

After the monsoon. Every bark-clad sinew of the mesquite trees soaked black and their canopy iridescent with refreshed intensity. All the motion and its echoes finally dissipated by the tail end of a breeze. Mamá emptied the dustpan of glass shards into the five gallon paint bucket. Hefted the bucket with a slight lean to her other side and walked with measured steps to the trash can.

The diamondback carcass. A single leg of printed tights stuffed with the parts of chicken and fish that can't be eaten. Strewn lengthwise, not stretched taut. Flies about the tattered gape that exposed the gory stuffing, made no attempt to restrain its stench.

Ari's forearms. Cross-hatched with fine hair, tanned, and tattooed on the upper sides. Softer, paler, smoother below. Resembling this length of serpent.

"¡Ten cuidado!" she had gasped when she saw he meant to engage it. "You don't have to kill it."

"Signed its own death warrant. Come around my Mamá's house."

"You don't have to kill it," Pita said, more emphatically than her mother.

"Give me that rake if you're not gonna help."

When Pita recoiled and held the rake behind her at arm's length, Ari took a measure of the snake's intentions then quickly turned toward his little sister, lunged one barreling step at, through, past her flinching figure to snatch the implement. His ten years and hundred pounds' advantage over her was overwhelming.

"Ari! Don't!"

But the snake had seized the moment to retreat and Ari was stalking it toward the edge of the shed.

"You're going to get bit! Ari! Leave it alone! It'll just go away!"

"Come inside, Mamá," Pita said. "Come on, Mamá. Let's go inside. Let's go sit down."

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"I thought he was out of here now. Living on Campobello," the officer said.

“That’s right,” Mamá said. This was the first she had heard the street name of Ari’s new flop. The way this man spoke to her, as casual as a relative. To have visited her son’s address how many times already? The address she did not know the numbers to, would never be invited to or expected to visit. Whatever den of hooligans Ari had thrown in with this time.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to call an ambulance?”

She glanced at Pita. Still holding a wadded kitchen towel packed with ice to her face for several seconds, then shoulder, back to face.

“She’ll be fine.”

He waited three long breaths for her to change her mind.

“If you say so. Listen, don’t be upset with your neighbor. Calling us was the right thing to do. I know it’s hard because Ari is your boy, but he isn’t the one who needs looking after.”

“Yes, yes.” It meant something closer to, “Please, just go now.”

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She stood on the step just below the top of the ladder, higher than you were supposed to step. Both feet on the one side of the ladder, not straddling it for stability. Uneven ground below, gusts of wind and slaps of rain where she stood. She held the corner of the house with one hand, reached the other toward the gutter that spewed water into the driveway where it deepened a trench started in the previous week’s rains. The ladder teetered.

From the neighboring enclosed front porch, the umbra of a cocked head projected consternation at her for a second before ducking inside.

The ladder had been waiting there. She had not planned to climb it. She only meant to step outside to escape the storm. Even with the wind whipping, she could hear through the wall. The voices from the bathroom window around the corner. Eyes closed to the gale, grimace turned upward, she reached then stretched her reach as one foot elevated onto tip toes.

Her hand felt every nuance of the scene behind the wall. As it shuddered with the commotion of them wrestling, the door being slammed behind them into the wall, then the fluttering beats of her footsteps racing away, through the bedroom. She listened for the back door, turned her head down to look under her outreached

arm at the front door that did not open. Felt Ari's heavier footfalls, sensed the lapse of any movement until finally she was jarred by the shrieking of glass shards on the patio, piercing through the tumult.

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"Wish you had some propane for that grill, Mamá," Ari said.

"We're not cooking it."

"Tastes like chicken. You ever try it? Tastes like chicken."

"That's nasty, Ari," Pita said. Their voices were all raised slightly to overpower the torrent on the roof.

"I killed it so we can eat it. Big rattler like that. I could grill 'im up you wouldn't know it wasn't chicken."

