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Cherries

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I

“Cherries!”

Beneath the word, she’d painted a pair of cartoon cherries smiling, happy their stems were joined. “Go on, sugar, paint Daddy some nice signs to put on the road,” he’d said. She thought the signs would have been better if he’d bought the good paints, the ones that came in skinny tubes, not small tubs. “Use some of that good Spanish they’ve been teaching you at that school you go to, too. Make me up a Spanish one.” Daddy had said this, ignoring the fact that she’d been speaking with Juan and Pilar in Spanish for years, long before she’d started taking it at school. But maybe that was the point — he didn’t consider Pilar’s Spanish to be “good.” She didn’t bother saying anything about the paints. His being nice to her was a minor miracle, so she painted one that read “*Cerezas*,” and left it at that.

The humidity of the day stuck to her arms and legs as she read from another book. And, though she sat in the shade, the stand felt like her own private Easy-Bake Oven, complete with bare light bulb. Her hair and skin had taken on the hue of the rust-colored dust kicked up by cars as they sped by. Even after she showered it remained, like a car’s coat of wax, only grittier. The long stretches between customers were perfect for reading. Over the years, she’d read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, made her way through most of Shakespeare’s tragedies, and was now starting *One Hundred*

Years of Solitude because she'd heard from Pilar that Gabriel García Márquez was the greatest Colombian writer of all time. Pilar knew a lot about literature.

Daddy never had nice things to say about Pilar. He didn't think much of pickers, particularly the women pickers. She liked the pickers but most of all Pilar, who gave big-breasted bear hugs and always had candy. Now and then, she'd say she was going to Connie's house, but she'd go to Pilar's instead, where they'd feed her thick, greasy corn patties to "fatten her up." Using both hands, she'd hold them like a sandwich, their paper towel wrapper oil-stained and warm. She'd listen, mesmerized by their stories about what life had been like in Colombia and how they'd made their way to America, always asking for more and more detail until she was sated—her belly full of cheese, her mind reeling with images. At the time, it seemed easier to lie to Daddy, though she was starting to learn better.

"It's okay, it's okay. Good girls don't cry, remember? *Shhhhh, shhhhh. Hush now,*" Mother whispered, as she wiped her tear-streaked face. Then she'd give her some book money. A dime here and there at first, but after Daddy found out that she'd been sneaking off, it increased to a quarter.

"Won't you look at her! Big know-it-all, nose always in a book. You'd never know what a dummy she was," he'd said once in front of a customer.

"Well, she looks like a very studious young lady," declared the woman in the red-and-white-checked blouse with oversized sunglasses obscuring her eyes.

She thought back on that day often. Once, she remembered the woman averting her eyes, unable to look at Daddy directly, ashamed and embarrassed for him. Another time, the woman looked him straight in the eyes, defiant and protective. Yet another time, the woman was disinterested, her comment dismissive, like she was another girl in another fruit stand on another stretch of highway. It could have happened any number of ways and depending on the day, the memory changed to suit her mood. The woman always looked the same — white linen pants, navy blue espadrilles, Jackie O glasses, bright-red lacquered nails. Red, white, and blue — the most elegant version of the flag she'd ever seen. She'd seen a cross-section of the world — customers with exotic accents, fine-perfumed ladies, families from far away wrapped in bright lime, gold, and ochre fabrics. She imagined them on their way to some place equally exotic, the cherry stand a novel stop on the road to far-off worlds. She traveled too, she told herself. She'd been to the Galapagos and to Ireland with her friends, Darwin and Joyce; to Greece and England; and now she was off to Macondo via Colombia. That

night, Mama gave her fifty cents to make up for the beating she took for “lookin’ smart.”

Shhhh, shhhh. Hush now.

