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Our Talk

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OUR TALK

by Mariel Eleni Valerio

Sitting on the back porch of our somnolent Florida home, we talk. Never late into the night because she has to be up at 3 AM to work security at the nearby Southwest Florida International Airport, but late enough that we feel a sense of finish to the day. We talk until my mouth becomes dry and hers filled with the tail of smoke from yet another cigarette. She's started smoking again, no doubt the cause of her incessantly coughing and which makes me wish I were older so I could have kids. Will they know her? But rather than say something of what feels like some irrational fear, I resort to hiding her pack of Marlboros. Maybe wait until she comes home before smoking one myself, pretending to be alarmed when she stands in front of the sliding glass door looking embarrassed. Ashamed.

My mother is sick. Sick in the sense that I'm afraid of how old she is and how old she's become. And my fear of such a sickness has arrested me since I was little, when I would sneak into her room at night to watch her breathe, watch the caves of her blankets fill with her belly as she inhaled deeply from a place I could never reach or fix if broken. Watch her breathe so that I could sleep one more night knowing that I'd have her in the morning. The last few nights we've talked of uncertainty. I'm afraid of graduating and being forced to go without a set schedule. She reminds me of how I've always wanted to travel to Ireland and of the 1,500 dollars I saved before quitting my job to come home. "You could just buy a one way ticket," she ventures, "maybe live with one of the people you worked with from Dublin." I drag my feet along the paled Persian rug my mother has brought from Morocco. It seemed while the house belonged to her family, the lanai is her escape, its very air tasting of cheap coffee. A combination of the things she loved most from her travels: wrought iron keys from Spain, aluminum decorations from Jamaica, ornate umbrellas from India. I want to tell her how I'm growing restless in California and need out, but that if I were to go, I may not come back.

"Your father and I would help. It would be good for you, Mariel." The guilt cuts across the top of my body like a flash of sunburn. I quickly change the subject to her potential loneliness. I'll be gone soon as will my younger sister, Kalena. And as I listen to my mother, her voice slow and rich with her Puerto Rican accent, I hear a sadness from lower than the throat where lie the daily troubles, washed clean with the night. It comes from the bottom of her stomach, waiting like some rusted bomb, hitting each rib as she leans forward and begins to cough again. It's a sadness that seems as endless as her sickness, but one she's come to terms with. One she's forgiven and insists she can manage.

I feel disconnected, so I tell her of when I would sneak into her room when I was little to watch her sleep when overcome with a sudden fear of her death. She smiles to herself, rubbing her throat gently as she begins to rock in her chair, willing the words from somewhere else than within.

"Yo tambien. I would do the same with your abuela when I was young, especially on the nights she was upset. I was always afraid I may never be forgiven and so I would sit by her bed and wait until she would wake up to tell her I was sorry, even if it wasn't my fault. Watching, listening, waiting. Always waiting, it seemed."

For a moment we avert our eyes from one another. She stares into the neighbors' palms she herself cut. She runs her hands along the arms of her chair, the blisters from working with a machete raw and exposed against the damp wood. Thinking, maybe, about how the couple was upset from lacking a sense of privacy the plants were intended to provide in being overgrown. She knew the old Mexican man who cuts the grass would have done it for an extra ten, maybe fifteen dollars, but she wanted to do it herself. Her hands insisted upon feeling the weight of the soiled curved blade cut its uneven teeth into the under belly of each tree. Their fronds littering the yard's divide like the orphaned children of some poorly planned massacre. Then, one by one, she would drag them to the street for the garbage man to take away. The work is what she needs, not the results. It reminds her of who she was before she was our mother.

Instead, I stare absently into the house, letting my spine rake itself along the back of my wrought iron chair as I inhale. I suddenly feel the need to understand that I'm breathing again. I watch our two cats find temporary comfort from the oppressive humidity by spreading out on the tiles beneath the baby grand in the living room, which has taken my mother seven years to pay off.

"I'll miss you," my mother says, standing up to hug me. She smells of earth and smoke and rose water. The skin of her discolored arm feel displaced at the back of my neck, the fat slid along the top of the bone like the fat beneath the skin of a broiled chicken breast. I want to remember her as the flamenco dancer from the pictures that she keeps tied in a box in her closet. Her back a never-ending question mark, hands forever poised like doves. I want to remember her struggles and her triumphs. I want to remember how twice, my abuela had to fly to Madrid to nurse her back to health because all my mother could afford to eat was a broth filled with whatever vegetables she could find. I want to remember that she was the first and only Puerto Rican to dance in Spain's national ballet, despite the women who spit in her face for taking what they as Spanish citizens believed was theirs.

"I know. Me too. I'll miss you too." I wrap my arms around her awkwardly in place of standing up. Her thin dress is wet from sweat. She exhales the last of her cigarette from the left corner of her mouth before

moving aside to fix something she sees as out of place - a pool towel my father has draped over the back of a chair, or an incense holder filled with ash. Anything until the pain of our inability to steal a bit of one another's strength from such an act of compassion passes. Then, carefully, she lowers herself back into her rocking chair. Pèpè, the younger of our two cats, is drawn from beneath the piano, interested in the sudden commotion between my mother and me. Through the glass, I watch as his mouth opens and closes, the pink of his tongue an eyesore against the black of his coat, his cries to join us lost in the anguish of a Macaw across the street that calls out to his owner to be held. Too weak to be heard, he paces, his eyes like two pools of expanding oil, as again and again I'm lost in the brief gasps of silent air collecting in the wet of his mouth.

"Have you fed the cats?" I ask, and I get up to let Pèpè out.

"Sí." The response quiet, lost in my mother.

The conversation has grown tired. It's now when it seems my mother would rather simply sit and stare into the faded sky beyond her. Beyond the neighbors' palms. Beyond the sickness and sadness. She begins to cough and this time I get up and stand beside her until it subsides. We watch as Pèpè makes his way to the edge of the large screen surrounding the pool. Here two large moths have come to rest and we listen as his voice cracks, his long whiskers carrying the moon's dirty light. I'm afraid this will turn into the foundation of what may be salvaged of our talk. I'm afraid of the sadness. I'm afraid of her age and the fact that I'm running out of time. I'm always running out of time. What about kids? Will they know her?

"Mamá, do you miss abuela?" I ask, desperate to regain ground that I'm convinced is lost.

"I can still hear her breathing."

I think I understand.

"Can you believe they actually complained about me cutting their palms?" She begins to rock again, pointing beyond where I can see. Beyond everything. And then, if only briefly, the sadness is lifted.