

2022

On Your Painted Wings

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Recommended Citation

Ford, Sandra M., "On Your Painted Wings" (2022). *Honors Undergraduate Theses*. 1296.
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ON YOUR PAINTED WINGS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors in the Major Program in English
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2022

Thesis Chair: Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés

ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to explore historical issues of Cuban restrictions on emigration through a magical realism lens. Drawing inspiration from Cuban-American writer Ana Menéndez and Columbian writer Gabriel García Márquez, this thesis focuses on family relationships, especially how grief shapes those relationships and the people in them. The thesis approaches these issues of family, grief, and Cuban emigration by weaving a more grounded central narrative with an original fairytale.

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PROPOSAL

Growing up, I tended to feel that I wasn't Cuban enough. No one knew I was Cuban by just looking at me; I always had to tell them, and they would always be surprised. I couldn't speak Spanish; it never stuck no matter how many times I tried. My mom is a Cuban immigrant, and my dad is about as white as they come, born in Texas. So, I would refer to myself as half Cuban because I didn't feel like I deserved to call myself Cuban-American or just Cuban, even with everything my mom went through to get here. Did I resent my heritage? I don't think so. I just never felt like I fit, but I know I would correct people about my heritage whenever I got the chance.

Since coming to UCF, I've learned a lot, and I've tried to teach myself a lot. I started to see myself differently, recognize myself as Cuban-American. I read authors that looked like me and finally had a teacher that looked like me. Even though I'm very white-passing, I don't feel like I'm hiding my identity anymore. Through writing this thesis, I want to embrace and explore my Cuban heritage, the history and stories I never really learned about before.

I want to write a story that's relevant to the real lives and struggles that Cubans have historically faced (and continue to face), intertwined with the fantasy and magical realism that I love. My mom's immigration story is one of my biggest inspirations for the thesis I want to write: the stories of her childhood and adolescence, and how her world changed when her father vanished at sea, and how my Abuela must have felt. I want to write this story for my mom and my family.

PLOT AND THEME

Two central themes I will explore in my thesis are family and freedom. My main characters Ramona and her daughter Araceli attempt to escape an island where leaving is forbidden in an allegory for Cuban emigration—the historical restrictions on it and the struggles Cubans trying to emigrate face. Simultaneously, it is also a coming-of-age story for Araceli as she grows up on the island and how her relationship with her mother changes over time. In several of the books I read while researching for my thesis, family played an essential role in the stories' themes. Foremost is Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the narrative following several generations of the Buendía family. Family relationships, loyalties, and conflicts are major driving factors for the novel's plot. In Ana Menéndez's collection *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd*, several of the stories feature families, their relationships depicted in vivid and realistic ways. One of my favorite pieces in the book, both for its absurdities and its characters, is "The Perfect Fruit." The dynamic between Matilde and her husband is central to the story, but it's her feelings towards her son and how her own life is changing that truly drives it. In a similar way, exploring Ramona's perspective as her daughter grows up will create a fresh take on the typical coming-of-age story, Ramona's life changing just as much as Araceli's during the course of my thesis.

Another book I read during my research, *Circe* by Madeline Miller, explores themes of both family and freedom. Being based on Greek myth, there are a lot of family relationships going on in the book (*everyone* is related in some way), but the relationships I found most meaningful were between Circe and her son, Telegonus, and between Daedalus and Icarus. Both Circe and Daedalus make sacrifices for their sons, trying to give them the best lives they can, something universal in most all parents and that I hope to capture in Ramona. Daedalus and

Icarus are only in the story briefly, with Icarus as a young child, but Miller makes the love between them clear, writing:

“Thank you,” [Circe] said. “And are you a good boy, for your father?”

[Icarus] nodded seriously. “Oh, yes.”

Daedalus laughed. “Don’t believe a word. He looks sweet as cream, but he does what he wants.” The boy smiled at his father. It was an old joke between them.

.... Daedalus’ face had gone soft as ripe fruit, his eyes full and shining. (141)

Between Circe and her son, meanwhile, readers get to see how their relationship changes and strains as Telegonus grows into a man. One of the main conflicts between them results from Circe lying about how violent his father, Odysseus, really was, letting Telegonus picture him as a hero only to have that picture shattered, along with his trust in his mother. This conflict is similar to one in my thesis: how Ramona lies to Araceli about her father dying and how their relationship changes once Araceli learns the truth. As for the theme of freedom, one of the central conflicts of *Circe* is how Circe wants to leave her island prison, ultimately succeeding by deciding that no one can control her fate but her. The story of Daedalus and Icarus also plays heavily on the theme of freedom, though it ends much differently with their failure and Icarus’ death. Their desperation and determination, however, are inspiring for my thesis as Ramona and Araceli try to earn their freedom.

The stories in Ana Menéndez’s collection *Adios, Happy Homeland!* similarly uses the theme of freedom. For example, in the story “The Parachute Maker,” an unfair system forces its characters to take action. When a town of parachute makers are stripped of their sewing machines, Belafonte knows they can’t resist much longer, so in the last chance of freedom to use his creativity and passion, he takes his final and greatest parachute up the mountain. The ending

is ambiguous, leaving it unclear whether he escapes on his parachute or not, but there is a sense of freedom in this ambiguity too. Belafonte's fate is no longer controlled by the unfair system or the story; anything could happen. The feeling that a world of possibilities exists where the story ends is something I would like to capture in my story. It isn't revealed what happens to the characters once they leave the island, but no matter what, they are free.

GENRE AND STYLE

Magical realism and fantasy will both feature prominently in both the genre and style of my thesis. I have loved fantasy since I could read, and though I've only recently started reading heavily in magical realism, I find that I adore writing in that genre. To me, it's only natural that my thesis would include elements of both of these genres.

One thing in particular about magical realism is the strong imagery writers tend to use. One of my favorite things about both writing and reading is powerful images layered with meaning, and I intend to use strong imagery in my thesis. Gabriel García Márquez, of course, is a master of imagery, and one of my favorite moments of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* comes after the death of José Arcadio Buendía as Márquez writes:

A short time later, when the carpenter was taking measurements for the coffin, through the window they saw a light rain of tiny yellow flowers falling. They fell on the town all through the night in a silent storm, and they covered the roofs and blocked the doors and smothered the animals who slept outdoors. So many flowers fell from the sky that in the mourning the streets were carpeted with a compact cushion and they had to clear them away with shovels and rakes so that the funeral procession could pass by. (140)

This image captures not only the tremendous grief towards José Arcadio Buendía's death but also memorializes the beauty and impact of his life on his family and home. The physical labor of clearing the roads for the procession captures the toll his death takes on Macondo and removing this scene from the family in favor of a more distant point of view captures how his loss was felt by all, but also emphasizes the solitude he felt at the end of his life. I especially love this use of point of view and would like to implement an omniscient point of view in my thesis.

Ana Menéndez also uses strong imagery in her magical realism. She does so in a way that is perhaps less flashy than Márquez, but more subtly, making her fiction more grounded. For example, in "Confusing the Saints" from her collection *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd*, she writes, "To be that woman again! To worry about those things. Not the ocean that gets into my dreams now, the waves dampening the sheets" (122). This image invokes both a sense of womanhood and the anxieties that the narrator faces in just a few sentences. It inspired a scene in my thesis where Ramona wakes up from a strange dream to find her bed and clothes soaked with ocean water.

As for fantasy, one of perhaps the most influential works on my writing style is *Stardust* by Neil Gaiman. I'm pretty sure ever since I read it, almost everything I've written has had a fairytale flavor to it, and the sections I've drafted of my thesis are no exception. The very first sentence of *Stardust* reads, "There was once a young man who wished to gain his Heart's Desire" (2). There's just something about the simplicity of it that I love, as well as the magic of the book as a whole. I think it's how fairytales tend to bring the reader back into a child-like state of mind that makes everything feel a little more magical.

In my thesis, I will incorporate fairytales and myths braided into the main plot. For the structure of short stories embedded within a larger narrative, I take inspiration from Carmen

María Machado's "The Husband Stitch." The story occasionally steps away from the main narrative to tell urban legend-esc cautionary tales that provide insight on the main plot, essentially holding up a mirror to it. In my thesis, I plan to use the myths I tell as a means of reflecting and commenting on the events of the main plot. Stories like Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose" and those in Leigh Bardugo's collection *The Language of Thorns* both influence how I want to write my fairytales: filled with vivid and simple images alike, talking animals, morals, and endings that don't have to be happy. I plan to write a combination of retellings of classic stories, original stories, and ones inspired by Cuban history.

