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Promises

Ten cuidado con los helicópteros negros. You know they can bite. Mamá recites the dragonfly warning every time the rain drizzles against our kitchen windows.

“Maybe they’re not really poisonous.” I try to convince her – myself.

Every time my mother talks about the black dragonflies, my left eyelid beats. That means the humming will follow. The sound comes from every electric plug in our house until it spreads to the backseat speakers of the car, seeps from the drain in my bathtub, and makes its way inside my clothes.

My mother drops her basket on the floor and takes three quick strides toward me. Her eyes dart in all directions. They search for a haven, a safe moment, to discuss the sacred knowledge of the *familia*.

“You’ve seen them. They fly up to your face.”

She cradles my face between her two palms.

The scar on her right hand grazes my skin. She notices I’m looking at it, thinking about her missing finger, and takes her hands away.

“They can hurt your eyes. Your tía used to say they wanted to nest in them. She swore they would nest, like a spider.”

I see the attack as it could’ve happened: the zigzag movements of the insect, scratched flesh, blood, its pincers on my skin, the open sore, more blood.

She confirms the fear in my eyes and steps back.

“That’s what they say. Keep thinking it’s only an old superstition. But, you’ll see. Just let one of them get close. Then you’ll know who was right.”

A sputtering sound comes from the other side of the front door. It’s the sound of insect wings breaking.

She hears it and clutches my wrists to her heart.

I pull my hand away. “It’s probably dead.”

“Then that means that someone’s going to die.”

She stops to listen for exhausted life. To her disappointment, the insect starts to bang its body back and forth against the glass. She is quick in her response. Mamá mutters fragments of the Hail Mary prayer and crosses herself before picking up her laundry bin again. Her footsteps make their way up the stairs until they fade into her room.

I let the old surge of curiosity consume me again. It runs through my fingers, as it always does during these dragonfly encounters. These motions are all part of an old ritual I’ve never finished. My hand sweat always makes the doorknob slide under my grasp. And just when the door swings open and I finally confront one of my childhood villains, the dragonfly always flies next to me or towards me until it compels my arm to tug the door closed again. It’s been ten years since my mind first played with the idea of touching one, of lifting its wings and testing if they really do crumble under the touch of my oily fingertips, of bringing its dead shell to my mother and proving her wrong. But I’m not sure what scares me anymore. If I’m scared because of the stories or because I’m afraid to discover that the old superstitions aren’t real.

The sputtering stops and I convince myself it won’t fly into my face because it’s most likely dead and then try to recall if dragonflies have any kind of stingers or antennae. I remember a butterfly that once landed on my cheek, how firmly it grasped my flesh. It looked like something or someone had folded a painting of warm water-colored sequins and glued a thin

cockroach to the folded edge.

Mamá realizes the door is open and yells from her room, “A dead dragonfly means someone is going to die. Close the door. You shouldn’t look at them, it’ll –”

“Bring in bad luck. *Sí lo se*. I already know. You always tell me that.”

I grab the doorknob and twist it 360 degrees. I see that the black dragonfly isn’t dead but clinging to the wall on the right side of the door. It is the size of my older brother’s hand.

“Caro, promise you’ll stay away from those dragonflies?”

“I promise. I’m just throwing out the garbage.” Just as I finish lying to Mamá, I cross the threshold of the door and leave the warnings behind me.

“You shouldn’t lie like that.”

A soft elderly woman’s voice greets me.

I turn around, expecting my mother to be standing behind me with her arms crossed. There’s only an empty kitchen behind me.

“*Aquí!* Over here!” The lack of patience in her voice is familiar.

Angry that I might have become the victim of another of my brother’s pranks, I ask the empty courtyard, “Who’s there? Come out from your cave. I know it’s you!”

The black dragonfly flies upwards to reach my eye-level.

“You shouldn’t break promises,” The dragonfly repeats. “Didn’t your mother teach you the story of broken promises?”

