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March 31st, 2021
Draft #4
Word count: 3,671

The Yellow Dress

Her fingers pushed deeper into the mud circling between her legs. It was hypnotic. Through her breath she steadied the flow of her wrists. *Listen to what it wants to be.* That advice was useless when the shop required a dozen lifeless flowerpots a week, but she was diligent. She would finish by Thursday, and come the weekend, she could make anything she pleased.

Friday afternoon was always busy. Customers would flock to the artisan's village situated just two blocks away from the town square. Young couples still in their checkered grey school uniforms would browse and silently dream of a place of their own to decor. Housewives seeking to break the domestic monotony with a coloured half-moon, half- sun to liven up their gardens. If lucky, a pale, white-haired man would come in asking how many “pesos” for this or that. Marimar knew that she was supposed to ask for at least triple the usual price, but when no one else was around, she would ignore the instruction — which was already a substantial profit, in her humble opinion.

White noise was abundant. As if on cue, thunder struck at precisely five o' clock. Marimar believed there had to be an actual curse somewhere for this to happen every Friday at the exact same time. She had many theories on the patterns she had found in the world around her, but had learned to keep them to her self early on. *No one cares*, her older brother liked to remark (to almost anything she had to say), but at least he said something at all — her parents, Alma and Eugenio, rarely spared to even hold her gaze. *Everyone has their own problems.* She contented herself with keeping a personal account of such trivial things as curses.

She was not sure what the clay in her hands wanted to be shaped as. She was not listening today. Her mind wandered to the night ahead, and with it, a flood of anxious thoughts. This party would start off the dreaded year with at least two quince años every weekend. She was the last in her class to turn fifteen, so she had put off the questions about her own celebration as best she could. She knew what others thought of her: the quiet, weird girl. What kind of party was someone like her supposed to have? The very question made her shudder.

One hour left. The village closed its gates at six on the clock. The small complex was a farce; the government had taken a neighbouring park and turned the lot into an unnatural collection of mushroom-shaped shops (all hosting mostly similar crafted products) that resembled the habitat of woodland fairies or certain Belgian folkloric blue people. At least cars could not run you over here like they did on the artisans streets in town. The black smoke they puffed was hardly part of the quaint magical town experience.

She shut off the the wheel, and the clay melted down in a sad puddle. She wiped her hands on the rag and got to her feet. Through the doorframe she could see two young people locking lips. They were older, probably seniors. Marimar made a frame with both of her hands, pressed in, and squinted through her makeshift viewfinder. The man's hands on either side of her face; the woman's fingers pressing into his back, not unlike what Marimar was just doing to the clay...

She pulled down the steel curtain the moment the hands on her battered watch were in direct opposition. She loved this moment of the day, not because work was done, but because each hand reminded her of the sun and the moon, tragically destined to watch each other from afar, until such time when they touch, as if they lived for it. Sometimes, she felt like the sun, full of warmth and power. Othertimes, she would relate to the moon, in its cold solitude, satellite to the world.

The mud splashed on her once-navy shoes as she rushed home, eager to take a warm shower — less so to prepare for the night out. If it was up to her, she would not go to a single one of those parties, not even her friend Imelda's (*why did she want a party anyway? What happened to making fun of all*

the girls who lived for their quinces?). Her parents would not have it. Her parents would not have it. After all, they would never admit that they were eager to auction her off to society.

To her surprise, she found her home deserted. A grin broke on her face. There was little more she enjoyed over a long shower. Most days, she would not be half done washing her hair when there would be a loud knock on the door (*Hurry!*). One bathroom in a house of six felt like poor planning, at the least. She took her sweet time lathering up the shampoo in her hair, taking special care to rub her scalp in the same way she played with the clay. She was spinning, her neck waving in circles to the rhythm of her hands. She opened her eyes to look into the fogged mirror hanging over the soap. She wiped it and gazed into her eyes. All who met her would compliment them (*so green!*) but no one had ever noticed the seven dark spots in the iris; three in the left eye, four on the right. She loved them — it was the only part of herself she could look into and not feel disgust.

