

The Suit of the Forgotten

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“Abuela!” My feet slap across the pavement and swallow the porch stairs in seconds, “What are you doing?”

My eighty-year-old grandmother drags out a box, which I know is at least half her body weight.

“Julio! I am fine.” She gathers her energy to heave the box out of her house one last time.

I place my hand on her shoulder “Abue-”

She lets go of the box to smack my hand off her shoulder, “Mijo, what did I just say?”

“Mama...” My mother comes to my rescue, “He’s just trying to help. Let him get the box.”

Her stern tone mirrors her mother’s.

As if she loses her hearing every time anyone speaks, “Mijo, don’t make me repeat myself...”

After hours of moving my grandmother’s stuff, there comes a point where we have all too silent ourselves without risking getting cuffed on our necks. I stepped out of the way to let Abuela pass, but failed to recognize where the box came from: There was a thick coating of dust covering the lid except for the finger tracks my grandmother leaves with each tug.

“Where did this come from?” I ask.

“Attic.” My grandmother grunts out as she heaves the box, barely giving me time to remove myself completely from her path.

“Mama! You know you aren’t supposed to go up the stairs.”

Spanish mumbling emerges from my grandmother, “I can walk up the stairs quite fine, *hija*.”

“Mama, please let the boys take care of the boxes,” My mother looks to me, “Julio, go get any and all boxes from the attic before your grandmother breaks her other hip - again.”

I bound through Abuela's door frame faster than any opposition from my grandmother can bind me to her side, "Mijo! Don't go up there!"

I could barely hold myself back from going to the place no one was ever allowed to go. Whenever I went to Abuela's I could do whatever I wanted, except enter her attic. My own mother warned me about the time my Tío Fernando went into Abuela's attic; she told me her mother gave that boy such a bad beating, he couldn't sit for weeks. In our family, the boys were always in trouble and the women - specifically their shoulders - are always hurting because of them. As I quickly run up the stairs, my nose catches the lingering spicy scents and calming aromas of Abuela's house. Even the long days and gruesome heat could be erased with one trail of steam coming from Abuela's kitchen; Most of the time she was whipping up tamales and her signature enchiladas suizas. My heart and stomach began to slowly weep at the thought of never having another of her filling meals in this house. Crammed around the ancient wood table - not even half of us sitting down, food towering and practically spilling off the sides. Most importantly, being with my family, except for one missing seat at the table. Even if the dining room had overflowed and people couldn't move their own elbows to eat, no one sat at the seat right of Abuela. I have never known why, but I guess I never wanted to ask.

As I trickle down the hall, passing the childhood bedrooms of my tías and tíos, I see the one string that could unweave a whole ball of ancient yarn. Whether it was giddiness that I - out of everyone in my family - was the chosen one, or the nervousness that I could open Pandora's box in my Abuela's home, my hands shook. I grasped the string and I tugged. A ladder emerging from the ceiling came tumbling down quicker than I had anticipated. I looked at the ladder and chuckled lightly as I could see my grandmother's handprints in the dust that had been separated from her vicious trek. I followed in her footsteps - or handprints rather - and climbed the ladder to the forbidden place of this home. With each rail I hold, more dust begins to fly off as if it identifies me as foreign and wants to run away. The familiar spicy scents scatter as soon as my head disappears into the ceiling and I can't help but gasp at the sensation.

To my dismay, this wondrous sensation of curiosity began to trail after the dust - to run away with every step I took. In this attic, there is nothing but boxes piled up to the ceiling, mouse droppings everywhere I look and stuffiness begins to overwhelm my lungs. As my eyes begin to water, a glassy hue covers my eyes and I blindly step out to try to gather some support. I could feel the wind slip around me as my foot caught the lip of a box and my body slammed against the floor and dust swarmed in clouds around me.

Through the dark clouds, I could see something that could appease my now foul mood and my body. A bright flash of yellow contrasts the rest of my vision and my watery eyes ceased. . Apparently, my clumsy tendencies paid off, the lip of the box I tripped on cracked the lid of a box - similar to the one Abulea's was lugging around only moments ago. I reached my hand out to completely relieve the box of its yellow contents, and to my surprise below it there were other bright hues underneath. Red, green, blue, purple. The yellow material was a soft satin and when I fully unraveled it, it was a tie with an elaborate swirl across it. I reached in the box again to pull out the next tie, unraveling the intricate designs with a bewildered gaze. After I had my fill of what was in the box, I wanted to see more. More color in this drab attic. I dumped the ties back into the box and looked to see if there was any indication or a label that could tie this box to others in the attic. Low and behold, in a questionable font and style, across the side of the box , I could make out a name, "Francisco," I whispered to no one.