II

The kitchen nook was covered in cherries, actual and pictorial. Sorting the real ones, she read from a book. Cans of whole kernel corn and sweet peas propped it open, the bright red Del Monte logo mirroring the cherries on the oilcloth, though not the ones in the bowl. Those were a much deeper shade of burgundy. Having perfected the art of sorting without looking, she could, by feel alone, tell if a cherry was plump and right. She’d moved on from Macondo years earlier and was now in Algiers with Camus. Since then, she’d gone to South Africa with Mandela, had spent *Seven Years in Tibet*, and trekked across the Australian outback, meeting Bushmen and Aborigines. In the other room, watching television, sat Janie, her youngest. Nine years old. Upstairs, Maddie listened to music. The thumping walls made the cans inch across the table, causing her to occasionally stop sorting to reposition them. Fourteen years old. James Jr., her oldest, was out with Steve, likely up to something awful, and probably illegal. Seventeen years old.

None of the kids ever took to the stand. She only half-heartedly hoped they would, though, figuring it might offer them structure and discipline like Daddy said it would. Their world was bigger than hers had ever been at their age, what with internet, cellphones, and satellite tv. All the trappings that came along with the modernizing of the dirt roads she’d walked as a child. They didn’t care for the stand and she couldn’t blame them, having grown sick of cherries, herself, years earlier. Pilar, now too old to pick, manned the stand. Daddy had wanted to send her packing, arguing that one of the kids could do it, but she’d managed to keep her on making the case that Pilar could watch the stand so she could be home with the kids. “After all, Daddy, James Sr. should have dinner ready when he gets home. Don’t you think?” She’d learned that the way to reason with him was to appeal to his ideas of what made a good wife. That meant cooking, cleaning, “makin’ babies n’ keeping their mouths shut.” And to her surprise, that summed up her life. There had been a time she thought she might like to go to college, but James Sr. worked the whole thing out with Daddy, and so that was that. They’d guaranteed the smallness of her world without her consent, so there was nothing for her to do but keep her mouth shut. She married James Sr. in the little

church down on Lawson Street on a Tuesday afternoon. There were ten guests in attendance — the minister, organ player, their parents, and James Sr.'s siblings. They had an overnight honeymoon down on the shore, and she was back in the stand by Thursday morning. James Jr. came shortly after that. The men had set her life in motion. Once James Jr. came, folks started asking when they'd have another, and so they did. First Maddie, then Bryce, then Janie. No one ever counted Bryce, since he'd died so young. But she counted him.

Shhhh, shhhh. Hush now.

Rolling out pie dough she thought about Mother, Pilar, the church ladies, and the ladies at the beauty parlor. A collection of young and old, sweet and demure, salty and vicious. The one thing they all had in common, was a question they asked themselves daily, even minute-to-minute. "Is now the time to speak up?" She remembered the first time Connie came to the stand with a black eye and the time Celia needed that money. "Don't say nothin' to nobody," Celia pled. So she didn't. Each woman deciding when to whisper, when to scream, and when to stay silent. In her own life, there'd been plenty of times she'd thought to speak up, talk back, set the record straight, but Mother told her to bite her tongue, "don't speak 'less you've got sugar for the silence. Pretty girls don't argue." Mother had been gone three years now and she still wasn't quite sure if that advice had ultimately served her. She'd learned a lot about talking over the years, met folks who so liked to hear the sound of their voice, they'd talk 'til they were blue in the face, but they'd never really say anything. She'd learned that once you'd said something you could never take it back, no matter how many times you apologized and that sometimes, when words are said, they don't show what's inside a person's heart. The mental calculation spanned time and space. Speaking up or staying silent, each came with its own special set of consequences.

III

Maddie declared that her new dress for the school dance ought to be "bright, tight and hot." At the department store, she found Maddie a dress on the clearance rack. Black with little flutter cap sleeves, appearing to hit below the knee. She thought it elegant, but the dress was aspirational, far more sophisticated than Maddie was at 16. She'd read once about the super power of the LBD, the Little Black Dress. The one article of clothing every woman needed. "The secret weapon in the arsenal that is your closet," it read. Perfect for an interview, funeral, church, or party.

“Here, hon, try this one,” she’d said, holding the dress over the fitting room door.

“Ew! Gross, Mom,” Maddie responded, taking a swipe at the dress.

The violent slap of the hanger against the fitting room’s aluminum frame bounced and echoed through the row of empty rooms.

“There is no need to be nasty. This is a pretty dress. You could wear it all sorts of places. You’d look very sophistica —”

“You’re so ordinary.”

