

Kate Koenig

Gentle, Gentle, Gentle

The day my daughter was born, I thought about him. I thought about him rushing to the hospital to meet his goddaughter all wrinkled and new. He'd hold her in his arms as if she were made of glass, but with all the warmth and love in his heart. His hand would run through her mess of black hair, already so dark, more hair than baby. He'd say, "*Te Amo, Sofia.*" I love you, Sofia. He'd give her a thousand kisses on her curly hair, kiss her crinkly forehead, and congratulate me and my wife, Ana. Or he'd have his own children by now and bring them by to see their new family. We'd both look at my daughter, her midnight hair, pink lips, and almond skin and think, *Te Amo, Sofia.*

But he wasn't there.

We brought Sofia home the next day. She slept the whole car ride back, unaware of the shift in her surroundings. Ana sat in the backseat with Sofia's carrier and sang her lullabies. Every so often, I'd sneak a peek back at my baby, her little nose the size of the tip of my finger. We arrived home and Ana fed her. Her eyes blinking, absorbing what was around her. Ana said she felt so warm in her arms and she didn't want to let her go. She smelled like roses, Ana said. I don't know if roses, but Sofia smelled like love. Her little hazel

eyes travelled across my face and I wondered what her thoughts were. Did she have them? Did she know that I was her father and that I loved her? For nine months she was just an idea, a distant thought, but now she was here.

I rubbed Ana's back until she fell asleep. The baby monitor was next to her on the bedside table. I listened to my wife's slow, steady breathing and the white noise in my daughter's nursery. If my mother was still alive, she'd be in the guest room, with enough suitcases to last her a year. The fridge would be brimming with hot dishes to help us along as we adjusted to a new baby. If he was still here, she'd feed him extra, telling him he looked too bony still. He needed food to grow, even if we were twenty-eight-year-old men.

That was the mother I once knew and loved. That was the mother I tried so hard to hold on to.

But my mother lost herself in drugs and alcohol and wasn't there when I hit high school. The neighborhoods she'd warned us to avoid on our way home from school, caught up to her and destroyed the mother I loved. If she were here now, she'd slump against our kitchen chair, head lolling back, and drool collecting at the corners of her mouth with apologies straining to form on her cracked, white lips. Her eyes would roam aimlessly at our white ceiling, her mind hundreds of miles away in a place I didn't know existed. There would be no food in the fridge. No *arroz con pollo* with the rich, earthy flavors of the cumin and cloves, ground pepper and salt, no savory rice and sofrito, or tender chicken sitting at my place. No humming as she cut up the fresh red peppers to add to the mix. Her long wooden spoon wouldn't slap at my eager hand as it tried to grab a sample before it was ready, "Miguel, *ten paciencia!*" Miguel, be patient.

I opened the fridge. I closed the fridge. If I closed my eyes, I could smell the *arroz con pollo* wafting around the air, spices and sauces simmering on the stovetop to my right. My stomach growled thinking of that full-bodied smell, the taste just out of reach. My mother's take on it was superb, the most addicting. Just

like her. I hadn't eaten it since I was thirteen and sometimes I still can taste the way her food made me feel, the way her spices danced on my taste buds, the way it filled me up with warmth and love. My mother's best friend and my best friend's mother, Ma, could make all the savory and sweet dishes of our heritage much better than my own mother, except for my mother's *arroz con pollo*. No one could make it quite like her.

He used to come over, make a big show of being faint with hunger, complain about growing pains, and my mother would smile at him and say, "Isn't your Madre feeding you, poor growing boy?" Then she'd walk to her meticulous spice cabinet and begin to hum "*Duérmete, Mi Niño*" even though we were too old for lullabies. She said she sang it to me when I was just a little bump, when we were a part of each other, and that no matter where I was, it helped her feel close to me and remember my first years. He and I would sit on the worn bar stools, listening to her sing lullabies as she added the spices and chopped the peppers, throwing a few slices our way to hold us over until her masterpiece was complete. We'd get drunk on that smell, cuddling against us, sipping Guava *Jarritos* to pass the time with that sweet syrupy colors staining our lips and tongue.

I thought about my mother as I prepared breakfast for Ana and me. My mouth watered as the eggs cooked for the *huevos rancheros*. It was the first dish I made with Ma. She was ever patient even as I cooked the eggs too long or burned the rice. She'd place her hands over mine and guide them saying *gentle, gentle, gentle*.