My eyes scoured the room around me for any other boxes that shared the same label, but as I looked around, I couldn't see any unique ones that had the name on it - all of them did. Many of them had "Francisco" with other words like pictures, books, clothing - nothing too out of the ordinary. As my eyes gathered as much as they could, I saw one more intriguing bite in the room. In the corner, to my right, there was something hanging from the low ceiling. I make my trek across the room. Ducking the cobwebs clinging on every surface in the room. I contort my body to be mindful of not disturbing the towers of boxes and holding my breath to save what little fresh air I had in my lungs.

I trudged along with the weeping floors until I was standing toe-to-toe with a hanging bag. I reached my hand out to sweep the dust off of the bag and I saw a label that bore a likeness to the others, but the swirls on this label were planned and precise as not one line was out of place.

“Francisco Castillo,” I whispered aloud. “Castillo...that can’t be.”

Where there are clouds, there’s bound to be a storm. “Mijo! Get away from that!”

The booming crackle of my grandmother’s voice startled me so greatly that I let out a scream that sounded like a dog having its paws stepped on.

“Ahhhh!” My voice cracks, “Ab-Abuela! Y-You know y-you aren’t supposed to go up the stairs.” I stuttered a retort.

My grandmother looks down at her feet to see the ties spilled and distorted in their box and gasps. With no respect nor awareness of her surroundings, she stampedes through the boxes and the cobwebs like a bull. Sheher hand clamps around my arm like a viper and with her mad-grandmother strength, she brings my face down to hers, “You know you aren’t supposed to be up here, Julio.”

Oh no! She said my name! “Mama said I could be.” That was all I could get out.

“Julio,” *She did it again!* “Who owns this house? Who cleans this house? Who cooks in this house?”

Quietly, I say, “You d-”

“I do!” She screams, “And when I say not to do something, what are you supposed to do?”

“Not to do it-” I am interrupted again.

“Not to do it! Yet! You are up here!” The rumbling of Spanish curses emerged from Abeula’s lips so fast that I could only comprehend a couple, but a couple was all I needed to know that I was screwed. “Julio, go downstairs and forget you *ever* saw this place.”

“Abue-”

“No!” Her furious gaze bears down into my soul, “Forget. This. Place.”

I try to step away from her as her viper clamp releases and obey her order, but my heart has found a way to bind itself to this bag and find its power to control my voice. “Abuelo.” My hand places itself over the label, right where the heart should be. “This is him, isn’t it?”

“Julio-”

My heart tightens its claws on my voice and boldly interrupts her, “Francisco Castillo - Wonderful son, loving husband, doting father.”

Every year, my mom - despite her mother’s wishes - takes me to this field where engraved stones erect from the ground and fresh flowers seem plentiful and everlasting. In the corner of this field, we always stop at one stone in particular and my mother reaches out and kisses the stone, “*Te amo papá.*” She would whisper. Then she would place those same lips on my forehead, “*I love you, Julio.*” I would always reply as I placed a kiss on her hand, “*I love you too Mommy.*” As I have gotten older, our journeys to the same spot have weathered a trail for us to follow, and for me, I have memorized how the flowers have changed from cheap carnations to roses. How the stone has slowly set into the ground even if it has been only a very few centimeters. But most importantly, how those words have yet to change, and how easy they are to remember.

“Brave man.” My grandmother’s voice softens, “They forgot that.”

My voice, like hers, softens, “Why would-” I stop myself from asking the question I already know the answer to.

“Because he wasn’t white.” My grandmother places her withered hand on mine and squeezes the bag, right where the heart is supposed to be.

Abuela’s hand dropped and the coldness in them without her usual warmth shocks my hand, “Open it.”

As if the cold shocked me, those two words could’ve sent me into cardiac arrest. “Are you sure?”

A smile, showing the missing molar of my grandmother's teeth, clashes with my frown and the sweat that started on my brow. "Mijo, open the bag."

