

1

Ana had one picture of her mother. It was not an original photograph but a color photocopy.

The image had been laminated, sealed in plastic for protection, so that it would last forever. When she was ten, Ana decorated the corners with sparkly stickers of flowers and stars. She handled the photocopy so often that the corners had started to curl and the plastic had begun to fray and come apart.

All of her life, Ana's aunts and uncles told her that she looked just like her mamá. Ana sometimes stood in front of the mirror, holding the photocopy next to her face. She wanted to see if her eyes really were the same as her mother's. Ana shifted her focus from her eyes to her mother's eyes until the images blurred and she could not tell where her mother ended and she began.

In the photocopy, Ana's mother was young; she was only sixteen when Ana was born. She had big brown eyes and feathers of dyed blond hair. Her skin, the color of cocoa, looked fresh, smooth, and polished. Ana hoped her family was right; she hoped she looked like her beautiful mamá.

Ana's mother had been gone for so long that Ana could only recall the curves of her face by looking at the ragged photocopy. Ana taped the picture to the wall of her bedroom at pillow height so that she could stare at it before she went to sleep, comforted in knowing that if she ever forgot what her mother looked like, she could glance over and remember.

2

Ana had only one actual memory of her mother. It was not vivid but vague and somewhat confusing. She remembered this piece of her past like a black-and-white movie, the images blurred and out of focus, beyond reach.

In the memory—Ana's first—she was three years old. She stood in the hallway outside a bathroom; her mother was on the other side of the door, sobbing and wailing.

“Mamá,” Ana whispered through the wooden door. “Are you okay?”

She could hear her mother crying, then trying to catch her breath.

“Mamá?”

Ana put her hand on the knob and turned it. She pulled open the door and peeked

inside. Her mother leaned against the wall with one hand and turned and looked at Ana through puffy red eyes. Her mother's hand trembled as she reached up to wipe the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

"Ana," her father said from the hall, "leave Mamá alone, por favor." Ana felt confused and afraid. Her papá's eyes were also red and he, too, had been crying.

"Your sister Lucía—," he started, then stopped. He drew a deep breath and then said quickly, "Your sister has died."

Ana heard the words, but she didn't really understand. She was too young to comprehend the meaning of death and grief. All she saw was that Mamá and Papá were crying, and that made her uneasy and afraid.

"Okay," Ana whispered, backing away from the door.

She knew that her mother had gone to the hospital and given birth to her youngest sister in the summertime. She knew that Lucía was sick and that her mother had come home without the baby. Mamá went to see Lucía at the hospital every morning but always returned home alone.

Ana had never met her baby sister, and now she never would.

Lucía died when she was two months old.

3

Lucía's death was Ana's first secret. During her first days of school, Ana and her classmates marched like sailors, wearing the mandatory school uniforms of her country, white blouses and navy pants or skirts. When anyone asked, "Do you have any sisters or brothers?" she usually responded, "Yes, I have one sister, Isabel, and she looks exactly like me."

Ana considered the response truthful, if incomplete. She willingly and openly spoke about Isabel, who was not yet in school because she was two years younger, but she didn't want to talk about Lucía. Lucía's life was like a dream, disconnected and private.

4

When friends asked about her family, Ana talked about her life as if it belonged to someone else. She recited the facts like poems she memorized at school. But so many memories were missing that her past was like Swiss cheese, filled with holes.

“Mamá died when I was three,” Ana told anyone who asked where her mother was. This was true, but in the place where childhood memories belong, Ana had nothing—a void. She only repeated what other family members told her about her mamá.

Ana didn’t remember Mamá growing weak and pale in the months after Lucía’s death. She didn’t remember Mamá’s face becoming gaunt and skeletal; she didn’t remember her mamá’s breathing becoming labored and slow, the pause between breaths growing longer and longer, until her breathing stopped. Ana’s mamá was not yet twenty when she died of AIDS.

“She was sick,” Ana told those who pressed for more information.

“With what?”

“I don’t know,” Ana replied. It was the truth because that’s all she would know for many years.

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