

Junior Diaz

1.

I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life. He was in the States, working, and the only way I knew him was through the photographs my moms kept in a plastic sandwich bag under her bed. Since our zinc roof leaked, almost everything we owned was water-stained: our clothes, Mami's Bible, her makeup, whatever food we had, Abuelo's tools, our cheap wooden furniture. It was only because of that plastic bag that any pictures of my father survived.

When I thought of Papi I thought of one shot specifically. Taken days before the U.S. invasion: 1965. I wasn't even alive then; Mami had been pregnant with my first never-born brother and Abuelo could still see well enough to hold a job. You know the sort of photograph I'm talking about. Scalloped edges, mostly brown in color. On the back my moms's cramped handwriting—the date, his name, even the street, one

over from our house. He was dressed in his Guardia uniform, his tan cap at an angle on his shaved head, an unlit Constitución squeezed between his lips. His dark, unsmiling eyes were my own.

I did not think of him often. He had left for Nueva York when I was four but since I couldn't remember a single moment with him I excused him from all nine years of my life. On the days I had to imagine him—not often, since Mami didn't much speak of him anymore—he was the soldier in the photo. He was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he'd left behind. He was pieces of my friends' fathers, of the domino players on the corner, pieces of Mami and Abuelo. I didn't know him at all. I didn't know that he'd abandoned us. That this waiting for him was all a sham.

We lived south of the Cementerio Nacional in a wood-frame house with three rooms. We were poor. The only way we could have been poorer was to have lived in the campo or to have been Haitian immigrants, and Mami regularly offered these to us as brutal consolation.

At least you're not in the campo. You'd eat rocks then.

We didn't eat rocks but we didn't eat meat or beans, either. Almost everything on our plates was boiled: boiled yuca, boiled platanos, boiled guineo, maybe with a piece of cheese or a shred of bacalao. On the best days the cheese and the platanos were fried. When me and

Rafá caught our annual case of worms it was only by skimping on our dinners that Mami could afford to purchase the Verminox. I can't remember how many times I crouched over our latrine, my teeth clenched, watching long gray parasites slide out from between my legs.

At Mauricio Baez, our school, the kids didn't bother us too much, even though we couldn't afford the uniforms or proper mascotas. The uniforms Mami could do nothing about but with the mascotas she improvised, sewing together sheets of loose paper she had collected from her friends. We each had one pencil and if we lost that pencil, like I did once, we had to stay home from school until Mami could borrow another one for us. Our profesor had us share school books with some of the other kids and these kids wouldn't look at us, tried to hold their breath when we were close to them.

Mami worked at Embajador Chocolate, putting in ten-, twelve-hour shifts for almost no money at all. She woke up every morning at seven and I got up with her because I could never sleep late, and while she drew the water out of our steel drum I brought the soap from the kitchen. There were always leaves and spiders in the water but Mami could draw a clean bucket better than anyone. She was a tiny woman and in the water closet she looked even smaller, her skin dark and her hair surprisingly straight and across her stomach and back the scars from the rocket attack she'd survived in 1965. None of the scars showed when she wore clothes,

though if you embraced her you'd feel them hard under your wrist, against the soft part of your palm.

Abuelo was supposed to watch us while Mami was at work but usually he was visiting with his friends or out with his trap. A few years back, when the rat problem in the barrio had gotten out of hand (Those malditos were running off with kids, Abuelo told me), he had built himself a trap. A destroyer. He never charged anyone for using it, something Mami would have done; his only commission was that he be the one to arm the steel bar. I've seen this thing chop off fingers, he explained to the borrowers but in truth he just liked having something to do, a job of some kind. In our house alone Abuelo had killed a dozen rats and in one house on Tunti, forty of these motherfuckers were killed during a two-night massacre. He spent both nights with the Tunti people, resetting the trap and burning the blood and when he came back he was grinning and tired, his white hair everywhere, and my mother had said, You look like you've been out getting ass.

Without Abuelo around, me and Rafa did anything we wanted. Mostly Rafa hung out with his friends and I played with our neighbor Wilfredo. Sometimes I climbed trees. There wasn't a tree in the barrio I couldn't climb and on some days I spent entire afternoons in our trees, watching the barrio in motion and when Abuelo was around (and awake) he talked to me about the good old days, when a man could still make

a living from his finca, when the United States wasn't something folks planned on.