SETTING

For the setting of my thesis, I want to build a world that is intimate and focused, very real yet full of magic, elements that are well embodied in the works of Gabriel García Márquez. In his classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Márquez paints the fictional town of Macondo nestled in both the historical and the fantastical. The visiting gypsies, the Liberals and the Conservatives, and the tragedies that result from the introduction of the banana company all parallel real-world events in Colombia. And yet, in Macondo yellow flowers fall from the sky, butterflies follow a young mechanic, and rain pours for four years straight. Márquez's use of the historical and the fantastical together is what gives Macondo its magic and what makes it so believable for the reader, effectively suspending their disbelief as they become immersed in this world that Márquez has created. In my own work, I want to incorporate parallels to Cuban history, such as Fidel Castro's dictatorship, Elián González, and the Pedro Pan flights, alongside more fantastical elements of magical realism, fairytales, and folktales.

Additionally, both Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* stay in one town for almost the entire book, creating a setting that the reader becomes familiar with. While the town of Macondo is constantly changing throughout the book over the course of several generations, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* takes place in a small Colombian town in the span of just a few days. This creates a small yet vivid world that's central to the story, with elements such as the entrances to Santiago Nasar's house and the layout of the town being central to how the story plays out. Locations within the town, such as the milk shop, docks, and square, become landmarks for the story's events. The small setting creates a sense of intimacy and familiarity for the reader that makes the story even more captivating and engaging. In my thesis, the story will take place largely within the fictional town of Santa Karina on the northern coast of an unnamed island very similar to Cuba, based on the stories my mom told me about growing up in Cuba (and named after her too). It won't be quite as small as the setting of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, but I hope to create a similar sense of closeness for the reader. With the story taking place over several years as Araceli grows up, I hope to capture the small changes in the town while still keeping it familiar for the reader.

CHAPTER 1

Ramona had always been a practical woman, so when her husband José suggested they build a plane, she laughed at him. Sure, she could recall seeing those tiny black specks leaving trails of exhaust as they crossed the sky ever since she was a little girl, but those things were for distant lands, not the island.

“And wouldn’t you like to see those distant lands?” her husband asked. José was the dreamer of the two with all his mad ideas.

“And would you like to crash and drown?” Ramona chided. No one leaves the island.

“Nonsense,” José said. “I’m a very good swimmer.”

He was stubborn, an ass really. It took months of convincing—Ramona was stubborn too—until she finally relented. “Fine,” she said, “we’ll build your damned plane.”

He grinned at her, and she couldn’t help but smile too. José always had that effect on her.

He put a hand on her pregnant stomach. The large, callused hand of a carpenter. “I want her world to be bigger than this tiny island,” he said.

“So do I.” Ramona put her hand over his. Hers was callused too: on the side of her middle finger, just above the upper joint from years of long hours with a pencil.

“You know, I don’t think you’ve ever looked as beautiful as you do today, my clever wife.”

“You’re a liar,” she said as she raised her lips to his. She kissed him. They’d build that plane.

#

Five years later, they came to an agreement. Someone had to stay behind with Araceli, the plane too unpredictable for a child to fly, like a beast barely tamed. Ramona was the natural

choice: the island would be less likely to separate a lone mother and child, and José was the more confident pilot. José would fly the plane to whatever lay beyond the blue-green sea and take a year to prepare a life for the family there. Then he would return, and the three would cross the sea together. That was Ramona's practical plan.

She squinted her eyes against the early morning sun; the racetrack turned bone-white under its heat. Years ago, it was used for horse racing by José's father but had since fallen into disrepair after gambling was outlawed. The track's shoulders were overgrown with tall grasses and weeds. With Ramona's every step, dust kicked up from the track. She and José did what they could to fix it up, but their repairs didn't extend far beyond the old stable, now converted into a workshop. All the same, the overgrowth helped keep their work hidden. No one was supposed to leave the island, after all, and their attempt would not be treated kindly if discovered.

José held his daughter in one arm and a suitcase in the other. Ramona had carefully packed it the day before with clothes, food, and any valuables the family could spare to sell, mostly old jewelry inherited from their grandmothers. The island's pesos would likely be worthless on the other side of the sea. But to José, none of it was as valuable as the child asleep in his arm, not used to getting up so early, or his clever wife, nervously eyeing the plane for any unnoticed faults. The old jewelry would buy them a future away from the island and its stifling heat.

He hefted the suitcase into the rear of the cockpit, the spot that should have been Ramona's. He tickled his daughter's nose. "Celi, Celi," his voice a morning bird's song, "it's time to wake up, mi niña."

Araceli's long eyelashes fluttered open like butterfly wings. "Sí, Papi." She yawned.

"How would you like to go for a ride on an airplane?" José said the last word like a

magic spell.

The little girl beamed, green eyes shining, the same shade as her mother's. She loved watching birds fly from the patio of their little stucco house. Looking at the great wings of canvas that stretched between the plane's parallel wooden frames, she wanted nothing more than to fly, just like the birds. Just like her father would, leaving her behind while he soared through the clouds. Araceli nodded her head eagerly.

José lifted her into the plane as she giggled.

Ramona folded her arms. "You're going to make her jealous."

Once Araceli was seated, her father's flight goggles perched on her head, José took his wife's hands. "It'll be her turn before you can blink, mi amor." He kissed her forehead.

"I'll hold you to it." Ramona looked at her daughter sitting in the cockpit, pretending to steer the plane as she made engine noises with her mouth, a slight whistle from where her missing two front teeth should be. "I don't know how I'm going to do this without you."

"You'll do wonderfully. One less bad influence for Celi." He laughed. "Besides, it's only for a year."

"A whole year. Tonto." She squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to imagine all the worst-case scenarios. She felt dizzy. José was always the optimist, the steady one. Not like her, fearful and jumpy as a bird. "Just promise me you'll be safe. That you'll come back."

José ran a rough thumb over her knuckles. "I will. I promise."

"Okay."

They pushed the plane out the stable doors to the makeshift runway. Araceli squealed as the plane rolled along under the clear sky, soaring in her childish logic. "Look, Mami! I'm flying!"

“You are!” Ramona tried to make her smile genuine.

When the plane came to a stop, she lifted her daughter from the cockpit and sat her down on the far side of the runway on a little stool, surrounded by the wild green overgrowth. One of the plants was flowering, pink and yellow puffballs drooping from its branches. Araceli reached out to touch it, leaving a strange, prickly feeling on her finger. She frowned, sticking her fingertip in her mouth. Absentmindedly, she watched her parents across the track as they circled the plane, looking over the wings and checking the engine. They stopped and spoke for a while, too far away for Araceli to hear, but it seemed very serious and her mother looked sad. Then her father walked over to where she sat on the stool, his figure growing like an inflating balloon as he approached. In front of her, his shoulders seemed very large.

“Celi,” he said.

Araceli removed her finger from her mouth. “Papi?”

“You are a very brave girl. And that’s good because I’m going to need you to be brave for a little while, mi niña.”

She looked across at her mother, her arms tightly folded over her waist. “For Mami?”

José followed the girl’s gaze to his wife. She was turning out to be just as bright as Ramona and would certainly be as stubborn too, someday. He smiled as he shook his head. “No, not for Mami. For you. Mami will be brave for herself, but I want you to help her out when things get hard, okay?”

“Okay!”

“Good girl.” José pulled her to him, his big arms wrapped around her tiny frame. She hugged him back, pressing her chubby cheeks to his chest. “I’m going to miss you, Celi. I love you so, so very much. Eres mi vida.”

“I love you too, Papi.”

He kissed the top of her head and pulled away. “Adiós, mi niña.”

Araceli watched his square shoulders as he walked back to the plane. He hugged her mother for a long time, and, once again, she couldn't hear what they were saying. Her mother shook slightly and her father seemed very stiff.

When they finally let go, José hoisted himself into the cockpit as Ramona circled around to the engine. Araceli remembered what came next from the nighttime test flights and put her hands firmly over her ears, keeping her inquisitive eyes wide open. Her mother kicked one sandaled foot up on the plane to brace herself as she pulled the ignition. With a burst, the engine came to life and the propeller began to spin. She ran towards Araceli on her stool.

The girl wondered who would start the plane's engine when her father was far on the other side of the sea. Her mother's sand-brown hair was flattened around her shoulders as though the ghost of her father's arms still held it there.

“Wave goodbye to Papi,” she said, voice slightly muffled through Araceli's covered ears.