My hand moves from the label to the zipper around the hanger, my fingertips grasp the zipper and I tug. Out of the drab charcoal coloring on the bag, blooms a beautiful yellow beneath. As I tug, the more I reveal the sunshine color that practically illuminates the dark attic.

The sunshine makes the silhouette of a suit. A suit that seems to have seen some days but refused to be dimmed.

"Dios mío! It hasn't changed a bit!" My grandmother exclaims. The hands that have always seemed to flow with confidence, now shook as they have grazed the fabric. Abuela lets out a little gasp, "Still so crisp after all of these years."

"Abuela," My eyes seek hers, "how long has it been since you've seen this?"

"Mijo," her voice breaks as her eyes grow glassy, "...too long."

This suit was similar to those I have seen at weddings and such, but it has more flow, more baggage to it. The bright yellow was broken into two large pieces: the pants that are cinched at two points - the ankles and the waist - and the jacket having little to no form at all.

"What is this, Abuela?" I finally asked.

"It is a zoot suit." She uttered.

My brows raise and my jaw drops slightly, "A...what now?"

"A zoot suit is what this is." As my mind attempts to gather or remember what she is talking about, she picks it up. "Your Abuelo used to wear this when we went out and were young sprite things." She chuckles, "He was certainly the most attractive out of everyone..." A sly smile greets her face as she winks at me.

I almost gag, "Wait, wait, wait. Why is it so big? How could he even move in one of these things?"

“Well, mijo, you must understand, this is all we had.” She takes a deep breath, “When I was younger, we all worked, no matter if we were paid to do it, or if it was domestic. No person like us was not working - ever. It wasn’t until I was...let me think,” She places her hand on her head and taps her foot in an erratic rhythm, “Ah! I was sixteen when the big bands came to sweep our nation off its feet, mijo!” Her hand slams to her chest, covering her heart. “Oh! The music! The saxophones, trumpets, and trombones! Even white people couldn’t resist!” Abuela sighs, “I remember the first time I saw a big band play. It was all people coming together. Mexicans, Africans, Italians, anyone who wasn’t supposed to be in the United States, they were there! Dancing and drinking - it was the good start of a revolution! The uniforms we wore evolved from the cleanest Levi’s we had to suits! But not any suits -”

“The zoot suits!” I exclaimed.

“Exactly! Now, to answer you, ‘Why so big?’” Abuela mimics me, “Why not?” She lets out a deep chuckle, “How could we move? Because we said so!” her chuckle leads into a cackle. “Alright! We used to buy suits that were two sizes too big and tailor them to our liking. Eventually, we all - minorities- came to a census: tight cuffs around our ankles so that we could move without tripping ourselves or our partners up. With the big bands, no one wanted to risk not moving because the rhythms, the beat, the sound, the atmosphere, the people, were moving. They chose to move because, mijo,” she reaches a hand to cup my cheek, “those days when we finally had a break, we had our freedoms back.”

My heart tightens to hear those words and my anger begins to swell. I try to tame it by asking another question, “Abuela...is this how you met Abuelo?”

“Sí, mijo.” Her smile returns to her face, “Franciso Castillo looked mighty fine in a zoot suit...”

“Abuela!” I start to dry-heave.

“What?” She innocently asked, “I am not the only one the believed in it! Francisco had many women chasing after him like he was carrying their paychecks.”

“Abuela, be honest... were you one of them?” I was willing to get hit for that one, but I needed to know.

I could see the gears in her head working and a hue of shame crossed her face as she mumbled, “Yes.”

I started to cackle as Abuela started to turn beet red, but eventually the shamre simmered to join my laughter, “What can I say? We are all desperate little things in his web!” That caused me to laugh even harder.

“Alright. I was so in love with your Abuelo I wanted to do anything for just his gaze to meet mine. Just once, but Francisco was an idiot, to be honest, and he needed a nudge. So one night, he was still in the dance hall and he had danced with every girl in town at that point, well, except for me. He was nearing the end of a dance with a girl named Juanita, and I could tell he was truly done with dancing at that point. In my desperate attempt to have just one dance, I ran up to the trumpeter and I gave him all of the money I had and asked for one request, ‘Something slow please.’ The look I got, mijo, was harsh to say the least. Almost to say that I had no idea where I was, but the fast swings and the jarring dances ceased when we all heard the tempo slow and the sweet croon of the trumpet began to play. This caused Francisco to look- to look at the band, then see me in the corner grinning. Whether it was the song that lured him to me or the cheeky grin, your Abuelo came running, and he had never ran for a girl before.”

