

*Rutmari*

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The room didn't smell like death. It smelled sterile, an attempt to mask death's presence when it finally decided to make its way through the hallway door behind the nurse carrying the morphine. Every time she did so and hooked it up to the IV, Mr. Fernando, flaccid and pale, would release something between a sigh and a grunt. Regardless of what prompted it, hospital smell, hallway lights, morphine, or some combination of all three, there was a finality to it. Maybe this one, I'd think, hearing him, is the last one.

On the table next to his bed, among the bright orange bottles with white caps filled with pills sat three frames with pictures: Pal, Mrs. Jimena, and him, smiling on the day of Pal's graduation at BU as I took the picture; in another, just him and Pal as he walked her down the aisle at the very expensive wedding he'd thrown her; the last one, smallest of them all, of me, also on my graduation day at local FIU with my mother's arms around me, beaming at the camera he'd used to take the picture. Mom had been cut out, not fitting inside the frame.

I lived the first years of my life with the innocence that usually characterizes them. I never knew if it was because of how well my mom's employers treated us, or the fact that I hadn't started school already, that I never felt different to the daughter of Fernando and Jimena Velázquez, at least not in any way that felt significant to my young mind. We were from separate worlds and that was fine. Paloma Velázquez was a year and two months older than I was. My first memories of that house in DF are sparse, most of them cloudy. They are the kind of memories that appear suddenly in our recurring dreams, bringing with them the feeling of a warm blanket with faded pictures of Bugs Bunny and the smell of fresh atole and tortillas.

My mother was a short woman. But at that point she was the largest person I knew, second to Mr. Fernando—it didn't matter that Mrs. Jimena was taller than my mother by a head, mom always seemed, well, bigger. She ran the house in ways Mrs. Jimena never could. In the mornings, my mom would feed Pal and I breakfast in the little white high top in the kitchen. From her room came the crunching noises of a radio that never fully worked. When the radio was in her room the voices sounded as if they were lost inside an aquarium that had its own erratic waves. On mornings when Mr. Fernando left for a meeting earlier than usual and Mrs. Jimena to some breakfast social with her friends, my mom would bring the radio into the kitchen.

Those days were my favorites. Mom would heat up conchas and put frijoles inside of them, giving them to us with the hot atole she would make every morning but that Pal wasn't allowed to have. To respect Mrs. Jimena and her rules, and to raise me as close to Pal as possible—despite our separate rooms and different wardrobes—my mom would also not share her atole with me unless Mr. and Mrs. Velázquez weren't home. Mrs. Jimena wouldn't return from her socials until right before lunchtime. After mom would clean the kitchen, she'd bring down one or two toys from Pal's play room and leave them on the floor while she watched telenovela reruns on her ten inch tv that in those days was still in black and white.

Mom and I ate lunch in the kitchen while Pal ate outside with her parents. I remember never asking myself why we ate separately. I think it was because I always associated mom with the kitchen, laundry room, and our own room behind it, and Pal's parents with the rest of the house. It was a simple matter, at that time at least, of the adults and their spaces. They ate outside in the dining room, and mom and I had the privilege of eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner in that same little white countertop, one we shared with Pal for breakfast and dinner, and Mr. Fernando when he left the house in a hurry in the mornings.

When we first got the news we were moving to the US, I remember my mom lit a candle to San Rafael, Archangel and patron saint of travelers, and prayed all through the night. In the end, she'd told Mr. Fernando that we accepted to go with them, though to be honest she never asked me anything. When I spoke with her once I was a bit older, she confessed to me that, my not having a father, and my aunts and uncles being strewn all about Mexico and the US were the two things that had convinced her. To her dying day, she claimed it had nothing to do with my abuelita, who was at that point in good health, threatening to personally come to DF to tell Mr. Fernando to take us whether we wanted to or not. Abuelita was wise, but I think at that point she'd only heard things about the US that everyone else does. At first, we came over with the Velázquez family legally with the travel visa they'd gotten us. This was before 9/11 when those things were much easier to manage. I found out many years later, when I confronted Mr. Fernando, that they hadn't gotten a work visa because Mrs. Jimena hadn't wanted the legal responsibility, and also didn't have any idea of nor desire to look into minimum wage and tax stuff only to later get in trouble. Ultimately, I think they just wanted to keep my mom around for the same amount of money they were paying her back in Mexico.