Cautiously, Araceli lowered her hands. The propeller thrummed loudly as the plane began to move. She waved, and her father waved back.

The plane took off. Up and up and up it soared, and José, preoccupied by the sorrow, excitement, and anxiety tightening his heart, didn't notice the butterflies in his stomach until he hiccupped one up. With white and yellow wings, it fluttered to the ground caught on a lonely breeze, brushing his wife's cheek and settling on his daughter's head. The girl didn't so much as look up at it. José smiled; the summer air was warm on his face. He knew they would be fine, those two women he loved more than anything else in the world, whose pictures watched over him from where they were tucked behind the controls. There were three in total: one of Ramona

in her wedding dress, serene and serious, one of little Araceli just a few days old and grinning like her father, and one of the three of them dressed in their best clothes, taken just a few weeks before at a fancy photography studio. Ay, how he ached leaving them.

Ramona watched as the plane shrunk until it was nothing more than a speck against the sky before disappearing altogether. She thanked every saint she could name for that cloudless sky, for the hot, stagnant air. Her husband might just make it.

She took Araceli by the hand. “Someday, you’ll fly too,” Ramona assured her. She led the girl through the abandoned racetrack and through the little town called Santa Karina as it was waking up for the morning and through the old bodega to pick up eggs and bread and ground coffee and through the telephone wire and palm-lined streets of their neighborhood past the candy-colored houses and through their dry front yard and through their little kitchen with its painted floral tiles and sat the child down at the kitchen table and started cooking breakfast. She fried the eggs into a tortilla and toasted and buttered the bread and started the coffee before pouring it into the warmed milk and serving a plate and a mug for each of them. She did all of this in the most efficient way she could to keep herself from crying in front of her daughter. From breaking apart like a cracked egg to fry.

Araceli, a good girl, hadn’t said a word. As they walked through Santa Karina, she kept her eyes fixed on the sky, and as she ate, she paid close attention to her food, saving the best bite of toast dipped in her café con leche for last, glancing out the kitchen window as she chewed. Finished eating, she got up from the table and went to her bedroom, busying herself with her crayons as she set out to draw the plane as best she could.

Ramona picked up the dishes from the table and brought them over to the sink. She turned on the tap as hot as it would go and washed and washed and washed. She still didn’t cry.

Even all alone at the kitchen sink, even when she so very much wanted to. She ached. Her hands started to burn as she realized she had been holding them under the scalding water. She held them in front of her face, studying her red blotched skin. On her left hand, she wore her wedding ring that had once belonged to José's mother, its ruby and gold slightly dulled with age. On her right, a small round callus, grown in recent years from the long nights spent hunched over the plane blueprints. She grasped the edge of the sink, soapsuds like tiny prisms in the sunlight that streamed through the kitchen window.

Why couldn't she cry? Were the tears just biding their time, waiting to flood her eyes, leaving her blind and drowned and heartbroken?

She looked out the window at the clear sky, at the still palm trees, at the little birds that flew on colorful wings. She tried to remind herself that everything would be alright. José always made everything right. She tried to make herself steady.

A column of smoke rose over the shore, blowing in from sea. It billowed over the pier, over the faded brick streets and tiled roofs of Santa Karina, and settled in a heavy smog over the old racetrack where it sat for a long moment before continuing on past the overgrowth and the pink and yellow puffball flowers. It made its way through the bodega, leaving a burnt taste behind on the fresh bread and ripe mangoes. It spread out in dark tendrils like an octopus's tentacles as it wound and wove through the neighborhoods, searching. When it found the dried-out yard it was looking for, it collected itself back into a single smoky cloud. It came in under the door, slid between the walls and the window frames to where Ramona stood putting away dishes in the kitchen. It came in like an omen, like a cruel yet truthful messenger.

A plate shattered on the floral tiles as Ramona covered her mouth. The smoke surrounded her, so black and pure it held stars like the night. The stars burned her skin and eyes, felt like fire

in her throat. She coughed but did not cry. She forced open the kitchen window and the smoke poured out, taking everything she had with it—her dreams, her love, her reason to live—leaving her eyes and heart dark.

Her lip trembled.

The plane had crashed. That ass. Ese tonto.

She would never forgive him.

Ramona cried a hurricane. The dusty racetrack was torn apart, palm trees and telephone poles ripped from the ground as broken roof tiles cut through the air. The storm buffeted the island and ravaged Santa Karina for days and days, but it wouldn't bring her husband back. She felt like a bird: frail, fearful body ready to break at any moment with the snap of hollow bones.

THE MOTHER AND THE MERMAID

There once was a woman named Marisol who lived by the sea. At night the crashing waves carried her gently to sleep, and in the morning the high tide would come to greet her like a friendly old dog, lapping just steps from her door. Hers was a quiet life, but she never felt lonely, not with the ocean's constant company and, later, the sweet cooing of her infant son, Teo.

She held Teo in her arms as she stood barefoot in the surf. He was like a little star, pulling her and the waves in with his gravity. She lowered him to the sand, holding him by his small, pudgy hands as he kicked at the water. The ocean sprayed his fine baby curls as he giggled.

Marisol smiled. She watched as the sun gave the sea one last kiss before ascending, leaving the waves blushing orange and pink. "Isn't it beautiful, Teo?" she asked as the baby giggled again. She swept him into her arms, spinning in the sand as he laughed and laughed. No child could have been as beautiful as hers, no sunrise ever so colorful and bright.

The ocean leapt against her calves in agreement and followed her to the door as she went inside.

Life was peaceful in the little house by the sea, like the easy clockwork of the tides. She cooked and cleaned, read to her son from the few books they had, napped when the sun came in through the windows at just the right angle, and walked along the shore until it was time to make dinner. Marisol didn't eat lunch, making her meager rations last until it was time to go into town again for more.

One night, she opened the windows to let in the cool ocean air and lied down beside her son, watching his saltwater green eyes flutter closed. There were many things she couldn't afford, and a crib was one of them, so they slept on the narrow bed together, one side pushed

against the wall so Teo wouldn't fall out. The pesos were thin and growing thinner; Marisol loved her life by the sea, been happy with what little she had when hers was the only mouth to feed, but she wasn't sure she could provide Teo with a life he could love the same. With a future such a precious boy deserved.

A wind blew over the ocean, carrying its voice through her window, blowing the sun-faded curtains aside. "Marisol, Marisol," it said. "Come to the water, Marisol."

Marisol jolted, listening to the ocean repeat her name. She thought she must be dreaming. She thought she was imagining things. She glanced at Teo, asleep beside her, and went to sleep.

The same thing happened the next night, and the next, and the next. She was beginning to feel the lost hours of sleep. When she awoke to the ocean's calling on the fifth night, she rose from the bed and latched the window, but the wind persisted, tapping against the glass, the voice only muffled.

Marisol frowned. Teo was still asleep, oblivious to the noise, his little chest rising and falling steadily. She hesitated for a moment and tugged on her sandals. As her hand turned the doorknob, the wind threw open the door. She raised her arms to guard her face against the wind, slipped outside, and closed the door firmly behind her.

She stepped out into the surf, wading until the water was up to her knees. She took a long breath of the salty air as it blew through her nightgown and tangled her long, dark hair. The ocean looked different somehow, its water oddly still despite the wind, the color of ink waiting to write something. The moon loomed full above her but did not reflect on the water.

"Marisol, Marisol. Come to the water, Marisol."

"I am here," she whispered.

"There is nothing left for you and Teo here, Marisol."

She knew the ocean was right. They had no one else on the island. Nothing else besides their home by the sea. The only life she had was to one the water gave her, and that wouldn't be enough for her son.

“Let us carry you away, Marisol.”

She looked down. Her nightgown floated around her legs like the moon's missing reflection. The water was cold on her skin, but not unwelcome.

“Please,” she said.

#

After that night, the ocean began to leave gifts for Marisol. Wooden planks and rods, blocks of styrofoam, textile sheets, sturdy rope, and sealed buckets of tar. She built a raft, shaping the gifts into something that might carry them across the sea as Teo played in the sand nearby. She went into town and saved whatever food she could and filled plastic jugs with drinking water for the journey. For a month she waited and prepared, decided it would be best to leave the night of a full moon, so she would have darkness to cover them and enough light to navigate by, and perhaps for good luck.

As the full moon drew near, she took to sleeping during the day, blocking out the sun with her worn curtains and rocking Teo. The ocean was accommodating—its calls far away—letting Marisol get her rest and save her strength, the gentle sound of the waves easing her turbulent worries. She hoped that if she could row them far enough out to sea at night, she wouldn't have to worry about the island catching them.