My heart ceased to have anger but it was filled with this sweet sensation of love twittering around in my chest. “Never?”

“Never.” My Abuela replied. “We got married a month later and he wore this suit that day.”

“Yellow? On your wedding day?” I whistled low, admiring the bravery of my grandfather.

“He said he wanted to see if he could steal some of the attention from me - he couldn’t.” My muscles in my face started to cramp as my smile never ceased.

“That day was supposed to be the greatest day of my life - and it was for a time.”

Supposed to be? “Abuela?” The muscles in my face started to relax as the smile smeared down into a frown.

“We were at the dance hall like we had planned and that slow song emerged and we were dancing cheek to cheek - just how it was supposed to go, but then-” Her voice halts to make any sense as tears emerged from her soul and broke over the surface of her face.

I immediately grabbed her and held her close. Held her as my brave Abuela cried, soaking my shirt and my chest with tears. The sadness bleeds into my very being as I- or anyone for that matter- have seen this woman break.

“Oh, Abella...what did they do to you?” My voice breaks as the sadness starts to settle its way into my voice.

Even though her voice was muffled, she replied, “They took everything from us.” She detaches herself from my embrace and goes over to one of the dusty boxes behind us. She unclasps the lid and dumps it to the ground. She pulls out a thick manilla folder that as she lifts it, papers begin to tumble to fall onto the ground. She opens it up and takes out what I can see as a newspaper clipping and hands it to me. Immediately I can see where this is going. In a bold font, the headline reads: “Hair Style Used in Identification of Hoodlums” Suspects Must Not Change Haircut, Judge Rules (Los Angeles Examiner - October 27, 1942). She hands me another: Latin America Group Probes Street Fights Fact-Finding Committee to Delve Into Causes of Brawls Between Servicemen, Gangs (Los Angeles Examiner - June 8, 1943). She continues to hand me more clippings until my hands are piled with history I hadn’t known before and she doesn’t stop. She continues to pile more and more into my arms and stops when she reaches a photo and places it on top of the pile- like placing a flower on a coffin. A young woman stands beside a tall, lanky man, but I know it is

more. My grandmother, at eighteen years old, in her white lace wedding dress holding a bouquet of fresh flowers grinning next to my grandfather - clean-shaven, painting on a stoic face but holding back his grin to match his wife's in his obnoxious, oversized zoot suit.

“That was taken three hours before that stain appeared...” My grandmother lifts the lapel to reveal a bloodstain that has woven itself into the suit jacket and the shirt underneath. “Then this one.” She lifts a part of the jacket that is out of place, resewn together probably, to reveal a pink blot that is where the most vital parts of your body are. “That picture was six years before he disappeared.

“Disappeared?” I interject.

“There is so much I wish I would've done.” She falls into herself, in her reflection of the past, “They came in - white men with bats, batons, daggers, clubs, and their anger. They trampled into the hall, hundreds of them and started to attack - we hadn't planned for it.” She falls a little deeper, “Francisco put himself in front of me as three sailors came at us. He had nothing except for his hands and so he used them. He leaped towards the biggest one and got one good hit on him, but that was it. One hit was what it took for six more men to descend onto my husband. I started to scream, but my sister ran to me and grabbed me around my waist. Tugging me away. I started to kick and scream, call out to Francisco, curse at the soldiers, threaten my own sister with every will and might I had. Francisco echoed my call, screaming my name as men bludgeoned him, punched his face.” She trailed her hand to the lapel, “and then stab him as he screamed ‘Te amo, mi esposa!’” She trailed her other hand to the out-of-order seam and clutched onto the suit. A desperate embrace as she sobs into the lingering feeling of her husband.

I wrapped my arms around her and around the suit and I joined her. In her loss and into my own. To never truly see, let alone, know this man who is my blood, my family, my heritage. I let my tears fall, I let the dam of my strength crumble as let my sobs expel without grace or fear. Time stops for a while as if the world around us decides to have mercy on us just for a moment.

