

Rabbit Rabbit

By Eillen Daniela Martinez

It was the night my parents got in a fight. Not that they don't always get into fights. We were at our dinner table: me, my mom, and my dad each seated on a single side so that one side remained empty and I could see my reflection in the window ahead. The kitchen was a haze of pan smoke from my mother burning the arepas, even though she had made arepas every day of her life. With the front door open to let the smoke out, we could feel a whispering breeze trickle into the kitchen, a rarity so early into what is normally a stagnant summer. My mother, her long hair braided into a messy french, sat still at the end of the table, her wide eyes gazing at her crossed thighs. She wasn't praying; we already did that. My dad chewed his chorizo-filled arepa with a force that spoke for him.

I knew they had argued before dinner from their muffled Spanish, but I didn't know about what. I just remember stepping into the living room from upstairs and seeing my mom standing stiff by the TV. The news had been on. A Venezuelan presidential address, streamed through a secondhand service. My mom had been standing in front of the paused screen, face to face with Maduro in his blue button up, the Venezuelan flag to his right. In the background: a portrait of horses running. My dad had called to her, "Ya, Milena, no le des más vueltas a ese plan conejo. Es todo un mal chiste," as he piled three plates to set the table. With that, my mom jammed her finger into the power button of the TV and brought out the plate of arepas with the calm yet seething demeanor that only a mom can.

My dad was still chewing. With my forefinger and thumb, I plucked a clump of grated white cheese off our single ornate plate, gifted by a friend of a cousin who visited once. The clock ticked like nails tapping on the window. My mother's stomach growled. Mimi, our pet

rabbit, shifted in her cage sitting on the windowsill. I sliced my arepa right down the middle and thought to myself *I am like a surgeon*. I stuffed the innards with cheese, grabbed the small burnt moon with both hands and swiftly moved it to my mouth, my elbow knocking a glass of water and shattering it across the kitchen floor.

“Coño.” I stood up.

My mother looked up, her eyes severe and glazed with a slimy film. She pointed her stare at my father in mid-chew, “She gets the language from you.”

My father stood up, exciting Mimi since he is her feeder. Her cage was like the shake of a maraca urging the start of a primal dance.

I cleaned up the glass like I was invisible as the yelling commenced in Spanish. Because you can only be really angry in your native tongue.

“No sé cómo puedes comer,” my mother said.

“Entonces yo soy el malo por trabajar tan duro para nosotros para que tengamos comida,” my father said.

“Nuestra familia está muriéndose de hambre. Tu familia!”

“Amor, tú sabes que hacemos todo lo que podemos para ayudarlos. ¿No crees que a mi me duele también?” My dad’s chin fell to his chest.

“¿Entonces por qué los tenemos amarrados por una cuerda? Tú sabes que tenemos más.”

“¿Quieres regresar? Dime, pues dime. I’ll buy you a ticket to Caracas if that’s what you want.” My dad jabbed the words at her.

My mother’s mouth snapped shut. She ran out of the kitchen, thumped up the stairs and slammed the door. That’s when I noticed the little gate to Mimi’s cage was unlatched. The bits of hay trailed out the cage down to the floor and to the front door, ajar. My dad followed my gaze.

“Coño.”

My dad and I spent the next two hours whistling for Mimi, walking deep into the forest outside our house. Looking back, he was probably avoiding confrontation with my mom, but I knew he loved Mimi so I was glad for his company. We returned when the flashlights began to dim, the curls on our head deflated. My dad said she’ll come back, la condenada, because he feeds her. We cleaned the plates and both went up to bed. I fell asleep thinking about Mimi and how she was all alone in a forest that wanted to eat her.

I jolted awake that night in a sweat. Looked at the clock by my bed. The green digits made a halo around my nightstand. 2:16 AM.

I took a deep breath and heard it— the scratching at the door.

Mimi.

I hurled my covers to the ground, slapped my bare feet onto the hardwood floor, and leapt down the stairs not caring if I woke anyone up. The scratching was louder and I said, “Shh I am coming I am coming,” with a smile inching onto my face, the nightmare dissipating. I nearly ran into the door as I turned the lock, pulled the handle too soon, tried again and yanked the front door open to find an empty deck.