The night of the full moon, Marisol pushed their craft into the water, already packed with supplies. In the end, there hadn't been much food she could spare and only two water jugs could fit in the raft with enough space left for her and Teo. She could only hope it would be enough.

The water was calm—she took it as a good sign—and the moon’s reflection painted the dark sea in a streak of bright white.

“Are you ready, Teo?”

He stared up at her from where he was slung to her chest, eyes unblinking like a fish’s.

Marisol looked out onto the horizon, then back at their little house by the sea. She smiled, knowing that she would miss it but knowing just as well that she had to leave. For who was she to deny the ocean’s call?

She climbed aboard the raft, seized the makeshift oars, and rowed out to sea.

CHAPTER 2

Ramona lost track of the days in the time after her husband's death. It was a slow decline: first she couldn't remember how long she had left the dishes in the sink as the pile grew, then she was forgetting when she last washed her hair, letting it fall flat and greasy. Then one day she couldn't bring herself to get out of bed. How could she without José there to gently kiss her eyelids to wake her in the morning? Time felt as hollow as she was.

And what of Araceli? What of her? Ramona wouldn't dare tell her blissfully ignorant daughter the truth of José's death.

Ramona rolled onto her back, but when she stared up at the ceiling all she saw were dark shadows marring her vision. She heard the clank of pots and pans in the kitchen, the sound of the sink running, and the shuffling of little feet.

She forced herself up from the bed, took a few lingering steps, feet dragging as though she was wading through water. From the door frame, Ramona watched her daughter. She stood atop a large pot—a step stool to the sink—while filling a smaller one with water. The stove was already on and a bag of rice sat open on the counter.

“Celi, turn off the stove,” Ramona called. “You're too little.”

Araceli glanced back at her, nearly falling off her makeshift stool. Her mother's hair was disheveled from her pillow and her nightdress hung off of one shoulder. “But Mami, yo tengo hambre.”

“I don't know, niña. Make some toast.”

Ramona went back to bed. She could feel Araceli's big green eyes on her, staring at her through the walls, the sheets, piercing through her. Is it possible she could learn the truth just by looking at how broken her mother had become? No, Ramona was just tired, overthinking things.

A while later, Araceli put a plate of toast on Ramona's nightstand, butter spread in uneven clumps, along with a glass of milk. Ramona couldn't bring herself to touch it: her hands were leaden at her sides, her stomach lurching at just the thought of food. A few hours later and Araceli brought another plate, and another, and another. The smell of fresh toast came to mark the hours, filling the hollow time with a subtle burning aroma. Still, Ramona couldn't bring herself to eat.

"Mami, come," Araceli said as she set a fifth plate of toast on the nightstand. A day must have gone by then, the table-top growing more and more cluttered with plates. "Are you sick? Are you sad?"

"No, Celi, I just have a headache. I'm not hungry. Let mami rest." Ramona turned away, pressing her face into her pillow. What would José think of her lies? Of her neglect?

Araceli picked the fifth plate back up, leaving the other four behind, cold and forgotten on their dishes. "Okay," she said in a small voice and disappeared from her parents' room.

She looked down at the toast in her hands. It was the last of the bread. Her stomach grumbled. Araceli knew she needed food if she wanted to be tall like her father. She remembered what he told her about being brave when he left, how she promised she would be. She put down the plate in the kitchen and tiptoed back to her parents' room. Her mother's breath was soft and steady with sleep. Araceli crept to where her purse hung on the closet door and dug through it in the dim of the bedroom until she found the ration booklet. The old bodega wasn't too far—she had gone with her mother enough times to know the way by now—but she had never gone by herself before. But wasn't going alone brave?

Araceli steeled herself, strapped on her sandals, and took a big bite of the last piece of toast. Determined, she left for the old bodega.

#

Abraham had worked at the old bodega since the day he left high school forty-eight years ago. In that time, he had seen power and wealth shift like sand buffeted on the beach, and seen food shift with them. But the day he saw his niece's girl come into the old bodega alone, clutching a ration booklet between her little hands, he found himself, for the first time in decades, surprised.

He had been thoroughly opposed to José leaving, what good that did. The island was as stable as a three-legged chair; things would change again soon enough. Its inconsistency, as Abraham often joked, was the island's only consistency. Give it a few years and things would get better again, and there would be plenty of food to go around (working at a bodega he was an expert on such things), so what was the point in leaving?

Ramona, though, Abraham recalled, had always been so stubborn as a girl. He didn't think she'd leave her daughter to roam the streets of Santa Karina alone just because of her husband's cowardice. He took a long drag of his cigar and let the smoke escape out of the corner of his lips.

Araceli marched up to the counter like a tiny soldier. Her tío abuelo was a very intimidating man, even if she thought he looked like a raisin left out in the sun too long. She could just barely see barrels of rice, beans, sugar, and flour peeking over the counter, and other groceries—bottles of yellow cooking oil, packages of powdered milk, tubes of toothpaste, cases of cigars—filled the shelves behind tío Abraham's shoulders. The stink of tobacco mingled with the smell of bread fresh from the panadería.

“Araceli, what can I get for you, my dear?” Abraham said, balancing the cigar between his crooked teeth.

“Hola tíobuelo,” said the girl. She passed him the ration booklet over the counter, barely reaching on her tiptoes. “Pan, por favor.”

Abraham looked over the booklet as his thick brows knotted closer and closer together. It hadn’t been filled in weeks. What had Ramona been feeding the girl? Stale bread and spare grains of rice? He snapped the booklet shut and went to work filling paper bags with rations for three. As he weighed the rice, he put one finger under the dish or the rusted scale that had been at the old bodega even longer than he had so it would weigh in lighter.

When he was done, three hefty bags sat atop the wooden counter, but when Araceli reached for the first one, he stopped her, sat her down in the corner of the shop, and handed her a glass bottle of pineapple soda. “You can’t carry those home on your own with those scrawny arms, ¿no?” he said. “I’ll call your tío Robertico to help you. Let him be useful for once.”

Araceli was quite pleased with the arrangement. She liked her tío Robertico—her mother’s brother—and pineapple soda was her favorite. Even at room temperature, it felt cool going down her throat, its sweetness refreshing after such a bitter morning, the fizz of the carbonation dancing on her tongue. Normally, she would only get to drink it on her birthday, so it made today feel very special. She took small sips, savoring it.

Abraham vanished into the back of the old bodega where the phone was kept. It was the newest thing in the old bodega and still ancient, installed so the workers could call the panadería to ask about the morning bread delivery. He flipped through a palm-sized notebook of phone numbers, found his nephew’s line at the city hall, and dialed, spinning the rotary as it squeaked in complaint. Then he put the receiver to his ear and waited.

“¿Dígame?” Robertico’s familiar voice was distorted on the other end, its usual warmth turned robotic.

“I need you to come by the bodega.”

“Hola, tío. Sure, I can stop by after work,” Robertico said. “Do you need something?”

“Cabron,” Abraham said, “come by *now*. Your niece needs you to take her home.”

His nephew huffed. “I’m at work. Why can’t you? Why can’t Ramona?”

“I can’t leave the shop.” Abraham tapped a finger on the back of the receiver impatiently.

“And Ramona isn’t herself.”

“Fine, caramba. I have lunch soon, I’ll come then. Hasta pronto.”

Abraham hung up the receiver with a click and returned to the front of the old bodega.

Araceli sat in the same spot, cradling her pineapple soda between both hands as though it could leap from her grasp at any second. Abraham sat back down behind the counter, smoking his cigar with one hand and drumming the worn wood of the counter with the other as he waited once again. He was not a patient man and waiting did not suit him. A few customers came in, and as he helped them with their rations, he kept one eye on the door.

Robertico arrived an hour later, the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up his lean arms.

Araceli ran to the door, the soda bottle rolling empty and forgotten on the floor. She threw her little arms around him. “¡Tío!”

Abraham scowled.

“So I’m here, tío,” Robertico said as he hugged the girl. “Now what’s wrong with Ramona?”

Abraham handed his nephew a cigar and started outside. “Araceli, you wait here.”

The girl frowned but let go of Robertico as he followed Abraham.

Robertico lit the cigar and held it to his lips. He had to be the only man on the island that didn’t care to smoke. He took a short drag anyway, the burn of tobacco reminding him of his

university days. Smoking had always felt performative, especially smoking with his uncle.