I was also going to have to start school at some point, and since public schools in the suburbs where we moved to were well-funded, we all found ourselves (and I say all because it was an uncomfortable experience for everyone in the family those first few months) in the strange situation of having Pal and I going to the same school. It wasn't until much later, when mom and I found ourselves spending weekends in Little Havana with friends that an acquaintance of mom's introduced us to and heard about their kids' schools that I realized just how different things still were, even here, where everyone was "a little bit more the same," as

Mrs. Jimena liked to say, followed by her usual amused chortle. Pal spoke English from her schooling in Mexico. I didn't, which is why I was put in an ESOL/ESL class filled with Latinx expat kids to get us up to speed with the language while Pal was put into an integrated class with the white and Jewish kids that lived in our neighborhood. This was long before Latinx even existed as a word.

I had spent a long time back home in Mexico on weekends playing pretend with my cousins in the pueblo. I'd sit around and give them orders as if I were Mrs. Jimena and they would all go around doing what I asked until they got tired of the game or asked to switch roles, which I never let them do. It must have been that, coupled with the lighter skin I was born with, much lighter than my mom's and envied by my tías, that led me to not correct the kids in my class when they assumed I was Pal's sister. When one of them asked me why she spoke English and I didn't, and if I was stupid, I had answered that I was, just like he was, and that had been the end of the argument. Because we showed up to and left school together, I think even some of the teachers wondered if we were related. It was an easy lie to maintain, since Pal and I had recess at different times and hung out with different friends. At school I hung out with the Latinx kids, even if they didn't invite me to any of their homes to play or to their birthday parties. On weekends I hung out with my mom's friends' kids. At school, Pal hung out with the white kids and the other Latinx kids that had also learned to speak English back home. At weekend gatherings, she babysat her parent's friends' kids from Mexico, all of whom were several grades below us. By the time the summer came around, Pal had only heard someone ask her about her sister once, and she'd shrugged her shoulders and answered she was away for the weekend.

"Alguien pensó que eras mi hermana la semana pasada," she'd told me, on the walk to school. I'd hidden my reddening cheeks in the Cat in the Hat book I'd been reading to pick up

some new words. I hadn't known what to respond, and we'd walked the rest of the way in silence. She never brought it back up again.

In high school, we went our separate ways, Pal going to the private high school in nearby Fort Lauderdale and I to the local public one. I'd heard a passing comment from Mrs. Jimena to Mr. Fernando that she was terrified of the crowds Pal would be mixing with in public high school, and that it was better to send her to a Catholic school where there'd at least be 'shared values.' Once, when our mutual friends happened to coincide for a party at one of her friend's house, Pal reluctantly agreed to take me only after I enticed her with meeting the guy I'd been dating for a few weeks. I didn't talk about him at home given my mom's obsession with my not dating until after college.

Something about mom's experience with my dad had made her incredibly wary of any men, though she of course, would never admit that openly. She'd had a few boyfriends over the years, eventually meeting Ricky, 'como el Martin,' she'd tell my aunt over the phone. Ricky had been a constant throughout my college years and, though mom refused to have more kids with him, I came to see him as the closest thing to a dad I ever had save for Mr. Fernando. Before Ricky though, mom would never allow me in the room alone with any of her boyfriends. If I had weekend plans with friends, she'd very easily let me stay home instead of going down to Hialeah, and would later confess to me that she was more comfortable that way, adding that one day I'd understand her.

The man standing next to me, his attorney, coughed, and Mr. Fernando opened his eyes, grunting.