She could feel Maddie’s eyes rolling. Her voice dripping with a contemptuous tone she’d recently acquired.

Maddie had fawned over the tight white dress with the spaghetti straps, heart-shaped neckline, and cherry print. She thought it funny — her family “bein’ cherry farmers n’ all” — apparently forgetting how much she’d bad-mouthed the cherry stand, Pilar, and everything associated with the family business.

Beginning her calculations, she considered pressing the issue. The black dress was on sale, after all. But household budgets were not the way to win Maddie over. She could argue that the dress was too tight, too expensive, too low-cut, too sexy, too inappropriate, the cherry print absurd. Then, she landed on Maddie’s inappropriate attitude, calculating that, with the fitting room empty, now would be a good time to speak up.

“Open the door, Maddie.”

“Oh, c’mon, Mom.”

“No. Now.”

Maddie opened the door. She stood with her weight on her left leg and her hip cocked. As predicted, Maddie’s eyes rolled.

“What?”

“Your tone is ‘what.’ It’s insufferable. You’ve fallen under the impression that you’re above it all: me, your father, this town and all the people that have done nothing but love you since the day you were born. We’re all pretty sick of your nonsense, young lady. Just sick. You can’t keep talking to people the way you do. All your hate and

nastiness is ugly. Just ugly. I tell you what: you take a good last look around, 'cause you'll be all alone if you keep acting the way you do. I assure you that while you *think* that would be a blessing, you'll shortly find that it is the biggest curse you'll suffer in your life."

"You're the biggest curse I've had to suffer," Maddie beamed.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You know, for all your reading and all your book learning, Mom, you don't seem to have learned much. You're *so* happy living here in this dusty town with these shitty people. This place is a shithole, and I'll be glad to be rid of you and this awful town."

The slap was unexpected, though not wholly unfamiliar. Her hand shot up open-palmed to the side of Maddie's face. It was a scene that had frequently played out in her own life, though she'd always been on Maddie's side of things. *Don't be bigger than your britches.*

After the slap, Maddie barely spoke to her. She wore the black dress to the school dance but didn't smile for the pictures. Once she finished high school, she made good on her promise, packed a bag and left.

IV

Janie, her youngest, was in delivery room 3. The nurse blurted this, as she tore down the hallway, her expression and tone conveying a severity you'd never want to see in a Labor and Delivery unit of a hospital. The smell of industrial cleaner masking bodily fluids brought back memories of the morning Janie was born and filled her with a sweet, peachy warmth.

They don't want to name him, they say, deciding instead to have the baby "tell" them his name. They explain that choosing his name for him will oppress him, rob him of his autonomy, "crush his spirit." She offers possibilities in the hopes they'll be inspired, struck by her literary prowess —Cicero, Iago, and Watson. But they're undeterred, steadfast in their desire to see what the baby "says" is his name. She wonders how long they'll have to keep calling the baby "Baby," but calculates that now is not the time to push the issue. They eventually announce that the baby's told them his name is Joseph, his great-grandfather's name. Daddy's name.

She half-smiled when they told her, “well, if that’s what the baby said,” her voice trailing off as she unconsciously thumbed the pages of her book. She didn’t say that Daddy beat Mother to death. Didn’t say that he bullied her for being smart and well-read. Didn’t say anything about the beatings or that once it’d gotten so bad he choked her, shoving great big man-sized handfuls of cherries into her face. She didn’t describe how their waxy skins split open, knotty seeds scratching, the juice tart and stinging. She didn’t tell them her eyes watered as she gasped. Futile, sour. She didn’t say any of those things. She’d learned not to.

Don’t say nothin’ to nobody. Don’t pay no mind. Pretty girls don’t argue. Good girls don’t cry. Don’t be bigger than your britches.

They had announced what the baby, now Joseph, told them to call him and they were elated, their baby-naming experiment a great success. She didn’t speak up, didn’t talk back, didn’t set the record straight.

Shhhh, shhhh. Hush now.

She smiled and prayed he would be better. Different. Good.

Jennifer Fernandez is a writer living in the Seattle area. She is currently working on a collection of short stories titled unsaid.