Mamá said nothing.

"I might just fry him on the stove, then."

"Not on my stove. You don't bring that thing into this house."

She imagined the sour stink of it and winced. Her cutting board, counter, lower cabinet fronts, floor would all be spilt over with its bits and juices. Stringing it all over as he operated on it to preserve its skin, filet its flesh. His hands slimy with entrails, contagious from its skin, touching every knob on her cabinets. The faucet, the door handle.

She shunted the imagery away, focused on her lap, where she scratched away at a patch of dead skin on the back of one hand.

"Shame to waste it, Mamá. I thought I'd do something nice for you. The way you're always helping me out."

"Do something nice then and go away," Pita said. She gnashed a few words, eyes casting a fierce spell on her brother. Drawing his glare, locking her unflinching sights on his. *You're not gonna find it. You're not walking in here doing this again.*

"You got nothing nice to say, little girl, you better shut your fuckin' mouth."

"You're not bringing that snake into my nice kitchen, Ari," their mother said, scratching.

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The Huachuca Mountains concealed the storm tribe until their grumblings grew into enough war dance fury to surmount the peaks and plunge down the opposite slope. Seven miles of impenetrable waterfall. Determined to pulverize this granite as it had

disintegrated generations of mountains before. The sun hid from its wrath.

Ari reached into the unlatched shed, lifted the step ladder from the two thick nails that served as its wall mount. He could feel the chilling shockwave that preceded the storm, and knew how long he had before the rain would beat every square inch of the acre into submission.

He leaned the ladder against the corner of the house, under the portion of gutter that needed mending. Then he started toward the back door, his shirt billowing from the gale behind him. The door lunged inward violently, victim to the wind. Ari plodded in, put a bit more strength than necessary behind his effort to close the door, slamming it behind him. The rain's arrows assaulted the tin roof over the porch. Though the power was not out, no lights were on. The windows dimmed and the shell of the house held its breath.

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"Don't! You'll break it! Just put it down. Leave my stuff alone," Pita said.

"Then tell me where it is," Ari said.

Pita collected herself before replying. She had let her brother get the best of her. She could not let him control her.

"Where *what* is, Ari?"

"You know. Mamá's stash."

"How should I know where it is? Isn't it where it always is? I saw you go into Mamá's room."

"I checked under the mattress. I know you took it. Saw you running out of there when I came inside. Saw you come in here. I know it's in here."

A smirk. She folded her arms and leaned back against the door jamb.

"Even if I did move Mamá's money, maybe I did it as soon as I smelled you on the wind. And if I did move it, I wouldn't put it anywhere so obvious. Have fun playing with my dolls."

She emerged to find Mamá still not finished in the kitchen. Pita positioned herself in the dining nook, which housed a pile of laundry but no table and chairs, and waited for Ari to follow her. She had no intention of staying in close quarters with him.

But if she walked right out the back door he would simply follow. So when her brother appeared, she spoke loudly enough for her mother to be invited into the conversation.

“When are you going to fix that gutter, Ari? You said you would on Mother’s Day. Remember?”

“Why don’t you fix it?”

“Can’t. We only have the step ladder, and I can’t reach. But you can. The end cap just needs snapped back on,” Pita said.

“You don’t just snap those on,” said Ari.

“So you won’t try?”

“You need caulk— ”

“Not gonna —”

“—or adhesive. And I—”

“—even try, huh?”

“—didn’t bring my—”

“Figures,” said Pita.

“—caulk gun,” Ari said.

“Mamá’s been waiting and the monsoons are here. You can’t do that one thing for her? All she does for you? Making your lunch.”

“That gutter needs fixed, Ari,” Mamá joined in, placing various items back in the fridge. “The water coming out of it is making a mess of the driveway.”

Satisfied she had bought a head start in which to gather herself, Pita strolled out the back door.