“So what is it?” he asked. “Is she sick?”

“What do you think?” Abraham countered. “It’s José, of course.”

“But hasn’t it been weeks since he left? It doesn’t make sense that she would act like this.” Robertico gestured with the end of the cigar towards the door of the old bodega where Araceli waited inside. “She wouldn’t neglect her daughter,” he said.

“I know. That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Abraham said. “Talk to Ramona when you see her, ¿sí?”

“Sí, I’ll talk to her.” As brash as his uncle was, Robertico knew he cared about his sobrinos. He just hoped that the concern was unfounded and his sister was okay.

“Bueno. Now, go help your niece with her groceries and get your lazy ass back to city hall.”

#

It had been almost a year since Robertico had last been to his sister’s house, he too busy with his career and she too busy with her plane. It looked the same as he remembered it—same dried-out yard, same cracking pale-blue paint—only quieter.

Araceli went ahead of him to open the door, skipping slightly and proud of herself for accomplishing her mission. Robertico walked in, set the bags on the dining table, and helped her put the rations away. Of course, he did most of the work, as four-year-olds generally aren’t the best at such things. He didn’t mind though, patiently waiting as Araceli puzzled over where the oil should go.

When they were finished, Robertico made sure Araceli was occupied in her room before going to check on Ramona. He knocked and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

Ramona laid curled on her side, hugging José's pillow to her chest. She had heard her brother and Araceli come into the house, their entrance like an earthquake shaking the bed. She buried her face into the pillow, breathing in her husband's scent. Someday, it wouldn't smell like him anymore.

Robertico sat at the foot of the bed, the sheets twisted around Ramona's legs.

"Ramona..." he said, "you can't keep this up. Your daughter needs you."

She pulled her face from the pillow. "Don't lecture me, hermanito. You're unmarried. You have no children."

"Well, I care about you and Araceli. I think that's reason enough to be worried. You can't just stop living for a year while you wait for José to come back."

Ramona barked out a laugh. "No, this won't be for a year. This is my life now."

Robertico looked at his sister, trying to grasp what she was saying. "I don't understand."

Ramona sat up, tenderly putting José's pillow aside. She looked her brother in the eye, pressing her lips together. She could feel the tears biding their time behind her eyes.

"Ramona?"

Her lip trembled. Her voice trembled. "He's dead, Robertico. José is dead."

She fell into her brother's arms as her body shook with tears ripping through her, desperate to escape. Desperate to share the burden of their secrets, their grief. She clung to him the way she wished she could cling to her husband.

As Ramona cried, she didn't know her daughter listened with her ear pressed against the door. She was a curious girl, after all. Araceli heard her mother's cries, heard them become quieter as tío Robertico comforted her. She knew now that her mother was sad, not sick, but the voices behind the door had only been whispers, unintelligible to her innocent ears. She slipped

back to her room before she could be caught eavesdropping.

Once the last of Ramona's tears fell hot and salty onto his shoulder, Robertico pulled away. He reached into his pocket and placed the ration booklet into his sister's hands. "I know it's probably the last thing you want to think about," he said, "but you need to get it updated. I just don't want you to get in trouble, ¿sí? And the island can't find out how José left."

Ramona stared down at the booklet. To exchange it would be a betrayal. José would really be gone. She hated it, but she knew her brother was right. She had to live again, for Araceli's sake.

#

Every year, the islanders would go to their nearest bodega to collect a new ration booklet. They would stand in a line that wrapped around the block, fanning themselves with their palms against the sticky heat, until it was finally their turn. The bodega workers would flip through a thick tome of households, names, ages. Copies of the island's annual census. They'd copy down the information of each núcleo familiar on the first page of a fresh booklet in their rushed print and hand it to the waiting islander so they could get to the next one in line. Maybe, just maybe, they would get to go home before dark.

But it was the wrong time of year for that, and it would still be a long time yet. So when Ramona needed a new ration booklet, she took her daughter by the hand and walked to city hall.

"Mami," Araceli said, looking up at Ramona with her curious green eyes, "are we going to go see tío Robertico?"

"No, niña. We need a new ration booklet," Ramona replied.

"But why? Papi will be coming home soon."

Ramona said nothing.

One thing that was always the same when getting a ration booklet was the lines. When she arrived at city hall, she waited in line at the receptionist's desk and was shown to another room that she waited in line to receive a numbered ticket before entering. She sat down in a small, uncomfortable chair among the rows and rows of other occupied chairs, Araceli sitting on her lap, swinging her short legs against Ramona's shins. Ramona was too tired and stressed to stop her, the beginnings of a headache pressing behind her eyes. When her number was called after almost two hours, she stood, took Araceli's hand once again, and went into the next room, where she stood in line for another thirty minutes to finally be helped at the registration office.

"Last name," the woman at the desk asked from behind the discolored plastic divider. Even through the plastic, Ramona could smell coffee and cigars on her breath.

"Sierra."

The woman disappeared and came back a few minutes later with a file. She rifled through it and pulled out a blank census form. "Household size."

Ramona squeezed Araceli's little hand in hers. "Two."

"What happened to your husband?"

"He left me." Ramona could scream.

The woman noted something down, nodding. "Names and ages."

"Ramona Pérez Sierra, thirty. Araceli Sierra, four."

"Are you living at the same address?"

"Sí."

Araceli peeked over the desk, watching as the woman copied down what her mother said. Her handwriting was scratchy and crude, and made what she wrote seem even more wrong. Her father would be back soon; she didn't understand why the woman was writing him away.

The woman turned the paper towards Ramona and handed her a cheap ballpoint pen, indicating where to sign.

She squinted down. It read *head of the núcleo de familia* before the signature line. She almost laughed; there was nothing nuclear about her family anymore. With a shaky hand, she signed.

THE MOTHER AND THE MERMAID

Marisol knew the dangers of the voyage across the sea. The ocean could be unpredictable, the hours in the sun unbearable with only the night for relief. Storms brewed quick and deadly in the humid air. Then there were the sharks, the ocean waters supposedly infested with them. But Marisol had spent her whole life in the safety of the island's shores, and sharks seemed to her as mythical as the sirenas.

She dipped her oars into the water again and again, propelling her little raft as far as she could that first night with Teo quiet against her chest. By morning, her arms and back ached as much as her heart did for home. She fed herself and Teo, each of them washing down the food with a sip of water, and let herself fall asleep.

#

She awoke as the sun was setting, her body sore and her skin tender. She felt disoriented, she *was* disoriented, letting herself stay lying down as the raft swayed. Slowly, Marisol raised her hand to her face, lightly cupping her cheek. But at the slightest touch, her skin screamed and her hand recoiled, a hot feeling on her fingertips.

Hunger pangs forced her to sit up, and the movement awoke Teo. He cried, the sound a shock to Marisol's ears. She unwrapped him from her chest and saw that his round face was a bright red. Guilty, she poured some of their drinking water onto the wrap and used it as a makeshift compress, dabbing it to his face hoping it would provide his burns some relief. She didn't use it for herself but wrung out the water into her open mouth.

They ate and drank, and Marisol resumed her rowing as the moon rose in the night sky. As she rowed, she found herself missing the shade of the sea grape trees that grew along the beach and the cool shelter of her home by the sea. She soon realized that her rowing wasn't

doing much against the ocean's currents, but it felt wrong to stop. She looked at her son as he watched the waves, fish scales glimmering in the water nearby. Even at night, his face looked red. Maybe it would be best to turn around rather than put him through who knew how many more days under the excruciating sun.

“Are you going to give up?”

Marisol jumped, rocking the boat. She looked down at the water. A woman's face stared back at her. But it wasn't a woman; the face was a pale blueish color, with patches of scales where her ears should be. Her eyes were big and yellow, her mouth filled with rows of pointed teeth. Hair like seaweed floated tangled around her head. Beneath the water, Marisol could make out a long tail flicking back and forth.

“Are you?” the sirena repeated. Her voice had the same echoing quality as holding a shell up to one's ear.

“I don't know,” Marisol said simply.

The sirena narrowed her shiny eyes at Marisol's burned face. “It's the sun, isn't it?”

Marisol signed. “Yes. I don't know how to keep us from burning.”

“Well, there is plenty of shade on the other side of the sea,” the sirena said, “and tomorrow the clouds will block the sun. I saw them moving this way with my own eyes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, so don't worry about the sun.”

The sirena flashed a toothy grin and disappeared below the waves.