Ana still slept when I dropped off the food on her bedside table. I tiptoed out of the room and down the hall to Sofia's nursery. She too was fast asleep, the steady waves of her chest as gentle as Ma's hands on mine. I sang to her "*Duérmete, Mi Niño*" as my mother had with me. I ran my hand gently against her chubby cheek and whispered, "*Te Amo, Sofia*". I love you, Sofia.

The cemetery was just a twenty minute walk away, but today I drove. Normally, I walked the streets, the ones I'd lived my entire life. I'd wave at the young boys playing soccer in the streets, and call out to them to watch for their mothers. They'd shout back that they weren't scared, but when I'd walk back, they were gone, playing in the open fields just a breath away. Walking was my preferred method because I needed the time to think, to formulate the words from what I was feeling. Ana said I kept too much inside. She'd joke that I was a piñata and that it took countless hard beatings with a stick for me to share what was there. She always giggled, taking her slender fingers against my belly and tickling it despite my feeble protests. I'd smile. It was true enough. So I needed the walk, the slow *one, twos* of my steps to piece together how I felt. It's always been this way.

My mother was buried there, but I couldn't talk to her. The last years of her spiraling life were constant hits and too much had been spilled between us. I held on to her spices, her lullabies, because I couldn't hear her moaning and the glass shattering against her bedroom walls. I only talked to him and we talked about everything, like we always have.

He'd always been the one with words between us. After his soccer or my baseball practice, we'd lay spread-eagle on the practice fields until night and stare at the emptiness above us. We spoke of the bloc parties of our youth and how we'd sit on the curb, hoping one of our classmates would walk by in a short skirt so we could catch a glimpse of the mysteries underneath. We spoke of loss. Sometimes we cried, but we always pretended once the tears dried up that it was a trick of the stadium lights. Our senior year we spoke of our futures. He'd aced his SATS. The Ivies became more than a maybe, or maybe he'd go wherever I ended up and he could play soccer there. He was going to be an engineer. Those nights he spoke of dreams, I swear there were fireflies dancing in his eyes.

The town pitched in for his headstone, even going so far as to having his senior portrait engraved above his name. I hated the headstone portrait at first. I hated seeing any indication that it was him lying in the ground. I hated knowing that he was already decaying and that face was just a picture now. It wasn't real. It wasn't him. Now, I cling to the image, I run my fingers over it as if I can feel him there, but the headstone is cold. Sometimes I forget details about him, like the way his lips curled when he smiled, a little awkward from years with braces, and the exact color of his brown eyes. *Was it russet or whiskey?* Forgetting scared me.

I'd sit crossed legged, facing the headstone, and run my finger over the indentations of his name, *Carlos Hernandez*, and the grooves of his birthday, *November 1st*. I'd run my finger over every curve and angle of those letters, summoning him here with me, touching his portrait last. *Hola, hermano*. Brother.

"She's beautiful, Carlos. She looks like Ana, just as beautiful. Lucky for her she didn't get my big nose, huh?"

I told him all about her. He'd heard my worries and fears these last nine months. He waited with me, guiding me along until she was in my arms and real— and thank God—healthy. He would have loved her. He would have loved Ana, too.

"I'm going to visit Ma soon. Maria called me yesterday and said she'll be with you. I'm going to say goodbye. I'll hold her for you, she forgets. She thinks I'm you, remember? Maria says it helps her," I kissed his headstone, touching *Carlos* one last time before departing. The thicket of trees near the gate swayed in the wind in greeting. I think Carlos was letting me know he still was there. *Adiós, hermano*. Brother.

The drive to the nursing home was pleasant, quiet. I passed my old high school and practice fields. It made me think of Carlos and wild youth. We'd been in the same school since kindergarten and friends since diapers. He lived across the street with his ma and sister. Our mothers bonded over single parenthood and

the struggles of life with devious and energetic children. He and his sister became siblings to me at once. Our families didn't share blood, but our tie was stronger, deeper like the roots of the ancient trees that lined our sidewalks. His ma was my second parent and when my own succumbed to her demons and regrets, she became my only. She took me into her home when I was seventeen, after my mother's funeral. She held my hand through the entire mass, whispering Hail Marys under her breath. I was numb, but not in a sad way, not at that point.

Living with my best friend, in a home that was stable again felt like a dream. They made sure that I knew that I was welcome, always asking if I'd eaten enough, if I was tired, if I needed just one more Ma hug that day. The last tumultuous years with my mother, I'd wasted away, looking like the skeletons of *Dia de los Muertos*. My first year at their house, on *Dia de los Muertos*, they joked that I could lead the celebrations. Ma fed me *pan de muerto*, the sugary bread to mark the celebration of our lost loved ones. We thought of my mother and of their father, taken before they could even form a memory of him.

