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Churros

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CHURROS

JULIA VAN DER RYN



We are here in the middle of a country. At night I anchor myself to my husband as if we were surrounded by water instead of a flat, dry plane of land. I hook my foot around his ankle and breathe in dust and the smell of other people's kitchens. Frying foods fuel my dreams.

On Sundays I wake up to the sizzle of fat, to the cooking of churros, the unround version of the donut consumed in this country. If I look out my window and down into the well of this apartment building, I will see it in the

pan, bubbles breaking off its surface, as it drowns in hot oil.

The well of this apartment building is actually an octagon, each level representing two interior apartments. My entrance window faces my kitchen window. Everyone uses this span for their laundry line. String bags of oranges and vegetables hang out the kitchen windows. On feast days they put out huge pots on the sill to cool.

I do not cook feasts, but I examine those of other people. I examine their laundry also. I listen for the squeak of the pulley as someone hangs out their wet laundry. I look out to see the perfect spacing of pins on a sheet. I observe how the fabric is not pinned straight along the rope but allowed to fall in a perfect loop between each pin in order to save room on the line.

I am new here. I do not have a proper sack for my laundry pins. I keep them on my sill and often push them off by mistake. I wait during the moment of silence for the metallic bang as it hits a vent far below. The sound gives me away. I am the messy foreigner who can't keep her pins in place.

I've dropped other things too. Once I dropped my underwear, but they were caught on the line below. I was too embarrassed to claim them. The woman from below finally brought them up disguised in a coffee bag.

I have never before been interested in cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Here I am alone all day with a baby. I have few distractions, no television, no books in my language, and no friends. I have my daily chores. I have time to notice how everyone has a system but me.

I look out and down and see someone washing their sheets in the bathtub. I wonder if the machine is broken and nobody has come to fix it, or if they don't have the money to fix it, or if they just don't have one at all and think that most people use their bath tubs. Maybe most people do.

The next day, I see the woman making her bed. She is humming, probably happy about her clean sheets --we have that in common. Only the comparison ends there because she has a style for making her bed that I could not begin to imitate. She is precise, choreographed. She is old, bent, and wrinkled, but making her bed is a beautiful dance.

Everyone seems to have a system for getting everything just right. Maybe it comes with practice, but I'm not so sure, because I too have been doing this for years. I am torn between admiration and fear of this ordered life.

It's the older retired couples who really get to me. Just to think about how long they've been doing this timetable life. I know their comings and goings--the shopping in the morning, the fresh loaf of bread for lunch, the vegetables and fruit upstairs at the Mercado, and downstairs the piece of meat and fish, the siesta after lunch, and the afternoon chat on the bench outside the barber's shop.

I see the old women scrubbing the tiles of the window-sills. I mean, it never occurred to me that I might have to clean something that was not even technically inside my apartment. Even my husband points out that our sills are the only dirty ones. So what, I say, but inside I am less sure.

Certainly I am less sure about a lot of things. Things I never gave importance to are suddenly important. I clean the base of the toilet, I wipe down the metal faucets, I separate my laundry and use bleach on the whites.

I mop the kitchen floor, skating around on rags to dry and polish it. I learned this watching the man who cleans the glass stores. I pass by in the morning when I do the shopping. There are three stores in a row that sell chandeliers, mirrors, and little animals made from glass. The man cleans the floors with the gusto of an Olympic skater.

I have new shopping methods as well. I have made friends with the banana man, the egg woman, the tomato and zucchini guy. It is better when they know you; here, you are not allowed to touch— you can't pick out your own fruit and vegetables. When the vendors know you, they let you tell them which pieces to give you, and maybe even let you sneak a feel, without giving you the evil eye.

These are the thoughts I think all day in this big city surrounded by a maze of freeways and clusters of lost-looking apartment towers. I think about why laundry soap costs so much and why it is so difficult to find real milk.

I think about the cars parked everywhere. They are so close together that I cannot get through with the stroller. I walk in the street and those drivers that do not try to kill me—honk instead.

I miss the water. I take the baby to the park. There is a lake there where people row boats. There are huge catfish that come up from the bottom to eat the old bread people throw them. Their bottomless mouths suck at the surface and make a strange popping sound. They are ugly, but it is nice to see something alive that is not human.

The way the fish come to the window at the top of the water and then disappear back to the muddy bottom, reminds me of my neighbors. They too disappear into parts of their apartments that I cannot see into. I am so glad that they do things I cannot see and that I cannot see all the things that they do.

I survey the windows below for signs of change. I am worried that the old woman on the fourth floor is sick. Her curtains have been drawn for so long. I listen for the sound of life. I look for a soft surface to press my ear against but there is only stucco, Formica, my almost white and unenticing linoleum of the kitchen floor. I strain to feel the beat that I cannot hear.

There are many unloving sounds. I listen to the constant hum of the huge neon sign that is on the roof above of me. When I come home from the park I can see the sign clearly. Colchon Flex, the sign blinks above my apartment windows. My building heralds the best mattresses in the country. I should sleep better than I do.

I have never lived so far from an ocean. Maybe it is the lack of sea air, or possibly the lack of air altogether that makes it so difficult for me to remember who I am. Sometimes I feel like some sea creature within me is coming up to the surface, bringing mud up from the bottom, clouding what was once clear.

On the way to the dry cleaners, the pharmacy, and the cheap place to buy diapers there is a bar called, El Diamante, the diamond. El Diamante makes its own churros. Because a day old churro is not a lovely thing to behold, much less eat, El Diamante is a popular place.

At El Diamante, you can watch a big man, wearing only an undershirt under his once- white apron, standing in front of a huge vat of hot oil. A machine is centered over the vat and as he pulls the lever, a length of dough is extruded. With a flick of his wrist he flips up one end so that it meets the other in the shape of a giant teardrop. He slices it away from the machine and lets it fall into the boiling fat. When a batch is done he hooks them out and strings them up on an iron rod to drip-dry a minute before they are passed to the people who work behind the bar.

I ate a plate of churros the first week I lived here. They were divine dipped in my coffee. The fried dough somehow managed to be soggy and crisp at the same time—a strange and compelling contradiction in my mouth. After I finished contemplating and chewing the miracle of it all, I saw the layer of oil that had floated to the top of my coffee. I thought how strange it is, the way certain things will not mix, ever, and other distinct elements, once married can never be separated. I think of the way that the milk and coffee together become something richer and better, while all the drops of oil seek and merge only with each other.

I thought about how much oil they could save if everybody suctioned that oil off the top of their coffee and gave it back so that they could fry more churros. I thought about seeing the same old oil reunited on the top of my coffee morning after morning.

After that I never ate another churro.