

Nopalitos

By Lidia Ortiz

The woman suddenly appears at the gate as I sit at the patio. I cannot hear what she is saying over the ad for the mystic *hermanos* on the radio announcing their modestly priced talents. They will cure you of your *mala suerte*, bring back that lover you lost, and maybe sell you success in the process. The tiny woman initially looks like a younger version of my aunt who is from a different *rancho* and therefore unlikely to be her. I wave at her to come in and like a panicked child, I run to the kitchen window where my grandmother is cooking. I tell her that a woman has arrived, to please come greet her. The woman is still waiting at the gate when we return, like some lovely *comadre*—vampire that cannot enter unless she is invited in. She has brought *nopales* she says, and she uncovers the brilliant green portions, already peeled for my grandmother, who endlessly expresses a combination of modesty and gratitude. The woman has a face that is ageless, as is the way of the indigenous people of our region. Her olive skin looks velvet soft, and she has the smiling eyes of the women from my father's side. I am a giant in comparison since I resemble my mother's family physically.

I greet the woman in the custom of my upbringing, with a kiss to her cheek and a hug to her small frame. Although I do not recall having met this woman before, this is what you do when you have the sense to recognize that this is your grandmother's close friend or relative. You know that she probably knows everything about you, as grandmothers live to talk about their offspring. I introduce myself to the woman and she asks who I belong to. In this, the land of the patriarchy, at my maternal grandmother's house, I belong to my mother. The woman remarks that oh yes, *hija* de Morena, as if she can finally see the resemblance. I smile and nod and walk with them towards the kitchen. I sit outside and listen to them catch up on the goings-on of their community.

The thing about being a woman of faith like theirs is that gossip is not common. Not with your neighbors anyhow. Any point made that discusses someone's misfortune ends with a prayer said out loud to God asking for better things to come, if he so wills it. In that way, I am a woman of faith, always hoping for better things to come. Maybe I should start saying these tiny prayers out loud like my grandmother does. Maybe it will make others feel better the way it does for me to hear such kindnesses. Instead, I decide it is not necessary, because I know by now that God does not require words. The woman eventually leaves, and I sit with my grandmother while she shows me the right way to slice and dice *nopales*. As I watch her, I keep thinking back to the cautious knife skills I learned on some TV chef's show but never applied. My grandmother needs no lessons and slices and dices midair while answering my questions. I ask her how she met my grandfather, and she starts by telling me her own father's story. This is followed by her own story, and through to the birth of her first child, who is proclaimed by her to have been the most

beautiful child ever. She beams with pride about her only male son, and I believe what she says about his beauty as my grandmother is not one to shell out compliments without merit.

Her face turns to sadness as we talk about his untimely death and the senselessness of the many losses she has lived through. She ultimately reminds me that our unending faith in the *santitos*, and God himself, carries us at all times. This faith, she says, is my God-issued birthright. I nod in agreement and occasionally interject with stories of my own tiny miracles. I do not tell her that I still pray the same short prayer over and over that I once overheard her say softly under her breath. I was fourteen and my aunts and cousins were all walking home in the dark with her. It always stayed with me even though I only heard it once. I don't think my grandmother ever stops praying, just like me.

Like me, she comes from a world of *telenovela*-worthy stories, stories of thwarted murders and reversed black magic spells. Like me, she too has an unbroken faith. My grandmother has many things to say, and I don't know how much time passes while we deal with the *nopales*. I suddenly find myself distracted by something on the wall and try to decide if the cracks on it are real or a bunch of daddy longlegs spiders. She lets me know there is only one way to know for sure, and we burst out laughing.

I find myself in the land of spiders that lazily hover, eavesdropping while families sit and reminisce over coffee. It is the land where lost granddaughters come after disappearing for years and years searching and longing for history and renewal. This is the land of *nopales* readily converted into food out of necessity, and sometimes just nostalgia. The old ways are not lost at all. Grandmothers will share them with you, all you have to do is dare to ask.

Glossary

hermanos – brothers

mala suerte – bad luck

rancho – ranch

comadre – family friend or relative that is a godmother to one's child

hija – daughter

santitos – saints

telenovela – television soap opera