We decorated their graves with marigolds, the cemetery bloomed with color and memories of those departed. I cried for my mother for the first time, even though she'd passed six months before. My feelings poured out. All the poisonous hate and anger, the deep, bone-aching sadness, spilled out finally. Carlos cried with me, his arm around my shoulder. Ma held my hand in hers, rubbing her thumb against the back of mine, *gentle, gentle, gentle*.

The images of my mother, bleeding, convulsing, crying out like a possessed child for her own mother haunted me, torn at the little normalcy I'd managed to save, but *gentle, gentle, gentle*, I let those feelings out and let them go.

Carlos would hate the smell of the hospice, the stench of impending death and carelessness. He wouldn't be happy that his mother stayed in such a sterile and unfamiliar place, but her condition had worsened and with my family and Maria's, we couldn't care for her. It shamed us.

The orderly at the desk smiled as I signed in, *Miguel Sanchez*. They knew me by name and my schedule of three weekdays and one weekend day, always Sunday, to take her to the chapel here for Mass so I could say the Hail Marys she'd long forgotten.

Maria waited outside her door, one hand draped across her round stomach, the other holding her cellphone to her ear. When she spotted me, she hurried to end the call and embraced me, planting a kiss on my cheek.

"Oh, Miguel, it's good to see you," she said and squeezed me tight, lingering for a moment.

"Maria, how are you?" I asked, swooping down to kiss her cheek. They were rosy, flush with heat. Her river of thick, deep brown hair hung in a disarray around her face.

"Good, I just wish he would come already. I feel so big," she patted her belly, crossing her fingers with a wry smile. "Carlos was always a pain in the ass, so this little man is already following in his footsteps. Although, it's more pain in my bladder. I'll be right back, ok? Wait for me before you go in...it's not easy to see her right now."

She shuffled down the hallway, her pregnant belly swaying out at the sides. I watched her walk away and thought of her. She'd come a long way, a family started and finally some peace it seemed. After Carlos' death she walked around like the dead and didn't snap out of it for five years, until she met Daniel, her future husband. One night, she returned to ma's doorstep, her belongings from college sitting in the seats of a borrowed car. She came back to live with Ma and me as I finished up senior year.

We made love, finding a medicine in the spaces our bodies could erase when we were together. I filled up her emptiness and she ate away at my pain. When we made love, hands lost in each other's hair and breath hot on each other's necks, we found something to fight that gnawing void inside. I said, "I love you" and kissed down her throat, her hips, her hands, her eyes. She whispered my name and drew a line along my jaw.

Eventually, we stopped.

I graduated and went to college and she petitioned to be readmitted to hers. Only in the summers and breaks did we see each other. The last time we made love, I hadn't met Ana—that would be in two more months—and she had just started to date her future husband. *One last time, Miguel.* Her lips tasted sickly sweet that night, her hair smelled of spices from the restaurant where she worked, and her skin, her skin smelled of fresh marigolds.

Maria returned, holding my hand with caution, exhaling before pushing open the door.

It smelled like death.

Ma laid in her bed, eyes unfocused at the ceiling, mumbling broken English between what sounded like prayers. Her skin taut over her skull, her cheek bones protruding over the thin layer, sharp, like they would cut through. Her hands were limp, but a Rosary was placed between her quivering fingers. I took the seat beside her, Maria at the other. I gripped her hand and whispered, *gentle, gentle, gentle.* Her lips paused their incantations and her eyes drove across the ceiling. From her lips, a single word slipped through. *Carlos.*

"Ma, *estoy aquí,*" I said. Ma, I'm here. "*Te Amo, Ma.*" I love you, Ma.

Little beads formed at the corners of her eyes, and fell down into her grizzled hair. She gave my hand the slightest squeeze and said, "*Hijo mío, hijo mío.*" My son, my son. Maria mirrored her mother, tears lining

her cheeks as she watched her mother's mind fight to speak with us, "Maria, Carlos, *los amo.*" Maria, Carlos, I love you.

I sang "*Duérmete, Mi Niño*" to her as her eyes fixated on the face of her son, in a place Maria and I couldn't reach, the place where Carlos waited. A final tear rested on the corner of her eye like the dew on morning flowers. On her lips, her breath drew a smile.

"My son, my son."