I whistled for Mimi but heard nothing. I knew she must be close so I closed the door, leaving it barely ajar, and sat on the rocking chair listening to the cicadas. I sighed and waited. The chair creaked like fingers cracking.

I thought about my mother, her tired eyes, tired hair, tired bones. How it must feel to suffer a lonely kind of suffering away from her family, a family I never met. I know their stories of course. My mom would lie down next to me when I was little, the both of us like straight

boards on a cushioned mattress. We laid there, my mom and I, her fingers—pruned from washing dishes—loosely intertwined in mine. She smelled like sweat and laundry soap, the green kind with the bald white man on the label. We looked straight up at the glow in the dark stars taped to my ceiling that my mom brought home from a garage sale once. She might say, “Talia, you know you have a cousin your age the only other girl cousin in our whole family. Her name is Rosa, Rosita, and she has the same eyes as you. She likes to make bracelets with colorful beads.”

My mother twisted the bracelet on her wrist before continuing.

“Rosa’s mamá is named Diana and that is my sister. My sister Diana has the same hands as me. She is a better cook though, she is opening a restaurant to sell arepas.”

“Why?” I ask, “If you can make them for free.”

My mom laughs and says don’t tell anyone. My mom got excited talking about her sisters and went quiet when finished. It was like she was filling in all the gaps in her head between now and when she left. Stolen time.

My favorite stories were about my dad. He was always the tallest in a room—an ostrich man and so skinny that of course my mom, the smallest in any room, noticed him. And then I laughed because how is it possible that my father, with a belly so large you’d think he’s pregnant, was ever skinny. My dad would write poems for my mother but the kinds that make you cringe, like when you read that my mom is a grasshopper among garbage. “It’s lucky he was a good dancer,” said my mother.

I learned from my dad that Rosa sells bracelets by herself on the street. Diana drinks too much and never leaves the house since the arepa stand never made enough money. I’ve never seen my parents dance. My dad told me it was better here to raise me and for our family too, because we could send them money and things like my clothes I grew out of. He says our life is

good. But for my mom, it is as if she is always carrying ghosts with her. Like she was never home. Remembering my dad and his chin to his chest, I questioned how this could be as good as he always says. I looked at my hands. Unpruned, smooth.

Time had passed and the cicadas were now silent. The forest was asleep. I inhaled, grasping the armrests of the chair, gaining momentum to stand up when I noticed one of Mimi's paws by a flowerpot. I let go of the armrests and let my shoulders hunch. I exhaled, relieved.

"Mimi, vamos, let's go inside." I whistled to call her, but no movement. Standing up, I shook out my legs that felt like they'd been fossilized.

"Mimi, pendeja. You know how late it is?" Of course Mimi didn't know how late it was. How long had I been sitting there really? I still don't know. I whistled as I moved toward the pot, a shrill call that echoed amongst the trees. The sound petered out as I saw what lay behind the pot.

I looked down and saw her paw. Nothing else. Mimi's paw, severed. Strings of flesh shredded and strewn across the wooden deck.

I released my breath in a shudder as a knot welled up at the pit of my stomach like a thick rope. I thought Mimi might still be alive and could have run away into the forest, so I planned to swerve inside, stomp my sneakers on, and grab one of the flashlights we'd left on the kitchen table. As I turned, I noticed that the kitchen light was on. Someone was in the kitchen. Stumbling in, I expected to find one of my parents.

Someone was there, back towards me, perched on the top of the table crouched over something so I could only see a single messy braid swinging steadily as the body rocked back and forth.

My mouth dry like someone had stuffed a towel into it, I managed, "Ma- mamá?"

The head lifted.

I replay each moment of that night in my head and I still can't understand. Yes, this was the part when, slowly, she turned her neck and I saw her eyes. Bursting veins reddening her sclera, one eye moving down while the other drifted left, the pupils separating like diverging pin balls. Her cheeks maroon with blood, her widening smile a putrid black. Crouching, her armpits pressed over her knees, she shifted her weight so I could see what was left of Mimi on the table, her stomach gnarled out so I could see the spine. My mom raised her eyebrows high like she was proud.