Mami came home after sunset, just when the day's worth of drinking was starting to turn some of the neighbors wild. Our barrio was not the safest of places and Mami usually asked one of her co-workers to accompany her home. These men were young, and some of them were unmarried. Mami let them walk her but she never invited them into the house. She barred the door with her arm while she said good-bye, just to show them that nobody was getting in. Mami might have been skinny, a bad thing on the Island, but she was smart and funny and that's hard to find anywhere. Men were drawn to her. From my perch I'd watched more than one of these Porfirio Rubirosas say, See you tomorrow, and then park his ass across the street just to see if she was playing hard to get. Mami never knew these men were there and after about fifteen minutes of staring expectantly at the front of our house even the loneliest of these fulanos put their hats on and went home.

We could never get Mami to do anything after work, even cook dinner, if she didn't first sit awhile in her rocking chair. She didn't want to hear nothing about our problems, the scratches we'd put into our knees, who said what. She'd sit on the back patio with her eyes closed and let the bugs bite mountains onto her arms and legs. Sometimes I climbed the guanábana tree and when she'd open her eyes and catch me smiling down

on her, she'd close them again and I would drop twigs onto her until she laughed.

2.

When times were real flojo, when the last colored bill flew out Mami's purse, she packed us off to our relatives. She'd use Wilfredo's father's phone and make the calls early in the morning. Lying next to Rafa, I'd listen to her soft unhurried requests and pray for the day that our relatives would tell her to *vete pa'l carajo* but that never happened in Santo Domingo.

Usually Rafa stayed with our tíos in Ocoa and I went to tía Miranda's in Boca Chica. Sometimes we both went to Ocoa. Neither Boca Chica nor Ocoa were far but I never wanted to go and it normally took hours of cajoling before I agreed to climb on the autobus.

How long? I asked Mami truculently.

Not long, she promised me, examining the scabs on the back of my shaved head. A week. Two at the most.

How many days is that?

Ten, twenty.

You'll be fine, Rafa told me, spitting into the gutter.

How do you know? You a brujío?

Yeah, he said, smiling, that's me.

He didn't mind going anywhere; he was at that age when all he wanted was to be away from the family, meeting people he had not grown up with.

Everybody needs a vacation, Abuelo explained happily. Enjoy yourself. You'll be down by the water. And just think about all the food you'll eat.

I never wanted to be away from the family. Intuitively, I knew how easily distances could harden and become permanent. On the ride to Boca Chica I was always too depressed to notice the ocean, the young boys fishing and selling cocos by the side of the road, the surf exploding into the air like a cloud of shredded silver.

Tía Miranda had a nice block house, with a shingled roof and a tiled floor that her cats had trouble negotiating. She had a set of matching furniture and a television and faucets that worked. All her neighbors were administrators and *hombres de negocios* and you had to walk three blocks to find any sort of *colmado*. It was *that* sort of neighborhood. The ocean was never far away and most of the time I was down by the beach playing with the local kids, turning black in the sun.

Tía wasn't really related to Mami; she was my *madrina*, which was why she took me and my brother in every now and then. No money, though. She never loaned money to anyone, even to her drunkard of an ex-husband, and Mami must have known because she never asked. Tía was about fifty and rail-thin and couldn't put anything in her hair to make it forget itself; her perms never lasted more than a week before the enthusiasm of her kink returned. She had two kids of her own, Yennifer and Bienvenido, but she didn't dote

on them the way she doted on me. Her lips were always on me and during meals she watched me like she was waiting for the poison to take effect.

I bet this isn't something you've eaten lately, she'd say.

I'd shake my head and Yennifer, who was eighteen and bleached her hair, would say, Leave him alone, Mamá.

Tía also had a penchant for uttering cryptic one-liners about my father, usually after she'd downed a couple of shots of Brugal.

He took too much.

If only your mother could have noticed his true nature earlier.

He should see how he has left you.