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Could you pinch its tapered rattle, hoist it from the ground? And would those guts spill out? Or could you lace your fingers through them and clench them into a juicy, tight fist and pull the whole mess out, reach by reach? Then could you slip your slender arm into the slimy sock of skin and wear it up to your shoulder? The rattle twitching at a poignant frequency as you flip off your brother?

Pita leaned over the back of the toilet, staring at the snake on the gravel. Had Ari dragged it there from the shed? Is that where he had slaughtered it?

The severed head lay on one side, faced its body, mouthed reflexive insults at its departed butcher. Stood guard to bite her if she dared go outside and reach for the body.

*What does this mean? It has to mean something.*

Just then, Ari marched by, holding the stepladder under the top step so its legs dangled near his knees. Pita sprung back, arrested her breathing, her back rigid and parallel to the wall inches behind, her chin tucked toward her chest. Listened to the mincing of gravel under his footfalls, heard their pause and then heard them resume, growing louder as he approached then passed the window again. As he rounded the back of the house, the rain blasted the gravel, the roof, the siding with three distinct pitches that sizzled together into a sound that boiled over in waves as the wind splashed erratically.

The back door slammed. Had she hoped he would stay on the covered patio to watch the storm?

As soon as she considered how to avoid Ari once again, Pita realized it was already too late to escape. Beyond the bathroom door was Mamá's bedroom. She couldn't make it to the living room before he intercepted her and trapped her behind the closed door.

The three sudden pounds on the bathroom door startled her. She hadn't heard him come through the bedroom door.

"Get out here!" Ari said.

Pita simply stared out at the gravel and sky that were now the same color, partly due to the screen that filtered their appearance, but more due to the rain and the way clouds stripped color as they overtook the land.

"I know you're not doing anything in there!"

He rattled the knob violently. She had not been able to reach the key resting on the molding edge above the door, hoped he did not know it was there, would not think to feel for one there. Still, the door would not withstand much, and he had no concern for breaking things. POUNDPOUND—POUNDPOUND—POUND! POUND! POUND! POUNDPOUND!

"Open the fucking door, Pita!"

Even through the obscuring screen, she could see the look on the face of their neighbor. She knew he could see her, stoic behind the screen, knowing what certainly must come next.

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She wished she hadn't said anything. She had been out raking the collected tumbleweeds from the fence. Mostly as a reason to escape the building pressure within the house. The sky was

virtually clear, except for the thunderheads amassing beyond the Huachucas. Their muted mumbles, flashes of eureka—as their war council churned through the afternoon. The imminent rain presaged by intermittent moist breaths.

“Whatchu doing out here?” Ari said.

She declined to answer. If she hadn’t said anything, he might have taken one more step backward, provoking it to strike. She wouldn’t have flinched as it struck at the back of his leg. Wouldn’t have felt remorse as he turned to defend himself, as the rattler dashed away into the haven of a rock pile, as he faced her again, his eyes now wide vacuums of fear ferociously imploring her for help. As he collapsed to his knees—if poison could work so fast!—and was reduced to begging, to apologies and supplications.

“I asked you a question, Lupita,” he growled.

“The ladder’s in the shed, if that’s what you came out here for,” Pita said.

“You’re wasting your time,” he said. “That storm comes over the mountains, just gonna blow more tumbleweeds right where you’re raking.”

He was staring at her, hands on his hips, expecting something. An answer to a question he hadn’t asked. In reply, she traced his immense form with her eyes, momentarily pondered how a beast like this could be her brother. Then turned her head down, away. No eye contact.

*Not this time, Ari.*

“You forgot your food, Ari!” Mamá called, descending the three steps at the back door. She had the plate in one hand and was pulling the door shut behind with the other. Ari put on his smile as he spun around on one heel. That’s when Pita saw it, and later wished she hadn’t said anything.

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“Don’t unlock the door, Mamá.”

Her mother stood in the center of the living room, peered into her gravel driveway through the cascade of sheers that allowed in just enough light and not the heat of day. Then pivoted and began a slow procession toward the door.

