jealous. I don’t know how to say no to Pina. When we were in fourth grade she made me play a game where you scratched your hand until it bled. Then we did a blood pact to be sisters. But lately

we're not so similar: everything she does, everything that happens to her, makes me jealous. It's all so much more exciting than anything going on in my life. And I don't know when this started. Actually, I do. It started when her mom reappeared. Before that we each had our own ghost: she had her mom and I had my sister. But three months ago her ghost contacted her online. It's not the same, obviously, your mother leaving or your sister dying. But what's worse: a mother that reappears out of nowhere, or one that never leaves the house?

Pina has stopped moaning.

'Don't say "pervert",' she says.

'Why not?'

'It's what assholes call gay people. It's a discrimatry word.'

'Discriminatory.'

'Whatever.'

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'Shall I just throw the new soil on top of the old soil and forget about it?'

We're in my yard. Pina's got one arm raised, with her head turned in toward her armpit. With the help of some tweezers, which she's holding in the other hand, she slowly plucks out the hairs. When her neck gets stiff, she changes side. She looks like a heron: beautiful and twisted. I stare at the sacks of new soil but they're not hiding any answers. My current favorite word is 'ennui'. This is ennui: that time of the day when even the flies are sleepy. Everything is still. Everything stinks of dust and cement. I don't know about

lead, but I did find a flip-flop in the old soil. And some bottle tops. And my cuddly toy dog who disappeared a zillion years ago, clearly buried with malice aforethought. If my brothers weren't at camp, I'd be taking my revenge.

'You have to take off the old soil first,' says Pina, who doesn't have a clue what she's talking about.

'And what am I supposed to do with it then?'

'You sell it to Marina. Or give it to her, so she can plant something and eat it.'

'With lead in it?'

'It's a mineral, Ana. She could do with it.'

'Maybe she could do with reading *Umami*.'

'What's that?'

'Alf's book. I lent it to you a zillion years ago.'

'I gave it to someone else. Was it a novel about pedophilia?'

'Not even remotely. It was an anthropological essay on the relationship between the fifth taste and pre-Hispanic food. Do you even know which mews you live in?'

'Yes, Ana, I know what umami is, but why would he write a book with the same name as his house?'

'You are so dumb.'

'You're the dumb one who doesn't know what to do with your dirt.'

Dad comes out through the sliding door. He got rid of his beard a couple of weeks ago and I still haven't got used to it. He looks younger. Or maybe uglier. The other day I turned up at one of his rehearsals so he could give me a ride home and I barely recognized him. Throughout his entire career he's always sat at the very back of the stage, but even then I never had trouble picking him out. Obviously, this was because of

the beard. But now's not the moment to bring it up. I hand him the twenty pesos left over from the garden center.

Dad sits down on a bench with a beer and props his feet up on my sacks of soil. He puts the money in his wallet. I promised him the project would be 'a sound investment', but the truth is, I don't even know what that means.

I explain about the nitrogen in the soil first: about how the corn will absorb it and the beans will replace it again. Then I explain about the lead, maybe exaggerating a little bit. ('Toxic,' I say. And, 'carcinogenic.')

He seems interested so I go on. I tell him we're going to nixtamalize our corn ourselves, the way Mexicans have always done, and unlike the Europeans, who took our corn but not our wisdom and went on to die of pellagra for centuries without the slightest clue of what was killing them.

'It was the lack of niacin, in case you're wondering.'

Pina rolls her eyes. Dad is watching Mom through the window. She's wearing an orangey turban and her lips are moving as she washes the dishes. She looks like a Japanese carp. We agree not to tell her the bit about the lead because she's one of those people whose heart breaks at the mere mention of pollution and/or progress.

I propose to Dad that we buy a hose. He makes some calculations. Fretting about money is one of his tics. It makes him go cross-eyed. I list off all the different types of tomatoes to distract him.

'Some of them will be green,' I promise him, 'and others deep purple.'

Pina helps. She raises her tweezers and traces vertical lines with them.

‘Some of them will be stripy,’ she says.

Dad perks up at this. He goes into the kitchen for another beer and we watch him try to convince Mom to come out.

‘Tiger tomatoes,’ he’s saying to her. ‘Quality time,’ he adds in English, with his Mexican accent that used to make her laugh. But Mom doesn’t come out. She doesn’t believe in yards. In her head a yard is something pathetic and wasted; something that wallows in its own filth; something constricted.