Unsure of what else to do—unsure if the sirena had told her the truth—Marisol kept rowing, pausing to drink when her arms felt like they would give out on her. When the sun rose, obstructed by clouds, Marisol smiled, relieved, and fell asleep.

#

When Marisol awoke, the sun was once again setting and still blocked by the clouds. Her burns felt no worse than they did the day before and had begun to heal. She checked on Teo—his burns much the same—and gently woke him. He cried until she gave him something to eat.

Marisol looked at their rations, already beginning to dwindle. Would this really last her and her son until they reached the other side of the sea? Their water too was beginning to run low with one jug already empty and a third of the water missing from the second. Still, she could not help but take a sip, calming her dry throat, and made sure Teo drank as well. Stomach rumbling, she bit into a bread roll, the familiar taste reminding her of home, of stability. She had picked it up from the panadería just days before, and it still tasted fresh, though a little dry. She had a hard time imagining what the other side of the sea would be like. She swallowed and took another sip of water, wondering if this journey was really for the best.

The waning moon hanging in the sky, Marisol took up her rowing, slower than she had the nights before as doubt dragged on her mind. The night dragged on too as the rowing became more and more difficult. Marisol tried not to stop for water breaks, fearing what would happen if they ran out.

There was a glimmer in the waves, and something stopped her oar as it touched the water. Marisol looked down. The sirena grasped the end of the oar with a webbed hand.

“You shouldn’t worry so much,” she said. “There is plenty of food on the other side of the sea.”

“But what if I don’t have enough food and water to make it there?”

The sirena released the oar, crossing her scaled arms on the side of the raft. “If you eat a little less, your food will last you. And tomorrow it will rain, so drink now and leave your jugs

open while you sleep. If you do that, you'll have no reason to worry."

With that, the sirena dived back into the water. She had been right about the clouds, so Marisol decided to trust her. As she rowed through the night, she made sure she and Teo were never thirsty, finishing the last of their water.

At sunrise, the clouds began to drizzle, and Marisol left the jugs open as the sirena had instructed. They ate a small meal, and she gave Teo rainwater to drink from her cupped palms. Then, she slept.

#

Marisol awoke after dark to Teo's cries. The rain had gotten heavier, the waves bigger and choppier. Their two water jugs were overflowing into the slowly flooding raft. She and Teo were drenched, shivering, and Teo would not stop crying.

Hurriedly, she wrapped Teo to her chest. She was terrified that he might catch something from all of the wet fabric, but she was more terrified that he might drown. For now, the raft stayed afloat, even as more water pooled at its bottom. Marisol could only hope that it would last through the rain. She held the oars in her hands but wasn't sure what good they would do. She could make out storm clouds in the distance in the dark of the night sky.

"Don't worry," the sirena said, "the storm will pass."

"How will I keep us from sinking?" Marisol asked.

"The storm won't be as bad as you think. It will pass tomorrow."

Lightning flashed ahead as Teo still cried against her chest. She had lived through enough storms on the island to know to take them seriously. Even a small one could be devastating, and, on the open water, Marisol felt helpless. She wanted to ask the sirena what to do, how to keep her and her son alive, but she was gone before the questions could reach Marisol's lips.

She was a fool to have left the island, she knew that now. Something tugged at her heart, but she couldn't name what it was: guilt or desperation or defeat. But when she turned her face south, she understood.

A light shined miraculously on the horizon through the darkness and rain. It was the golden, familiar light of home, a lighthouse guiding her back to the island. *That* was what tugged at her, like a magnet pulling at the compass of her heart. Teo's crying stopped; he must have seen it too.

"Hold on, Teo," Marisol said. She tightened her grip on the oars and turned the raft toward the island. Toward home.

CHAPTER 3

Once there was a boy who had left the island. He had lived with his grandparents in a tiny house with faded blue paint, just down the street from Ramona, José, and little Araceli. He always seemed unhappy, grumbling to himself as he walked, friendless, past their house on the way to school with his shoulders hunched forward. Ramona wasn't surprised; at just thirteen, the boy was taking care of his almost deaf grandfather and almost blind grandmother. She wasn't surprised when he disappeared either—stowed away on a tourist ship—or when she never heard of him again. She had assumed he had died at sea, just as her husband would.

But seven months after José's plane crashed, Ramona was proven wrong. Winters on the island were always warm, but that day was cooler than most, a pleasant breeze coming onto shore. Araceli, almost five years old now, wanted to collect shells on the beach.

She dug her big toe into the silver sand. Her mother always seemed too tired or too busy these days to take her to the beach and said she was too little to go alone. A seagull might sweep her up, mistaking her for a worm, like Papi used to say.

“Araceli, don't wander too far,” Ramona said from where she lounged on her beach towel, a book sitting open but unread on her lap. She looked out over the water, its salty gray waves rolling, rolling, rolling, but never coming any closer to shore. But they only looked gray to her, didn't they? She remembered how blue and bright the ocean used to be. Now everything was gray.

“I won't, Mami,” Araceli assured her. She swung her yellow plastic pail by her side as she continued her search for treasure. Only the very best shells would do for her collection. She marched along the water's edge, keeping her eyes on the surf. A purple scallop, a pearly oyster half, and a greenish sea-snail shell clattered like castanets in her bucket when she saw it. The

conch was bigger than any she had ever seen, bigger than her hand with a rough, curling exterior like an orange peel. The inside flipped out like an ear, bright pink with embarrassment. Araceli held it up to her own and heard the ocean whispering secrets inside.

She carefully arranged her prize at the top of the pail before running to show her mother, feet slipping in the sand. “Mami, mira!”

Ramona pushed her glasses up on her nose, the dark spots swimming in her eyes. She looked at the conch, comically huge in her daughter’s little hands. She sighed, pinching her nose bridge. Where had her energy gone since José died? She couldn’t keep up with this child.

“Put it back, niña, it’s too big. You don’t want to drop it.”

“But it’s so pretty! I won’t drop it.” She placed the shell back in the bucket with a defiant pout and started down the sand.

“Hey! Listen to me.” Ramona got up from the towel with her book tucked under her arm, following her daughter. “Put it back, or I won’t bring you to the beach again.”

“But I want to show it to Papí when he comes home! Please?”

Something pitted in Ramona’s throat, a bitter combination of anger and grief and guilt that stung like the salty waves on a cut. She’d have to tell Araceli the truth eventually, but not today. “Come on, we’re leaving. Put the shell down. I have a headache.”

Not fair. Araceli dragged her feet to the edge of the water, dropping the conch with a splash and a wet thunk. She already missed her treasure. And her father. The other three shells still sat in her pail, but they didn’t seem as pretty anymore, their color fading the more she looked at them until they turned a starch white. Araceli frowned as they crumbled into dust. Mami always seemed to have a headache these days.

She sat down in the sand with her sandals, putting them back on one at a time. But it was

taking longer than it should have: her hands kept slipping and sand kept getting stuck between her toes, so she kept having to start over again.

Ramona watched, twisting her wedding ring around her finger. “Let me,” she said, crouching in front of the girl.

“No! I can!” Araceli yanked in her knees. She tried again, but the straps wriggled like snakes in her hands, falling from her grasp. She extended her legs in defeat.

Ramona huffed, pushing up her sleeves. “Ay, niña.” Ramona tamed the sandals as Araceli crossed her skinny arms. Finally, she took her daughter’s hand, sandals sinking in the sand as they left the beach.

Araceli stared up at the old lighthouse as they passed it on their way towards the pier. Its cracking pale gray stone reminded her of her shells. It was a cool, February day and her wet legs felt chilled as they walked. Her mother’s hand felt like ice. It would be a long way home.

The pier was busy, but it always was that time of year. A ship was coming into port, and a crowd had gathered to watch it. They waved the island’s bannered flag at the great white ship, hanging their bodies over the water. Some watched from the edges of the pier, leaning on the sides of their parked cars or standing on their colorful hoods for a better view.

When the ship docked and the pier raised its ramp, the people who came off it were a spectacle. The locals couldn’t leave the island, but the foreigners could come and go as they pleased. On vacation. They came for the beaches and resorts, for the cigars and rum. But they didn’t have to stay; their children didn’t have to sweat in the coffee fields. To them, the island was a happy paradise. That was what made them a spectacle.

The islanders crowded the pier to imagine their home as paradise, to take pride in it. It was an impossible dream, shadows flickering on a cave wall far from the truth of the island.

Ramona pitied them for dreaming, believing in the shadows; she pitied herself for not.