"Ah, Rutmari, ya llegaste. Gracias por venir."

“Sure thing Mr. F. How are you feeling?”

“Adolorido...debil...me urge dejar todo listo para poder descansar.”

“Yeah...cancer’s a bitch.” Mom had wasted away from it too, except she’d done so quickly and at Ricky’s apartment. We hadn’t been able to get her on Obamacare on time.

Once I’d finished signing the documents from the lawyer and handing them back to him, Mr. Fernando sighed with relief.

“Gracias Rutmari. Me quitas un peso de encima. Siempre has sido muy buena niña.”

I nodded, patting the emaciated hand that rested over the blankets, leads and the IV dangling from it. I didn’t find out about his agreement with my mom until around the time I’d needed to get my license to drive myself to and from campus in the car Pal hadn’t been able to take up to Boston with her.

It had been a few years after mom had had the scare. One of her boyfriends, I can’t remember which one, had been coming to pick us up to take us down to Miami for the weekend. Mrs. Jimena was driving us to the strip mall parking lot where we usually met up when we noticed the police pulled up by his car. They’d sent him home the following week and mom had never heard from him again. The panic and fear that followed coincided with Mr. Fernando starting to work with a lawyer on the green card process for his family. So, behind Mrs. Jimena and Pal’s back, and in order to give mom some peace of mind, they’d transferred guardianship of me over to him so that I too could have the privilege of security around the life I’d built with her around here.

But mom could never go back home, at least not until my own citizenship went through, a process that would take years from the moment I got my green card. This became most painfully apparent to us when abuelita died and we were unable to attend the funeral. We’d

considered it, considered even risking her being unable to come back and staying home to help put abuelita's affairs in order until I could reclaim her years later. The arrangement had brought its fair share of issues, not least of which was the risk of Mrs. Jimena finding out, who would not only not be understanding, but complain to Mr. Fernando that it opened up an avenue for me to try to take away their money years later when they both died.

Hence the lawyer and the nondisclosure agreement Mr. Fernando had asked me to sign. He didn't just want to make sure that Mrs. Jimena and Pal would never find out I'd been legally in their family, but that I was clear on the fact that I wasn't getting any piece of his estate. He'd set aside some money, this with Mrs. Jimena's reluctant blessing, to finish paying off my student loans, but beyond that, I needed to understand that I was legally being disowned and would need to stay well out of the way as his wife and biological daughter grieved and managed affairs without him.

When we'd first moved to the states, Pal had mentioned to me that she really wanted a black friend, like the little girl on Barney, so she could play with her hair, so different to hers. A few days after I first introduced her to Jacob at that high school party she took me to, Pal once again brought up her childhood dream as I maneuvered her and Mrs. Jimena around the Calle 8 festival, a Miami staple they had yet to attend and mom and I had yet to miss.

"Oye ma," she'd said, "¿te acuerdas cuando era chiquita y decía que quería una amiga negrita y lo triste que estuve cuando me enteré que todos en la escuela eran blancos?"

"Claro," Mrs. Jimena had responded with that laugh of hers. "¿Por?"

"No namás. ¿Que harían tú y Pa si algún día traigo un novio negro a la casa?"

I remember that as the color had risen to my cheeks, Mrs. Jimena had choked on her sugarcane juice. Pal kept her gaze forward, feigning interest in the sights and sounds of the crowds to avoid eye contact with me as she spoke. I'd been anxiously dreading this moment since she'd met Jacob.

“Pues nada Pal. ¿Ya a estas alturas que hacemos? Tu Pa y yo te vamos a querer salgas con quien salgas. Aunque para serte sincera no te puedo negar lo aliviada que estoy que estés saliendo con un niño como Nacho. Hace que las cosas sean mucho más fáciles.”

“¿Como así, Doña Jimena?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

“Bueno ya sabes, Rutmari...Ósea misma cultura, mismos valores, misma religión...a ver, no me puedes decir que no preferirías a un mexicano como...pues como tú, que entienda como has vivido y crecido y tu situación...”