“Beautiful.” My throat burns as the words finally break through the sobs.

My grandmother's sobs are silent for a moment and allow her own words to come through,
"What?"

"What we are - beautiful." I place my hands on hers and release their hold on the ghost of her past. "What he was, what you are, what I am. Beauty is in surviving and in living: When he wore that suit, he believed in the beauty of what he was. What you wish you could've done, would have destroyed the beauty of who you are now, and what I am because of the survival and the will of our people, is beautiful."

Abuela takes a moment to open her eyes and look at the suit, then she turns in my arms to look at me, "He would've said that."

"I had a feeling he would've too." I counter.

She breaks through her muddy reflection of the past and puts her hands on my cheeks and lowers my head to meet her lips, "He loves you."

"I love him and I love you Abuela." I lay a kiss on her tear-stained cheek and I caught just one final tear with my fingertip, "We mustn't cry any longer, Mama will think I am hurting you up here." Abuela starts to laugh lightly, "Go downstairs and get yourself a glass of water, Abuela. I'll take care of this, okay?"

"Okay, mijo." She starts to leave and starts her descent down the ladder, but I stop her quickly.

"Abuela! You said he disappeared, how?"

With one watery gaze she says, "My Francisco died that night. A husk of his body was my husband for six years, then he succumbed to his desire to die..."

I gasp, "You mean..."

"Mijo, he was dead a long time before that. The things my children said about him are the things I told them to remember. Not the meal he had with our children that he told them he loved and proceeded to take a pill out of his pocket and put it in his mouth and swallow it. My children don't

remember how their father disappeared right in front of them, but they remember how much he loved them. I am only mad that I haven't had the chance to reunite with him." With that, Abuela descends down the ladder.

My heart officially breaks as her steps depart, how my grandparents had suffered and how little anyone, not even their own children, realized it. I - out of all my family - know the secret as to why we know how to function, how we breath, how we have life in our chests, how we have carried the Castillo name through the world no matter the chances and I now know my purpose because of this sensation blooming in my chest. This passion that ignited my grandfather now has a place to blossom again, in my heart, my lungs, and in my blood, and to grow wildly and free.

I turn my body to the suit once more, to seek a suit that has been forgotten, and I bring it to the light: I strip the clothes I have been told to wear and I embrace the rebellion, the revolution of the years before. My skin welcomes the stains of my ancestor, my body feels the warmth of a rebel, and my legs feel the power and confidence in stride. I make my way to the box that houses the final piece, the tie that brings focus to the attire and to the person beneath it. Placing the lid back on the box, I make my own descent down the stairs, passing the rooms that once hosted the naive children and to pass the pictures of a happy family that once was, but always felt like it was missing something.

With this march, I take to descend the stairs to my aunts, uncles, cousins, and my parents.

Tío Fernando is the first to see me, "What the hell are you wearing?"

I ignore him.

Tía Daniela follows suit, "That is...ummm...new?"

I ignore her.

My cousins follow the rumble I caused and all say nothing, but start to laugh at me.

I ignore them.

Mama starts to come into the room, "What is going -" She stops herself, "Julio?"

I - boldly - ignore her too. I make my way through the house and onto the porch where my grandmother is sitting, sipping on her ice water. “Abuela?”

My grandmother looks over her shoulder and sees me, clad in my Abuelo’s zoot suit, “Francisco.”

A bright smile cascades over her face, almost combating the bright yellow coming off the suit, “Abuela...it’s me, Julio.”

“Mijo, you look just like him.” A tear threatens to trail down her face, but I run in time to catch it with my fingertip.

“No more crying, it is time to celebrate, Abuela,” I demand.

Her smile catches the light and takes my breath away, “Sí, mijo. It is time to celebrate.”

We both turned to the house door, looking out to our family’s inquisitive and almost worried gazes, and began to laugh. Soon enough, they begin to laugh too. Since the door can’t fit us both, I guide her hand to my mother’s outreached one and meet her prideful gaze. I placed my foot on the doorway to follow my family into the house, but my entire body stops as I can catch in the reflection of my mother’s eyes, the blue and white lights that start to flicker behind me.

“Julio...” My mother’s voice begins to tremble and the sirens begin to erupt.

“Te quiero, mamá.”