Araceli watched as the strangers came down the ramp. They looked odd with their fancy clothes and sun-screened pink faces and big sunglasses. They looked like the people in the movies whose voices never matched the flap of their lips. *Dubbing* Papi had called it. She wanted to go closer, to meet the people from the movies, but she knew her mother would say no. She had a headache. Still, they stopped to watch from a distance.

In her gut, Ramona hated the foreigners. She hated them for being so free; she hated how they gaily crossed the sea when her husband had drowned in it. Why couldn't they open their boats to her family? She looked up at its hundreds of windows, looking back at her with black eyes. It certainly had the space for three more passengers.

And yet, she could remember a day when the sea was still blue that she stood at the docks with José, her stomach round and a ship coming into port. He held her hand as he smiled up at the ship.

Ramona frowned; pregnancy had made her bitter rather than glowing like the other women said it would. "Why are you smiling?"

He looked at her, grinning even wider as he squinted his eyes against the sun. "Because, mi amor, it's proof the world is so much bigger than this island."

José was the dreamer between them. Ramona scrutinized the ship. As long as she had him, she could dream too.

She tightened her grip on her daughter's hand. She wanted to leave, to escape the docks. That was when she saw the boy. He walked down the ramp with his face cast down, darker than the foreigners' as his brown curls obscured his eyes. He wore their fancy clothes, but they didn't fit his islander body right. His shoulders still hunched forward the same way, like they were

ready to sprout wings.

It had been three years since Ramona had seen him. He'd be sixteen years old now, but she recognized him. She told herself she didn't, that this boy was a stranger.

Araceli noticed him too. "Who is that boy, Mami?"

"No one. A tourist." Ramona, transfixed on the boy, forced herself to move. She was imagining things, surely. The boy was no one. She pulled her daughter—and her eyes—away from the docks, not letting herself look back when the uproar grew behind them.

At home, Ramona started dinner and told Araceli to wash herself off and get ready for bed, even though it was much too early for any of that. She made too much rice and not enough black beans and overcooked the pork. The TV blared behind her, the news reporters talking in rapid voices that Ramona didn't recognize as language, just noise.

Araceli did, though. Bathed and pajamaed, she sat cross-legged in front of the TV, the sounds of the kitchen fading as she hung onto the reporters' every word. She wanted to know what the adults knew. The reporters interviewed a man in olive drab, so she understood it to be political and important, even if many of the words they spoke she had never heard before. The story changed, and the docks appeared on the screen, the caption below it reading "Triumphant Return of Lost Island Son in Santa Karina" in big letters. The strange boy from the docks was there, being embraced by another man in olive drab, this one with a hat and a thick beard and mustache, his uniform adorned in medals. She called her mother over.

Ramona switched off the stove and walked over to the TV as she wiped her hands on her apron. She read over the headline once, then twice, her brows knitting together. She looked at the boy's face; she looked at the man's, recognizing both. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, the TV's flickering lights showing her something impossible. The man—The Wizard, the leader

of the island—led the boy to a sleek black car on the edge of the docks, surrounded by an armed entourage. A man who was a wizard and a boy who was just a boy, so small beside the myth.

The camera moved to a press conference where the man and the boy stood together in front of the island's flag, a bouquet of microphones on the podium in front of them. "My friends, today is an extraordinary day," The Wizard spoke. "With me is Fortunato Morales, a young man from Santa Karina. My friend Fortunato spent the last three years lost in a strange land but has finally been brought home to our magnificent island. He has something he would like to say to you." The Wizard put his hand on Fortunato's shoulder.

The boy inched closer to the microphones, cleared his throat, and spoke. "The world out there is a cruel place. The people have no compassion or respect. They care nothing for each other and even less for the people of this island. Leaving the island was the biggest mistake of my life. What we have exists nowhere else in the world. There was never any reason for me to go, and I can only thank The Wizard for accepting me back so graciously. Our island—our home—is un paraíso."

Ramona watched as the boy finished. His chest puffed out with a held breath as he looked straight into the camera like an alert bird, moments from flying away. With his words, she thought of the islanders at the pier, hanging their bodies over the water. They wished for paraíso too. Her head pounded.

The Wizard smiled proudly. "I am adopting Fortunato as my son. His abuelos, sadly, have passed before they could be reunited with their beloved nieto," he said. "From this day forward, he will be the child of this island."

Ramona could only stare as anger boiled in her stomach. No one could leave the island, right? Then what of this Fortunato? What of José? Had he not died in vain but as a failure for not

making it across the sea like this boy had?

“Mami, do you know that boy?” Araceli asked. She noticed her mother acting strange—stranger than normal—since they had seen the islander boy come off the boat, and now Ramona tensed in front of the TV like a stray cat. Something was wrong, and Araceli wanted to know what the adults knew.

“No.”

“But The Wizard said he was from here. He looks like the pictures at old lady Morales’s house.” She looked up at her mother with inquisitive eyes.

Ramona heard the truth in what her daughter was saying, but she refused to listen. She couldn’t let herself accept what it meant. “He’s a different Morales. A different boy.”

Araceli shook her head. “I don’t think so.” She turned back to the screen where reporters were talking about the Morales boy. “Does that mean Papi will come home soon? On a boat like the boy did?”

Ramona went back into the kitchen and started serving. She set two plates on the table. “Eat your dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.” Araceli didn’t move. “When is Papi coming home?”

“Eat your dinner!”

“Why are you lying?”

“He’s not coming home!” Ramona’s voice cracked.

Araceli didn’t understand; of course Papi was coming home. But she knew her mother was stubborn. She remembered Papi teasing her for it constantly. So, she got up from in front of the TV and sat down at the table, scooting her chair in with a loud squeak so she could reach her plate. There was no point in arguing now. Araceli scooped her rice and beans onto her spoon as

Ramona sat across from her. They ate in silence and went to bed.

Alone in her room, Araceli looked at her shell collection arranged by color on her windowsill: its beiges and oranges, its purples and dark grays. The conch would have gone right in front, a place of honor. Her bucket sat beside her, the crumbled white shells still inside; some of the broken shards sparkled like bits of shattered glass. Carefully, she tipped the shells into a little wooden cup her father had carved for her and placed it on the very edge of the collection by the palest shells.

There was a new moon that night, the sky dark as Araceli rested her chin on the windowsill, looking out. Mami seemed so sad. But Araceli wasn't even five; what could she do?

#

Ramona dreamt of the ocean. The water was stained black as she floated on her back, looking up at the sky. It mirrored the ocean around her, a thick, dark cloud surrounded by clear blue. She was alone, all alone. Thousands of leagues below her was the wreck of a plane, merpeople swimming around it. She closed her eyes, felt the sun warm her face. She breathed in salt and soot. She let the ocean roll her as hands pulled her beneath the waves, and she drowned. Columns of tiny bubbles swelled around her as her body descended and awoke.

The bed was damp with saltwater and, without José there, felt just as vast as the ocean. She got up and changed into a fresh nightdress and pulled a brush through her wet hair. She stared into the mirror, looking at the drowned woman she had become.

Ramona crept across the hall to her daughter's room. Araceli was awake, hugging an old stuffed bear to her chest. Ramona spoke in a soft voice, "niña, you need to sleep."

The girl looked at her mother, framed in the dark doorway. She still felt cold. "Will you sleep with me?"

“Of course.” Ramona joined her on the narrow bed, cradling Araceli against her chest. She spoke into the girl’s hair, so much finer than hers had been at that age. “I’m sorry. Papi will be home soon. I love you, Celi.”

“I love you too, Mami.” Her mother’s arms felt warm as sunshine.

Araceli curled into her mother’s body, and Ramona curled around around the girl, holding on tight. Lifesavers for one another in an ocean of a bed. Soon, both were asleep.

THE MOTHER AND THE MERMAID: RETOLD

There once was a woman named Marisol who left the island with her infant son and never came back. Their first night at sea was filled by Marisol's ceaseless rowing, fueled by the terror of being caught, of being forced to return to a place she no longer belonged. She medicated Teo so he would sleep, so he wouldn't cry and alert the island. Guilt bit at her as she rowed, but she didn't want to risk it.

She planned to continue rowing through the day, but by morning they were caught on a current and rowing did little good. She had been able to trust the sea all her life, and so she decided to trust it now to carry them away from the island as it had promised. She fed Teo and then herself before letting herself fall asleep.