The door swung open, and her father walked in. Without a sideways glance, he stood over the lidless toilet, faced away from Marimar, unbuckled his pants, and proceeded to relieve himself without hesitation. Marimar turned her back to him, wishing there was a curtain to hide behind. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, trying to let the water cascading on her face drown out the obvious stream from across the room. She heard the zipper rise, a curt, “Hurry up,” and the door click shut. Marimar opened her eyes, her emerald eyes, but their reflection in the mirror was gone, lost to the fog from the steam or her cloudy eyes.

Only her mother, Alma, shared those emerald eyes, which was a frequent source for gossip amongst the extended family. No one had cracked the mystery of this genetic anomaly, not even running up the family tree. Alma was the first in both sides of the family to have green eyes, which always cast doubt in her parent’s marriage. Even so, Alma had always felt a great pride in them, as they distinguished her from the rest of her blood relatives and their dark, common retina.

By the time she was fourteen, Alma had called “home” at a least a dozen places. From hopping between friends’ couches to sharing a twin bed with her siblings and their spouses and children.

She soon began spending more time at work than in school, until she eventually dropped out altogether. She would observe the group of elite, private school kids hanging out after school from her job at the mall. Amongst them was a young boy from a foreign exchange school. It was not the silver blonde hair, the pale ceramic face, or the towering height, but the eyes—his emerald eyes — that compelled her.

He took notice, and perhaps bored with seeing the same people everyday at school, struck up conversation with Alma. He was forward, and she liked that. They went out a few times (always dinner and a movie in the same mall) and it was not love — even then she knew it — but it was thrilling. She made friends with people who had their own bedrooms, warm food on their tables, and never made a bed in their lives. When he asked her to the upcoming fiesta de quince años (the one of the governor’s daughter), she said yes before he had finished the question.

Alma had not forgotten those, her first, true quinces, as she called them. It had been a sweet taste of opulence. The white around her: the strobes on the dance floor, the impeccable lace mantelpieces, the blazing teeth and clean-shaven faces on the boys spinning the girls dizzy to music in another language. From the moment she stepped foot in the grand hall, she had felt a twinge in her gut — a hunger.

On her bed, a long, yellow (not golden, not pastel — highlighter lemon yellow) dress with white laced cuffs sprawled before her. Marimar ran her fingers on the lace, and they glided over the shimmering fabric. Her mother entered the room, hairbrush in hand. Marimar straightened her back. She sat on the bedside and her mother joined her. She felt her hair pulled back and the plastic bristles piercing into her scalp, undoing the gentle massage she had just given herself. Each knot yanked her entire neck back, but she knew better than to show a single sign of pain or weakness.

“Put it on. You’ll be late.” Her mother stood in the doorway, arms crossed. “Andale, now.”

Marimar unclipped the towel and laid it on the covers. She reached for the drawers where she stored her intimates and slipped into the only piece of clothing that she was free to choose without prying eyes. The fabric on the dress felt rough against her skin, each thread like knives scraping her arms as she reached into the sleeves. She bit her tongue behind her pursed lips, but she knew that her mother was seeing right through her.

“I was going to wear the purple one.”

“Don’t provoke me, María del Mar.”

Not eager for another mark on her back, Marimar. Accepting her silence as compliance, she walked out of the room, leaving Marimar to move around in the dress. One look into the mirror was all she needed to know. She picked out the largest clutch she could find in the closet where all the family accessories were compiled. She crammed in two of her sister’s silver, sparkling high heels. The colour was unimportant, for nothing pairs with bright yellow.

She rushed out the door and sat in the back seat of her father’s cab. She did not think her mother saw the purse, but uncertain how many eyes she had around the house, she hid it under the mat beneath her feet, currently sporting flat, black buckled shoes. Her father took his place in the driver’s seat, and without looking back at her in the rearview mirror, started the car and pulled away.

The drive was quiet, save for the crumble from the engine and the muffled band music on the radio. Most cabbies in town would gladly talk your ear off, but Eugenio had not been in a good mood for the past three years, not since he got laid off from the factory. Nothing had made him happy; not tending to the shop, not staying home looking for a job, and it did not help when his unemployed cohort inhabited the local cantina — not a place you take residence in when you have not had a drink in nine years (*it works if you work it!*).