The weeks couldn't pass quickly enough. At night I went down by the water to be alone but that wasn't possible. Not with the tourists making apes out of themselves, and with the tígueres waiting to rob them. Las Tres Marías, I pointed out to myself in the sky.

They were the only stars I knew.

But then one day I'd walk into the house from swimming and Mami and Rafa would be in the living room, holding glasses of sweet lemon-milk.

You're back, I'd say, trying to hide the excitement in my voice.

I hope he behaved himself, Mami would be saying to Tía. Her hair would be cut, her nails painted; she'd

have on the same red dress she wore on every one of her outings.

Rafa smiling, slapping me on the shoulder, darker than I'd last seen him. How ya doing, Yuniór? You miss me or what?

I'd sit next to him and he'd put his arm around me and we'd listen to Tía telling Mami how well I behaved and all the different things I'd eaten.

3.

The year Papi came for us, the year I was nine, we expected nothing. There were no signs to speak of. Dominican chocolate was not especially in demand that season and the Puerto Rican owners laid off the majority of the employees for a couple of months. Good for the owners, un desastre for us. After that, Mami was around the house all the time. Unlike Rafa, who hid his shit well, I was always in trouble. From punching out Wilfredo to chasing somebody's chickens until they passed out from exhaustion. Mami wasn't a hitter; she preferred having me kneel on pebbles with my face against a wall. On the afternoon that the letter arrived, she caught me trying to stab our mango tree with Abuelo's machete. Back to the corner. Abuelo was supposed to make sure I served my ten minutes but he was too busy whittling to bother. He let me up after three minutes and I hid in the bedroom until he said, OK, in

a voice that Mami could hear. Then I went to the smokehouse, rubbing my knees, and Mami looked up from peeling platanos.

You better learn, muchacho, or you'll be kneeling the rest of your life.

I watched the rain that had been falling all day. No, I won't, I told her.

You talking back to me?

She whacked me on the nalgas and I ran outside to look for Wilfredo. I found him under the eaves of his house, the wind throwing pieces of rain onto his dark-dark face. We shook hands elaborately. I called him Muhammad Ali and he called me Sinbad; these were our Northamerican names. We were both in shorts; a disintegrating pair of sandals clung to his toes.

What you got? I asked him.

Boats, he said, holding up the paper wedges his father had folded for us. This one's mine.

What does the winner get?

A gold trophy, about this big.

OK, cabrón, I'm in. Don't let go before me.

OK, he said, stepping to the other side of the gutter. We had a clear run down to the street corner. No cars were parked on our side, except for a drowned Monarch and there was plenty of room between its tires and the curb for us to navigate through.

We completed five runs before I noticed that somebody had parked their battered motorcycle in front of my house.

Who's that? Wilfredo asked me, dropping his soggy boat into the water again.

I don't know, I said.

Go find out.

I was already on my way. The motorcycle driver came out before I could reach our front door. He mounted quickly and was gone in a cloud of exhaust.

Mami and Abuelo were on the back patio, conversating. Abuelo was angry and his cane-cutter's hands were clenched. I hadn't seen Abuelo bravo in a long time, not since his produce truck had been stolen by two of his old employees.

Go outside, Mami told me.

Who was that?

Did I tell you something?

Was that somebody we know?

Outside, Mami said, her voice a murder about to happen.

What's wrong? Wilfredo asked me when I rejoined him. His nose was starting to run.

I don't know, I said.

When Rafa showed himself an hour later, swaggering in from a game of pool, I'd already tried to speak to Mami and Abuelo like five times. The last time, Mami had landed a slap on my neck and Wilfredo told me that he could see the imprints of her fingers on my skin. I told it all to Rafa.

That doesn't sound good. He threw out his guttering cigarette. You wait here. He went around the back

and I heard his voice and then Mami's. No yelling, no argument.

Come on, he said. She wants us to wait in our room.

Why?

That's what she said. You want me to tell her no?

Not while she's mad.

Exactly.

I slapped Wilfredo's hand and walked in the front door with Rafa. What's going on?

She got a letter from Papi.

Really? Is there money?

No.

What does it say?

How should I know?

He sat down on his side of the bed and produced a pack of cigarettes. I watched him go through the elaborate ritual of lighting up—the flip of the thin cigarillo into his lips and then the spark, a single practiced snap of the thumb.