‘Don’t you think she’s too skinny?’ asks Pina.

‘Who?’

‘Marina!’

Dad comes out and announces that he’s not going to buy me any tools. I’ll have to borrow some. I’d put money on this being Mom’s fault: she’s always telling him he spoils me. I ask him who exactly he thinks is going to lend me tools, but he just crushes his empty beer can with his foot. He’s played timpani in the National Symphony Orchestra for twenty years: when he makes a sound, he knows how to let it resonate. He looks up after a while and sits gazing at Pina.

‘Doesn’t that hurt?’ he asks her.

‘Yeah, it does,’ she replies.

‘Then why not just shave?’

‘Because then they grow back quicker,’ I explain through gritted teeth.

Dad takes the hint and doesn’t ask any more questions. Pina puts the tweezers in her shorts pocket, crosses her arms and clutches both hands under her armpits.

‘I better go pack,’ she says, getting up and giving us each a kiss.

‘Aren’t you staying for lunch?’

‘I can’t, I’m going to see Chela tomorrow and I still haven’t got sunblock and blah blah blah.’

‘Tell her I said hi,’ Dad says.

But I don’t know what to say and Pina leaves. Through the window we watch her hug Mom: Japanese carp, Chinese heron.

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An email arrives from my brothers, who have just landed in Michigan. We always get our plane tickets courtesy of the airline that my granddad, the one we can’t remember, worked for as a pilot. When I was little, there was nothing in the world more exciting than flying with them, as if we were all part of one big, brilliant extended family, where there were blue washbags full of goodies for the grandchildren of pilots, infinitely better than my friends’ party favors. At the airport they’d hang a badge around my neck, and I’d take charge of my siblings. Back when there were still four of us, we didn’t all fit in one row. I would sit on the other side of the aisle and pretend I was traveling on my own. Emma didn’t even have Internet in those days. Now she can’t stop forwarding things. She sent us an email recently about skin cancer; one of those PowerPoint slideshows that get shared endlessly online. And this probably explains why in the photo attached to the email Theo is wearing a baseball cap, Olmo a visor, and Emma a conical Asian hat, no doubt from Penny Savers where she buys everything in threes because she knows they’ll fall apart. All three of them have the unique phantasmagorical skin tone of cheap total sunblock, and Emma has a cigarette between

her fingers. There's not a PowerPoint in the world that could convince her to give those up.

Last year, Theo tried to explain to Emma that it would make more sense for her to buy one decent-quality flashlight, let's say, than three crappy ones. Emma let him finish then said, 'Well, you obviously never lived through a war.'

Theo was too slow to react, because by the time he'd said, 'Neither did you!' Emma had already wandered off in the direction of the detergent aisle, her trolley packed with triplicate items. Whenever anybody tries to take her up on this habit of hers – so inconsistent with the rest of her so-called off-the-grid and, as she would have it, antiestablishment ways – Emma defends herself, arguing that by shopping in Penny Savers she's doing her bit for the Burmese economy.

'Or Taiwanese, or one of those countries in the process of expansion.'

'The universe is the only thing expanding,' Theo tells her. And she says, 'Alrighty, then.'

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Mom cries at the email, and the photos. She gets worse in summertime. Like a dirty river carrying trash, the summer drags the anniversary of my sister's death to our door. She was the youngest.

'The dumbest, you say?' a deaf aunt asked me one day during those weeks when family kept crawling out from under stones, like insects that only live for one day (the day of condolence).

'NO!' I shouted back. 'I said she was the YOUNGEST!'

Luz was almost six when she drowned. That's what she'd say from the day she turned five: 'I'm almost six.' Mom hasn't gone back to the lake since, but she insists on sending us. To her mind, if you fall off the horse you have to get right back on again. Or if not you, at least your kids.

'Is there anything you want to say to your children?' the psychologist asked, the one time we went to group therapy, not long after Luz died. Dad, Theo and I had been talking for an hour, but Mom hadn't said a single word. Nor had Olmo, who was really little. The doctor raised her eyebrows, as if to remind Mom that our future was in the balance, our mental health at stake; all those things she had spent the last hour repeating. In the end, Mom gave in. She looked at us one by one, her three remaining children, and, so slowly you could make out the foreignness in her accent, she said, 'Kids, you are very brave, and I am not a fish.'