All those years saving away every bit he used to spend on beer piled enough for Eugenio to haggle on a rundown sedan and finally felt the rush of the morning road rage on his commute. Not

a week later, the factory laid off three-hundred people. He tried to return the car, but the seller was suspiciously unreachable. Unwilling to sell off a stolen car, he kept it and decided it was a pity prize. During a drive — one of those increasingly frequent strolls to get out of the house and avoid the disappointed in the eyes of his wife, Alma — he figured he might as well make some money while he was at it. Cabbage gave him the chance to drive around all day numb to the smog piercing the broken A/C and the hazy brake lights on the dashboard, with nothing but a bottomless case of cigarettes where no one but himself could witness his self-perceived shame.

‘Who’s party is it?’

Marimar jumped. “Sandra. Salazar?”

He squinted. “Paco Leon’s daughter?” She nodded. “That explains this.” A hint of jealousy in his voice.

They pulled up to a three-story hotel which in the city might qualify as adequate, yet for this up-and-coming town it was the pinnacle of luxury. The battered cab stood out against the black SUVs lining up to a valet at the entrance to the lobby.

Marimar pulled the silver heels from her hideout and stowed them back into the clutch while she saw her father was distracted eyeing the groomed man handing the keys to the valet.

“They’re taking forever, just go. I don’t want to waste gas.”

“Gracias, pa.”

“Behave. And say thank you to Octavio for me.”

Marimar nodded and stepped down onto the wet stone with a twinge of guilt for she would not be seeing her best friend’s father tonight. She would do her usual plan: make an appearance, pretend to feel ill, and ride a cab home. She made her way towards the main entrance, the path with torches on either side of the red carpet leading guests to the event hall, and as soon as her father’s cab broke away and drove off, she scurried to the courtyard off to the side of the building.

Although the stone fountain was lit up from below the pool, the rusted emerald bench beside it was dark enough for comfort. She threw her purse on it and lifted a shoe to unbuckle.

“Want one?”

On the opposite side of the fountain, sitting on a matching bench, she saw a silhouette clouded by smoke. It lit up a bright orange and paused just long enough for her to make out a young man, a few years older than her with curly, dark hair, and freckled cheeks on his golden skin. His eyes, though — darker and deeper than the night’s sky.

He gestured with his outstretched hand offering Marimar a cigarette. She shook her head. He shrugged and stowed the pack back into his shirt pocket. In the ruffle, a gleam bounced off the lens dangling from his neck.

“Those are nicer.”

Marimar continued changing the other shoe. She stood upright, steadied herself, and walked back towards the lobby, each other step hampered by the cracks between the damp cobbles trapping her heels.

“Have fun.” He puffed a cloud of smoke and dissolve back into the darkness.

The bass waves shook her bones as she crossed into the grand hall. If the architecture outside had left room for improvement, it was because the owners had spent their entire construction budget on the massive chandelier overlooking the dance floor. The coloured lights from the DJ’s booth pierced the crystals and streaked across the room through the blue haze. Marimar paced the hall, eyes scouring the crowd of people not dressed in bright yellow, for a sign of a familiar face. Round table after another, white cloth draped over the laps of those close enough to the family to be invited to the dinner part of the event, all competing for the loudest laugh, they encircled the stage where people of all ages danced to the same playlist of classics plaguing these events. What people would do with the memory bank dedicated to those lyrics is a mystery. Imelda was nowhere to be seen, and in a

flurry of panic having spent the last ninety seconds without conversing with someone, she dashed to the washrooms outside the hall.

She closed the stall and, relieved to find the hotel's budget had allowed for seats over the toilets, she sat over it, not particularly worried about keeping the horrid dress pristine. She pulled out her phone. *Where space are space yo-*

The door burst open and Marimar screamed.

Imelda threw her head back and laughed hysterically. "Relax, stupid. It's me, who else?"

Marimar grinned. "I was just texting you, I couldn't find you."

"Next time I'll wear fuck-up-your-pupils yellow, can't miss it."

"Shut up, my mom made me."

"You shoulda let her beat you instead."

"I honestly considered it."

"C'mon, let's go see if there's anything left at the dessert table."

They teleported to the needlessly extra dessert table on the other side of the hall, with flowers emerging from flowers for 'reasons', and sure enough, it had been ransacked by a group of a twelve year old boys stuffing their pockets with every single Miguelito, Carlos V, Bubulubu, and every classic Mexican candy imaginable. Only De la Rosa marzipans remained forgotten, likely due to how messy they are to eat, and Marimar, hoping some would catch on the dress, helped herself to one — then doubled back for another.