#

It was sunset when Marisol awoke. Her arms and back ached from the night before; sunburns throbbed up and down her skin. Still lying down, she looked at Teo, slung to her chest. His round face was a bright red, and he frowned deeply in his sleep. His burns were worse than hers, though they didn't go beyond his face and neck, without Marisol's years darkening in the sun to protect him.

She pushed herself up, the boat rocking as she did, and Teo awoke, crying. She untied him from her chest, thinking to use the wrap as a makeshift towel, but decided against it. Instead, she tore a clean section from her skirt and, after wetting it with a bit of drinking water, lightly dabbed it to his burns. She didn't use it on herself but instead left the fabric folded against Teo's forehead to keep him cool until night fell.

Then she sat and waited, watching the water as the current carried them farther from the island. She watched the sky too, finding Aquarius among the stars. She started pointing out

constellations to Teo then, charting the sky as he silently watched.

She heard a splash and turned in time to see a long tail diving into the water. Its dark blue scales caught the moonlight as two sets of translucent, silvery fins spread beside it like wings. It reminded her of the flying fish that she would sometimes glimpse from her little house by the sea, though it was far larger as its shadow moved toward the raft.

The water broke again, closer this time. Marisol pulled Teo to her chest and cautiously looked down. Her eyes met those of a woman's peering back at her. But it wasn't a woman; the narrow face was a pale blueish color framed by silver scales and a cloud of midnight black hair. Her eyes were a stormy gray, her gaze soft yet commanding. Beneath the waves, Marisol could make out sail-like fins on her willowy arms, and a powerful tail swaying easily back and forth.

"You should go home," the sirena said, her voice like the wind, cool and unyielding yet beautiful.

"I can't," Marisol said simply.

The sirena looked at her burned face with a piercing gaze. "Your burns will only grow worse if you continue. Not to mention your son's."

Marisol had spent her whole life under the island's scorching sun and knew its ways. "We will manage," she said.

"You're a fool," the sirena replied and disappeared into the sea.

As the sun rose, she laid down, positioning her body around Teo's to block him from the sun. Then, she draped the wrap over their faces, covering most of Teo's body in the process. Marisol's arms and legs were exposed, but she had been burned before. She let herself drift off to sleep, holding her son but careful not to stifle him. They would survive.

#

When Marisol awoke the following sunset, her limbs felt tender with new burns, but her face was no worse than before and Teo's burns had even begun to heal. She thanked the saints and let him sleep.

She looked over their rations. The first jug of water was nearly empty, the second still unopened beside it. Their food, however, was dwindling faster than Marisol would have liked. As night fell, Teo awoke crying and wouldn't stop until she fed him, her own stomach grumbling.

"It won't last you to the other side of the sea. Your food nor your water."

Marisol looked down and once again met the sirena's stormy eyes.

"Go home," the sirena said.

"I can't," Marisol replied.

"Then you're still a fool. Go home! Do you wish to die out here?"

Marisol shook her head. "We will manage."

The sirena huffed and dove back into the water. Marisol watched her glimmering shadow as she swam away.

Marisol had gone hungry before, and she could do it again. And she knew that if she didn't eat, she could drink less too. The fact that she wasn't rowing would make it even easier; she wouldn't have to maintain her strength. But she made sure Teo didn't go hungry or thirsty, tending to his needs whenever he started to cry. If she was careful, they would survive.

#

Marisol awoke after dark to Teo's cries. The waves had grown bigger and choppier, and the wind buffeted their little raft. While the waning moon still shone brightly above them, on the horizon Marisol could make out the massive shape of storm clouds.

She tried to feed Teo, and when he wouldn't eat, she rocked him, hoping and failing to calm him. The seawater sprayed, the salt stinging Marisol's angry burns. She pressed Teo's face to her chest.

"It's not just a storm," the sirena said. "It's a hurricane."

"But how?" Marisol asked. "It came on so suddenly."

The sirena shrugged. "That's the way of the sea."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Go home," the sirena said.

Marisol squeezed her eyes shut as salty tears spilled down her face, burns screaming. She didn't know if she was more afraid of the storm or of turning back.

"I cannot."

The sirena sighed. "I've never met a mortal as deaf as you. Turn back now, before it's too late."

And she was gone.

As their raft drew closer to the storm, Marisol wrapped Teo to her chest. She medicated him, and, once again, guilt gnawed at her. But it was for his safety. He fell asleep, a little cheek pressed over Marisol's heart. She had lived through a hundred storms and hurricanes on the island. They would survive. They had to.

#

Marisol crouched low, using her body to shield Teo's. With her eyes pointed toward the bottom of the raft, she could not see the hurricane but she could feel it.

Their little raft pitched and threatened to roll as it climbed and fell over waves. Each one was more violent than the next, threatening to tear the raft apart or else quietly sink it. Water

came crashing from all sides, breaking over Marisol's back and flooding the raft. All she could do was try to keep Teo's head above the water and hold on to the raft.

The wind deafened her ears, and all Marisol could taste was salt. The rain poured down on them like curtains of steel as they miraculously crested wave after wave. They lost their food, their drinking water, and even the two makeshift oars, but somehow, they stayed in the raft.

The waves grew larger, and Marisol hoped it meant they were almost to the end of it. Even then, she knew she was wrong. Up they went, and Marisol felt her legs dangling in the open air as she clung to the raft. She didn't know if Teo was still asleep or if she simply couldn't hear his cries over the storm, simply couldn't feel his warmth against the cold. For a moment, they floated at the top of the wave, and Marisol wondered if gravity had forgotten them, was leaving them to hover there forever. She looked up and saw what looked like a flying fish, gliding on silver wings through the storm. She blinked and it was gone; gravity returned even stronger, sending them crashing back down, water splashing into the raft on impact.

Eventually, the rain slowed and the waves calmed. The sun looked down on them from its place in the sky. Teo cried. Marisol caught her breath and sat up. Yes, the sea was calm, but all around them were walls of dark, twisting clouds. The eye of the storm. She felt her heart sink.

She became aware that she was being watched, and looked down at the water. The sirena's eyes peeked up through the waves.

"I can't survive the second half," Marisol said, voice cracking.

"I know," the sirena replied.

"But I can't turn back."

The sirena nodded. "It's too late for that."

"So what do I do?" Marisol leaned her body over the side of the raft, her face inches from

the sirena's. Tiny silver scales dotted her face like freckles. "Please, what do I do?"

"You're a fool," the sirena said. "But perhaps the bravest fool I have met. There is one—and only one—way you can survive."

"What is it?" Marisol could hear the desperation in her own voice.

"Come with me."

Marisol blinked. Her eyes stung of saltwater, but it was a familiar feeling by now. She leaned back into the raft.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "We'll drown."

"No," the sirena said. "You'll become like me. Both of you. Free to swim the seas and soar the skies. A lifetime ago, I was given the same chance."

"You were like me? You tried to escape?"

"Yes. Only I was less a fool. Though not much less."

This wasn't the future Marisol had imagined for her son, but neither was a future on the island. She thought of her little home by the sea, how she would have gone on raising him there until he found a life of his own. She would have grown old there too, withered by the sea and the island. Teo would visit her, though he would never be satisfied.

"Take us," Marisol said, "please."

The sirena smiled. She held out her hand, and, when Marisol took it, pulled her and Teo into the sea.

The sirena pulled her deeper and deeper, her dark blue tail propelling them both. Already, Marisol felt her body begin to change: her legs growing together and sprouting fins, her eyes adjusting as the saltwater no longer burned them. She winced as gills cut open her neck. But change, leaving the world you know behind, was never meant to be painless, was it? She

breathed water. Teo was still wrapped to her chest, though his arms had come free, growing translucent fins as they grasped at the water.

Even with the hurricane churning above, the ocean came to welcome them. Schools of fish swam around them in swirling rainbows as sharks circled peacefully nearby. Deeper, sirenas swam, tails and fins glimmering. An ancient humpback, giant and noble, sang its beautiful, haunting song. Teo smiled, giggling bubbles, his green eyes wide and shining. They had always reminded Marisol of a fish's.

When Marisol looked back over her shoulder, she saw the little raft floating in the watery sun and knew they would be alright. Happy even.

END NOTE

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my thesis! Originally, I envisioned this piece as a novel where we'd see Araceli grow into a young woman and how her relationship with Ramona changes over time, with more characters, more fairytales interwoven with the central narrative, and far more pages. While this vision did not fit the scope of my final thesis, I still imagine this story growing into something more and plan on expanding it into a proper novel. If you want to see more of Ramona and Araceli's story, I hope you'll look out for my name at your favorite bookstore in the future.

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