Where'd you get that lighter?

Mi novia gave it to me.

Tell her to give me one.

Here. He tossed it to me. You can have it if you shut up.

Yeah?

See. He reached to take it. You already lost it.

I shut my mouth and he settled back down on the bed.

Hey, Sinbad, Wilfredo said, his head appearing in our window. What's going on?

My father wrote us a letter!

Rafa rapped me on the side of my head. This is a *fam-ily* affair, Yunior. Don't blab it all over the place.

Wilfredo smiled. I ain't going to tell anybody.

Of course you're not, Rafa said. Because if you do I'll chop your fucking head off.

I tried to wait it out. Our room was nothing more than a section of the house that Abuelo had partitioned off with planks of wood. In one corner Mami kept an altar with candles and a cigar in a stone mortar and a glass of water and two toy soldiers we could not touch ever and above the bed hung our mosquito netting, poised to drop on us like a net. I lay back and listened to the rain brushing back and forth across our zinc roof.

Mami served dinner, watched as we ate it, and then ordered us back into our room. I'd never seen her so blank-faced, so stiff, and when I tried to hug her she pushed me away. Back to bed, she said. Back to listening to the rain. I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up Rafa was looking at me pensively and it was dark outside and nobody else in the house was awake.

I read the letter, he told me quietly. He was sitting cross-legged on the bed, his ribs ladderling his chest in shadows. Papi says he's coming.

Really?

Don't believe it.

Why?

It ain't the first time he's made that promise, Yúnior.

Oh, I said.

Outside Señora Tejada started singing to herself, badly.

Rafa?

Yeah?

I didn't know you could read.

I was nine and couldn't even write my own name.

Yeah, he said quietly. Something I picked up. Now go to bed.

4.

Rafa was right. It wasn't the first time. Two years after he left, Papi wrote her saying he was coming for us and like an innocent Mami believed him. After being alone for two years she was ready to believe anything. She showed everybody his letter and even spoke to him on the phone. He wasn't an easy man to reach but on this occasion she got through and he reassured her that yes, he was coming. His word was his bond. He even spoke to us, something that Rafa vaguely remembers, a lot of crap about how much he loved us and that we should take care of Mami.

She prepared a party, even lined up to have a goat there for the slaughtering. She bought me and Rafa new clothes and when he didn't show she sent everybody

home, sold the goat back to its owner and then almost lost her mind. I remember the heaviness of that month, thicker than almost anything. When Abuelo tried to reach our father at the phone numbers he'd left none of the men who'd lived with him knew anything about where he had gone.

It didn't help matters that me and Rafa kept asking her when we were leaving for the States, when Papi was coming. I am told that I wanted to see his picture almost every day. It's hard for me to imagine myself this way, crazy about Papi. When she refused to show me the photos I threw myself about like I was on fire. And I screamed. Even as a boy my voice carried farther than a man's, turned heads on the street.

First Mami tried slapping me quiet but that did little. Then she locked me in my room where my brother told me to cool it but I shook my head and screamed louder. I was inconsolable. I learned to tear my clothes because this was the one thing I had whose destruction hurt my mother. She took all my shirts from my room, left me only with shorts which were hard to damage with bare fingers. I pulled a nail from our wall and punched a dozen holes in each pair, until Rafa cuffed me and said, Enough, you little puto.

Mami spent a lot of time out of the house, at work or down by the Malecón, where she could watch the waves shred themselves against the rocks, where men offered cigarettes that she smoked quietly. I don't know how long this went on. Months, maybe three. Then,

one morning in early spring, when the amapolas were flushed with their flame leaves, I woke up and found Abuelo alone in the house.

She's gone, he said. So cry all you want, *malcriado*. I learned later from Rafa that she was in Ocoa with our tios.

Mami's time away was never discussed, then or now. When she returned to us, five weeks later, she was thinner and darker and her hands were heavy with calluses. She looked younger, like the girl who had arrived in Santo Domingo fifteen years before, burning to be married. Her friends came and sat and talked and when Papi's name was mentioned her eyes dimmed and when his name left, the darkness of her ojos returned and she would laugh, a small personal thunder that cleared the air.