The view from there to the dance floor allowed for a safe distance to mock the guests. Marimar munched merrily on her sweet, Imelda being the witty one, the gloss on her lips trapping the crumbles of peanuts and sugar.

FLASH.

When the white becomes coloured and she next focuses her eyes, the dark creature from the fountain appears before her, this time under clear light. He is long and thin, dark circles around his eyes, covered by the curls parting on either side of his face. Without looking down at the camera, his eyes fixed on Marimar, he grins, and without a word, he floats along and is soon lost to the sea of dancers.

“Who the hell is that?” Imelda’s eyes lit up with curiosity.

“I dunno, I saw him smoking outside the party.”

“What a creep. I like him.”

Marimar assents out of reflex, but is already lost to her thoughts. *First he doesn’t shut up, then he says nothing at all?*

When she comes to her senses, she notices Imelda is gone. Immediate panic, she cranes her neck and scans the room. In the waves of dancers she catches a glimpse of bouncing golden curls. Imelda waves at Marimar to join her, an ear to ear smile on her face. The monster inside Marimar creeps in and whispers. *She is changing, adapting, growing up. Why can’t you? You will never fit in. She does not need you, and she will soon forget you.*

Marimar grins and signals that she will be there in a moment. She darts out of the hall, tears in her eyes. She knows this is an overreaction, and the embarrassment only makes it worse. She follows the red carpet to the hotel’s entrance, where a couple of families await their vans from the valet. Two girls, around ten and twelve each judging from their flat shoes, stare at her, but say nothing. Marimar retreats to the dark bench. She takes off her heels and slams them onto the stone fountain. It does little to help, and she buries her face in her hands.

“This helps.”

A single cigarette faces Marimar. She raises her eyes to glimpse the dark creature, and is no longer surprised. She accepts it and places it between her lips. He flicks his thumbs and the sparks flame burning the paper and leaves to a crisp. Marimar coughs a cloud of smoke and the light dies

out. The silhouette trades her cigarette with his. The smoke dries her mouth and burns down her throat, filling her chest. She exhales a coarse, dry, smokeless blow.

He sits beside her with the dark as their cover — a light and a shadow.

“All things end, y’know? Good and bad.”

She inhales into the dampened filter (*cough, cough*).

“I’m done with this. It’s so stupid, what’s the point?”

He takes the cigarette back between his lips.

“Does it get better when you’re older? When you’re on your own and nobody can say anything about who you are, what you wear?”

He tilts his head sideways, and shrugs.

“Sure.”

He stands to leave. When he is almost lost to the shadows, Marimar stands up.

“Where are you going?”

He stops. “Home.”

“Is San Fabian on your way?”

A puff of smoke.

“Sure.”

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She lays frozen; her dark skin pale, blank eyes wide open, wearing more makeup than she ever approved of. She cannot twist and turn, but she wanders, and somewhere, she wonders. Those who visit, head bowed, puffy-eyed to hide the cold, dry looks that followed Marimar always.

“Stupid girl, why did you let this happen?”

“You were asking for it.”

“Did you see what she was wearing?”

“I heard she’d been drinking.”

“What was she doing alone with a man?”

Her phone would never be found; he had burned it. No one would ever know the truth because no one would care enough to uncover it. Someone would create a clever hashtag — if lucky it would be a trending topic — then oblivion. Crowds flocked to the chapel on the first and second night after the funeral, less and less so each night thereafter. On the ninth night of the Novenario, people gave Alma and Eugenio one last sympathetic hug before heading out for tacos and tequila. Each anniversary, the family would pay a ‘symbolic’ fee to the pastor to mention Marimar’s name during the Offering, praying for her soul alongside those who died of old age, cancer, and car accidents. Her face would remain framed on the mantel, only moving to the altar during Día de Muertos. Her name seldom used save for the occasional acquaintance spewing her tale as a sob story for pity sex or by the townsfolk’s mothers as a cautionary tale when dressing up their daughters in a ridiculous dress and shoes for quince años parties — because no man would be tempted to touch a fourteen year old girl wearing a horrible puffy yellow dress and black flat shoes.