“*Hijuemadre!*”

Just as the last word echoes through the air, the tips of dragonfly’s right wings begin to rip, as if the curse word has inflicted a hex upon it.

The dragonfly struggles to balance its wings as it flies closer my face, “Stop cursing, *grosera!* Do you want me to die?”

The insect’s whole body looks like the kind of giant black ant you’d hope to only see on a National Geographic special. And then there’s the head. It has the human head of a somewhat flat-faced old woman, with long thinning white hair, and quicksilver eyes. Whenever she stops talking, the eyes get tucked beneath tiny folds of skin that seem to melt over time. And, every time she smacks her lips together, the dragonfly woman creates deeper trenches around her mouth. I can see her two jagged front teeth when she yells, “Don’t curse at your great-great-great abuela.”

I realize what I have to do. I clap my hands together, entwine them, and then deliver my plea to the sky. “*Ay diosito*, I promise I’ll listen to my mother and her stories. I’ll never make fun of her again. Please make this demon go away!”

The wings on the dragonfly whirr violently as it yells, “Promises must be honored. *Lo prometido es deuda*: a promise is a debt!”

The insect lands on the back of my right hand. “Be grateful I’m your grandmother and not a demon.”

I stand paralyzed as it grabs my little finger with two of its feet.

“Grandmother? But, I don’t have one.”

I want to dream the dragonfly away but the pain of its pincers digging into my flesh denies me any kind of escape. She asks me, “Do you know what happens to those who, with their little fingers, make promises and break them?”

I shake my head and she continues to explain, “The fingers from the hand that was used to make the promise fall off, grow feet, crawl away, and become people.”

“That’s impossible,” I interrupt, “people aren’t born from fingers. We evolve from

chimpanzees.”

“The finger people grow and spread lies.”

She pinches the skin on my little finger and says, “This one turn dreams into nightmares for profit.” She crawls towards my ring finger and warns, “That one, like the Aztecs, feasts on hearts.” She grabs the middle finger with one of her pincers and whispers, “That one denies all ancestry for the sake of appearance.”

A teardrop falls on my index finger, “This one, look how crooked it already is! After it beats its daughters and sons, it becomes the compass that points towards purgatory. And those children will grow and make the Andes their home. With the help of the coca plant, they become cruel rebel leaders.” She turns away from my thumb and spits on the floor, “The big one is the greediest and most violent. It wants to devour the Colombian flag, build on top of elementary schools, and sell emeralds and holy water. The city air is its breath. It wants what belongs to the people with sapphires for eyes, and plans to torture what is left of Chía.”

The name of the lost goddess Chía echoes in my ears, the same way it echoes when my mother tells me of the people who once worshiped her, the Chibchas, the people we descend from. Just as I begin to wonder where the goddess has gone and how people can devour a god, the dragonfly crawls up my arm and clings to my right shoulder.

I can feel a heat on my neck as she lets out an exhausted breath, the kind of breath the Incas let out when their stone carvings began to chip away, the kind of breath my mother lets out when I forget to the meaning of a word in Spanish, the kind of breath I let out when I ruin my mother’s recipe for a Colombian tonic that relieves headaches.

An expression on the old woman’s face reminds me of my mother when she bites into green apple or when someone can’t understand her English accent. I ask her if dragonflies really mean death, and if she was there to announce mine.

Before she can answer, my mother comes out of the house with a broom.

“Caro, get away! It might attack you!” Mamá screams as she hits the dragonfly until she makes sure its wings are in tatters.

Its body falls in a rain puddle where it curls into a tight ‘C.’

My mother looks at her right hand and touches the hollow spot with her thumb, where her middle finger used to be. She tells everyone to remember her lost finger before sticking an arm out of the bus window. But she knows I know the truth about her scar. About her lost middle finger. About the reason she’d rather I speak Spanish or English than Spanglish.

A red halo tattoos itself around my middle finger. And before I can hold it in place, the promise claims its debt.