She didn't treat me badly on her return but we were no longer as close; she did not call me her Prieto or bring me chocolates from her work. That seemed to suit her fine. And I was young enough to grow out of her rejection. I still had baseball and my brother. I still had trees to climb and lizards to tear apart.

5.

The week after the letter came I watched her from my trees. She ironed cheese sandwiches in paper bags for our lunch, boiled platanos for our dinner. Our dirty clothes were pounded clean in the concrete trough on

the side of the outhouse. Every time she thought I was scabbling too high in the branches she called me back to the ground. You ain't Spiderman, you know, she said, rapping the top of my head with her knuckles. On the afternoons that Wilfredo's father came over to play dominos and talk politics, she sat with him and Abuelo and laughed at their campo stories. She seemed more normal to me but I was careful not to provoke her. There was still something volcanic about the way she held herself.

On Saturday a late hurricane passed close to the Capital and the next day folks were talking about how high the waves were down by the Malecón. Some children had been lost, swept out to sea and Abuelo shook his head when he heard the news. You'd think the sea would be sick of us by now, he said.

That Sunday Mami gathered us on the back patio. We're taking a day off, she announced. A day for us as a family.

We don't need a day off, I said and Rafa hit me harder than normal.

Shut up, OK?

I tried to hit him back but Abuelo grabbed us both by the arm. Don't make me have to crack your heads open, he said.

She dressed and put her hair up and even paid for a concho instead of crowding us into an autobus. The driver actually wiped the seats down with a towel while we waited and I said to him, It don't look dirty, and he

said, Believe me, muchacho, it is. Mami looked beautiful and many of the men she passed wanted to know where she was heading. We couldn't afford it but she paid for a movie anyway. *The Five Deadly Venoms*. Kung fu movies were the only ones the theaters played in those days. I sat between Mami and Abuelo. Rafa moved to the back, joining a group of boys who were smoking, and arguing with them about some baseball player on Licey.

After the show Mami bought us flavored ices and while we ate them we watched the salamanders crawling around on the sea rocks. The waves were tremendous and some parts of George Washington were flooded and cars were churning through the water slowly.

A man in a red guayabera stopped by us. He lit a cigarette and turned to my mother, his collar turned up by the wind. So where are you from?

Santiago, she answered.

Rafa snorted.

You must be visiting relatives then.

Yes, she said. My husband's family.

He nodded. He was dark-skinned, with light-colored spots about his neck and hands. His fingers trembled slightly as he worked the cigarette to his lips. I hoped he'd drop his cigarette, just so I could see what the ocean would do to it. We had to wait almost a full minute before he said buenos dias and walked away.

What a crazy, Abuelo said.

Rafa lifted up his fist. You should have given me the

signal. I would have kung-fu-punched him in the head. Your father came at me better than that, Mami said. Abuelo stared down at the back of his hands, at the long white hairs that covered them. He looked embarrassed.

Your father asked me if I wanted a cigarette and then he gave me the whole pack to show me that he was a big man.

I held on to the rail. Here?

Oh no, she said. She turned around and looked out over the traffic. That part of the city isn't here anymore.

6.

Rafa used to think that he'd come in the night, like Jesus, that one morning we'd find him at our breakfast table, unshaven and smiling. Too real to be believed. He'll be taller, Rafa predicted. Northamerican food makes people that way. He'd surprise Mami on her way back from work, pick her up in a German car. Say nothing to the man walking her home. She would not know what to say and neither would he. They'd drive down to the Malecón and he'd take her to see a movie, because that's how they met and that's how he'd want to start it again.

I would see him coming from my trees. A man with swinging hands and eyes like mine. He'd have gold on his fingers, cologne on his neck, a silk shirt, good leather shoes. The whole barrio would come out to greet him.

He'd kiss Mami and Rafa and shake Abuelo's reluctant hand and then he'd see me behind everyone else. What's wrong with that one? he'd ask and Mami would say, He doesn't know you. Squating down so that his pale yellow dress socks showed, he'd trace the scars on my arms and on my head. Yuniior, he'd finally say, his stubbled face in front of mine, his thumb tracing a circle on my cheek.