“Mamá, please? We can be quiet. Pretend we’re not here.”

Even as her mother, still three steps from the door, lifted one

arm to the deadbolt, Pita dashed behind her, into her mother's room. She heard the lock clack back and calculated the milliseconds before being caught in the act. Luckily, Mamá always stashed her money in the same spot under the head of the mattress. Pita didn't have time to lift it, so dove onto the bed, splayed out, reached between the headboard and stabbed her upturned hand between the weight of the mattress and the mass of the box springs, clutched the bag—*His footsteps! He's on the steps!*—and plucked it out, rubbing half her forearm raw as she did.

Pita rolled to her back, hugged the bag to her abdomen as she sat up, lifted her knees toward her chest, wheeled around on her elbow, and bounced off the bed. Launched through the door, past her Mamá, beyond whose figure she stole a glimpse of Ari's eyes, tracking her—*Just go!*—as she darted toward her own room.

*It's so bright outside he can't see anything, looking into the dark in here. He doesn't know,* she thought.

When Pita reappeared moments later, the house was surprisingly quiet. She ventured the few feet to the living room where she expected to see Ari waiting to ensnare her. But the living room was empty. Mamá was in the kitchen making a plate for Ari. Pita sidled along the wall between kitchen and living room, peering through the open door to Mamá's room, seeing deeper into the room with each tender step. The mattress was out of alignment with the box springs, its rounded corners protruding over the end and side. She leaned her torso toward the threshold, braved one more step. From that vantage, she could see Ari hunched over the head of the bed. He had sent Mamá to the kitchen so he could sneak in here. He probably wouldn't even eat what she made for him. Nothing but a thief!

Pita eased back a few steps, not knowing whether Ari would bother to restore the condition of the bed or just march through the door.

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From her perch on the lowest front step, Pita watched the last cruiser leave. Milling the gravel deliberately as it eased up the rise at the mouth of the driveway. The red and blue lights were not flashing. They had not been flashing when the cruisers pulled in, either. There certainly was no siren. She would have heard

the siren, even covering her head with both arms, because even in that flurry of sweat and fear and pain she heard the cars skid around the circle drive and skid to simultaneous halts. She peeked when she first heard it, and again when the door burst, and saw the lights then. They must have turned them on as they arrived.

She shook the rounded pebbles of melting ice out of the towel. Some clung to the loops in the fabric.

The third cruiser had pulled in after Ari was outside, stayed at the mouth of the drive, blocking it in case he ran. But the officers had faced no trouble putting him in the car. He knew how to pick his fights.

She was lucky none of the glass cut her. She wouldn't have cared, though. This is what it took. A little blood to accompany the bruises would have been fine. Confetti and streamers to celebrate her badges.

*I earned this. Mamá couldn't handle it. The next time he comes for money, he comes to me. I'll hide Mamá's money so we can pay the rent and don't have to do laundry without soap at the end of the month. I earned the right. And soon he'll stop coming at all.*

Getting up, she laid the towel flat on the step to let the ice melt off. Even immersed in the monsoon's vapor trail of humidity, the towel would dry quickly. Pita took a wide berth around the snake as she spotted the rake discarded on the ground near the shed. She would have to undo the erosion on the slope of the driveway, covering the scars of exposed mud with the gravel that had been washed several feet lower.

Mamá was carrying a bucket to the trash can. She hurried a few steps to lift the lid and help Mamá heft the load to the lip of the can, raise the bottom of the bucket high enough for the glass and dirt to slide out, resulting in a plume of dust as they both held their breath and turned away their faces.

As Pita extinguished the cloud by restoring the lid, she found both her eyes and Mamá's gravitating toward the snake.

"The poor thing," Mamá said. "This didn't need to happen. What do we do with it?"

"The snake is dead, Mamá. Nature will take care of the mess. Tomorrow, there won't be a trace of it left."

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