“Mamá!”

“¿Qué Pal? Solo estoy diciendo la verdad. No tiene nada de malo. Es tendencia a lo conocido. Hay unas razas que simplemente son más estéticamente atractivas. No me puedes decir que sinceramente te ves saliendo con un hombre negro y besándolo. Yo, francamente, no podría,” she said, shrugging and scrunching her face in disgust.

“Doña Jimena,” I had said, this time unable to hide the tremor in my voice, “con todo el respeto que se merece, eso es bastante racista.”

“Ay Rutmari no seas payasa! Hay cosas que francamente no nos gustan. A mí los negros no me atraen...eso no es racismo. Es cómo el mismo pues...asquito que me da el pensar en dos hombres besándose,” she'd said to me, doubling down.

“A ver Ma,” Pal had intervened, noticing how quickly this was spiraling “también tu bajale. Ósea, super de acuerdo contigo en que pues al final de cuentas hay quienes nos gustan y

quienes no y eso no lo podemos controlar. Pero también a Rutmari hay que darle la razón. Aguas con lo que dices, especialmente en público, y especialmente aquí,” she’d finished, looking around to see if anyone had heard Mrs. Jimena above the noise of the crowds and the various booths playing music. A crowd of people were gathering around a group that had called an impromptu rueda de casino and were synchronized dancing to the salsa beat. Pal pulled us in that direction.

I turned to leave, noticing he’d fallen asleep, and nodded to the lawyer. Outside the hallway, I was greeted by colorful balloons and high-heeled woman standing behind them.

“Oh my god Rutmari! Is that you? I didn’t even recognize you. You look so pretty!”

“Hey Pal. How are things? Long time.”

The last time I’d spoken to her was shortly after the Jacob incident. She left to study at BU and I stayed to finish my last year of public school before applying to FIU so I could work part time and help mom make payments on the small apartment we’d gotten in Hialeah. Pal didn’t invite us to her wedding, which had been in a fancy hotel up in New York, where her husband worked. Only Mr. Fernando had come to my graduation, alongside mom and another local fifteen cousins, tíos, and tías that had become family over the years.

“I know! It’s been ages,” she said, drawing out the a, “it’s so nice that you came to see Papi. How is he?”

“He’s ok. Just fell asleep right now. Might be out for a bit. Lawyer’s in there too if you want to catch him.”

She cocked her head.

“Que raro, he’s not supposed to be here for another thirty minutes. Mami will be a bit annoyed he’s in there alone with Papi. I don’t think they were friends, were they?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“How’s what’s his name?” she asked me.

“Who, Jacob?”

She nodded.

“He’s good,” I answered. “We broke up a long time ago, right after high school when we both got those internships. We figured it was easier on both of us to occasionally catch up and stay friends. His uncle got him a job out in Michigan, and he’s taken over the business. I catch up with him once in a while.”

“Oh my God Rutmari I’m so happy for him, and for you! Are you with someone right now.”

I shrugged.

“Well I’m glad things are going well for both of you. Can you imagine how awkward it would have been for us if you’d introduced Jacob to mom after that conversation we had that day at Calle Ocho?” she said, laughing like her mother. Her phone buzzed, and she quickly handed me the basket before answering, “I’m really sorry, I have to take this. Work is crazy, you know? But anyway, it was awesome seeing you. We should totally grab a coffee or something while I’m down here. I’ll text you!”

I nodded as she pulled open the door to her dad’s room.

“Oh my god babe. Can I call you back? I just got to Papi’s room. Yeah...I know. We’re hanging in there...can’t wait to see you....thanks...love you too, bye.”

I waved to her from the other side of the glass looking into the room, pointing to the basket and the ground right by the door. She waved back and gave me a thumbs up with one hand, holding the phone against her ear with the other. I gently placed the basket by the door, waved once more, and made my way to the elevator.