I remember in those times when my mom would tell me stories in bed, we would sometimes fall asleep after she got quiet. We would wake up to the sobered stars, translucent plastic shards in the daylight, like they knew that their resplendence was only temporary. My mom stopped telling me those stories when I asked to go meet our family. What are we like when we get pushed to the edge? My mother is silent.

I screamed at the thing crouched at the table but couldn't move. I remember feeling like my legs were not connected to my brain, processing that Mimi was a carcass, her blood covering that plate from a friend of a cousin in crimson. And then my dispossessed legs ran up the stairs into my bedroom and I watched my fingers lock the door. I grunted and huffed because I forgot how to cry. I shoved all my blankets and an entire bookcase against the door. The stuffed animals on the shelves came tumbling down. I grabbed a stuffed elephant, bit its head hard and screamed. I grabbed three more and began to pull the cotton out of them, using the stuffing to fill the cracks beneath the door. Not like that could keep away a monster.

I couldn't hear anything beyond my hyperventilation. My legs brought me to the ground and my arms dragged me beneath my bed. I lay there wheezing, paralyzed for what seemed like

hours, staring at the shingles of my bed, the springs rusted over and curved towards my face, from years of bearing weight.

“Talia? Mija, are you ok?” My mom’s voice behind the door.

Startled, I hit the top of my head against the bed shingles and bit my cheek to keep from wailing. The sunlight poured into my room.

“Get away from me!” My voice was a rasp.

“Uiii. Don’t use that attitude. I am coming in.” I could hear her jiggle the door, and then whisper to my dad who must have also been standing there, to get the key. My dad ended up opening the door which slammed against the shelf.

“What the—” He tried again with more force and knocked over the shelf, flinging books across the room. So much for an obstacle. I saw my mom’s slippers approach the bed, little soiled bunnies with the beaded eyes missing. Her knees dropped to the floor. My breathing quickened. Her cheek pressed against the hardwood and my eyes met hers. Normal. Her face was clean, the single mole on her nose the only fleck of discoloration. And then her face contorted.

“Hey, qué pasa! What are you doing, what’s wrong with you?!”

The words struggled to leave my mouth.. “I-I think I had a bad dream.”

“Well clean up your room! You know Rosita would kill to have stuffed animals like yours and here you are tearing them up like they cost nothing! Breakfast is ready!” I winced at the word kill. My mother huffed, bounced up to her feet and her slippers shuffled away out of the room. I noticed as she drifted away that two braids swayed against her back. I’d never seen my mom in two braids. My dad’s large veiny feet stayed at the foot of my bed.

“Ven Talia. We made your favorite.” His feet turned to the shelf that had fallen to the floor. I watched his hands grasp at its sides and lift, sliding it against the wall before he walked out the door.

I drew in a trembling breath. Just a dream. I peeled myself from the floor and rolled out from underneath my bed. Books were lying across the floor, the stuffed animals decapitated.

I walked over the mirror hanging on my closet door to look at myself. Deep purple bags under my eyes made me look like a starving racoon. Drool dried on my cheek so I had to scratch the white flakes off. Just a dream, I thought to myself as I dipped my fingernail into the skin of my cheek.

I tiptoed around the fallen books and stuffed animals and headed down the stairs. When I reached the foot of the stairs, I found my parents waiting at the kitchen table, food already on the plates. Stopping at the foot of the stairs, I inspected the floor and the table and the plates. The plate gifted from the friend of a cousin was pristine and centered at the table like a eucharist on an altar.

My dad asked if I was okay.

I said, “Sí papa,” and walked to the table, pulled the chair so that it made a grinding noise against the floor, and plopped into the seat. I stared straight in front of me at the embellishments on the plate: identical hens with red, blue, and yellow feathers bordering the edge of the dish, their talons brushstrokes one in front of the other like they were soldier hens following each other into cycles of eternity. Two hands appeared in my field of sight: my mother’s at my right and my father’s at my left. Time to say grace. I looked up to see my dad nodding at me like it was my turn.

“Ahem. Mm. Aghh. Gosh, well. Thank you, Lord, for this, uh...FOOD. Yes. Thank you for uh...” I opened my eyes and saw the little hens painted on the plate. “Hens. Mm.” I hunched as my mother’s bony fingers squeezed tight against my palm. Tightening my eyes again, I remembered a line from the Our Father, “Oh and uh, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Yes, yes. A-MEN.” I don’t think that’s ever used to say grace but what can you do. I quickly let go of my parents’ hands and shoved food in my mouth without tasting it, feeling every swallow like a handful of pebbles squeezing down the sphincters of my throat. I looked everywhere except my mom. That oily smile, the diseased eyes, fingers dripping with Mimi’s blood kept coming to mind. Examining the kitchen, squinting like I had x-ray vision, I noticed everything was the same as it had been my whole life, the only house I ever knew as home. My drawings from elementary school on the fridge, where the people had arms coming out of their heads because I guess I didn’t understand the concept of a torso, and the sky was a line across the top of the page as if it didn’t envelop the whole universe. Drawings of my family, always just the three of us, until Mimi came into the picture. My parents said they got her so I could have a friend. They thought I was lonely, but I was used to being by myself. I think they got her because they weren’t.

My eyes moved over to the window and I noticed the one thing that was different. Mimi’s cage was no longer on the windowsill.

“So uh, papá did you find Mimi last night?”

My dad spoke with his mouth full so I could see the mush inside. “Aha. And who’s Mimi?”

I stared straight at his face and gave him a smirk like ha-ha you are so funny papá. But he gave me a perplexed look back.

“Papá! No juegas conmigo. It’s not funny, did you find Mimi, her cage is gone.”

My mom decided to chime in with a my-husband-cannot-navigate-our-daughter’s antics-because-he-is-pendejo-but-I can-set-her-straight kind of attitude. Like only she can.

“Talia. Stop messing with your father. Who is this Mimi you talk about? Tell me.”

I finally brought myself to look at my mother, her eyebrows arched expecting me to say something. My mouth agape, I let out a scoff.

“Mamá. Papá. Mimi! Our. Pet. Rabbit,” I enunciated each syllable, punctuating the words by tapping my palms on the table.

“*Pet* rabbit? ¿Qué es eso?” My dad asked me, as if he had no clue.

“You know! Mimi! She’s normally in her cage there!” I flailed my arms toward the window, knowing I was starting to sound crazy to them. “Last night she ran away and we went looking for her remember we got her because you were lonely or I was lonely or something and anyways she’s our baby Mimi and we love her and she’s probably still out there!”

My father placed his large hands like pans flat on the table and drummed his fingers. “Hmm. Mimi mimi. You mean one of our rabbits out back? Did you make a friend, Talia?” My dad’s lips pulled back into a toothed grin.

Not sure I wanted to know the answer I asked, “Rabbit-ssss? What do you mean out back?”

My mother dropped her fork so it clanged on the plate. “Talia, por dios. Why are we playing this game. Go find your friend rabbit or whatever you mean and let me know how you want me to cook it for you.”

“*Excuse* me. Since when do we cook rabbit.”

“Mija, what do you think we prepared for you?”

“Nononono. I don’t eat rabbit.”

My dad added, “Then why did you beg us to buy a whole rabbit pen.”

He chuckled like someone saying a pun at a golf game.

“Talia we can’t keep—”

I stood up, my chair toppling back, as I ran to the door on the other side of our kitchen that led to our backyard. Before I even opened the door, the warm smell of animal hit me.

I opened the door and found, enclosed by a net of wire, a sea of fidgeting, plump, cotton-white rabbits. I ran to the terminus of the wire enclosure and edged my face towards it, meeting the eyes of the animal breathing there, pushed against the cage, its furry skin a waffle against the wire that pressed against it. Its red eyes with no eyelids said terror, even though at that point I was probably projecting. So, it was an imagined terror that said I am trapped here with all my rabbit brothers and all my rabbit strangers, we are terrorized but we are happy, see here my fat, see here my white fur, we know that it’s better to suffocate here. One day you will understand.

End.