

Symposium Pieces

Oraciones de Mama

Mr. Segovia, Karina is crying again.

I tugged at the flower shaped buttons on my white uniform shirt. The tears weighed heavy in my eyes; I couldn't help it. I sniffled as they fell down my neck, more rapidly than the ones I cried when I fell off my scooter and bled from my elbow. The kids looked at me.

It was seven-thirty in the morning. Mami had just dropped me off at Lincoln Elementary, and now she was walking home, alone. By this time she'd be passing the yellow duplexes on Gundry street holding tightly to the umbrella she used to shade her on bright sunny mornings. She'd probably stop to chat with the *señora de los tamales*. A man stopping at the Spanish words, glaring at her. Following her through 11th street.

Suddenly there was a shortage of air and I couldn't catch any of it. My stomach started to turn like it does when I eat too much *chile*. I felt a dizziness in my head and thought it might explode if I didn't stop thinking about it. My *mami*, in her blue V-neck and beige linen pants that reveal her vulnerable white ankles. Alone. The man coming up from hiding and aiming a gun at her.

I looked around. Everything was blurry. Footsteps were approaching. *Mr. Segovia, Karina is crying again.*

In the nurse's office, right next to the secretaries' cubicles, I could hear them speaking to each other in Spanish. *¿Otra vez la van a recoger?* They're going to pick her up again? It's the third time this week. *Válgame, Dios, esa niña nomas no le gusta venir a la escuela.*

But I wasn't faking anything. I did want to go to school. I just couldn't bear the thought of my nearly 50-year-old mother walking through the streets of Long Beach.

Another voice said casually, *se me hace que a ella le mataron su papa o tío o no se quien...*

I wanted to correct them. No, it wasn't my dad or uncle. It was my brother. Someone killed my brother.

Las oraciones – prayers – son importantes. Así le das gracias a Dios por todo lo que tienes, Kari. I did not understand Mami. Not because she was speaking to me in Spanish - I understood more than the adults assumed – but because I wasn't thankful to God. How could I thank God for everything? Even the bad things? I had to thank God for those things, too?

Todo. Everything.

With my head tucked between her arm and chest, she explained God's greatness and power. Through heavy soft breathes, *Mija, yo estoy tan agradecida con Dios...me dio las fuerzas después de que se murió Addiel.* I'm so grateful for the strength God has given me after mijo died. Thankful for all of his creations – the trees, the ocean, *los pajaritos que te gustan, esa sonrisa.* She smiled down at me. The fat under her chin make it look like she had two. The little birds you love. God gave them to you.

I couldn't find the words to tell her I had outgrown the birds I loved. Not in Spanish, not even in English.

The nurse offered me reasonable explanations for my headaches. She looked at me from the brown leathered backless rolling chair. I stared at the cars passing by in front of the school through the only window in her office. *Sometimes, when I didn't want to go to school, I'd tell my mommy that my tummy hurt just so I could stay home.* I resented that she spoke to me like a child. I didn't feel much like a kid those days, and I often noticed when adults used kid-language to try to comfort you about something that's not going to get better. But I nodded anyway.

The nurse shuffled papers and noted some things down on her yellow legal pad, it looked like a list of items she needed.

I here to peek up Karina Mejia. It was Mami, speaking softly in her best English.

One of the clerks responded to her in Spanish, their voices were hard to hear as the nurse rolled to the sink in the squeaky chair. Soon, someone notified her of my mom's arrival, and she led me to her. She opened the wooden partition that separated the staff from the parents. I stood behind Mom, defeated.

There were no words to illustrate my fears, not without giving too much away. I wasn't afraid of the dark or monsters. I was afraid of men with guns. How do you explain to someone that your brother was killed by a stranger who hated him because he was Mexican? How do you reveal that much fear and hurt to someone you don't know, if you can't even say so to your family who went through it with you? You can't.

The year before, on a road-trip to Northern California, a little girl from a beautiful house gave me a *pajarito azul*. We traveled home with him in his sky-blue cage. I held my small brown finger inside the cage as I told him about his new home in Long Beach. *We have four dogs,*

they're big, but they don't eat birds. One time one of them saved my brother Louis from a guy that was trying to hurt him. He's a good dog, his name is Scatter. He bit my tia's hand once, but it's okay you'll be far away from him. You can stay in my room.

He rested in his cage atop our porch's concrete fence just outside my window. In the mornings I could hear his chirping. He'd peek out at me as I passed on my way out to school.

One day, when Eva and I were on our way to Target, his stillness frightened me. I ran up to his cage, hoping he was just asleep. But he was lying on his back, dead. The ants surrounded his lifeless little body. I hadn't even given him a name.

I wanted to cry but it felt stupid to me at the time. I liked Nameless Bird, but I didn't love him. It didn't matter how much love I gave something or someone, they were bound to die regardless of the amount. Eva offered to buy me a new one, I shook my head, *it's okay, I don't want a another one*. Mortified at the ants climbing the belly of the bird, I asked her to throw it away.

How could I explain all of this to Mami? That the dead nameless bird forever gave me an aversion for *pajaritos*? *Pajarito muerto*, I could say. But instead, tired of trying to explain myself to adults, I gave up.

So, when you are afraid, ask God, and he will give you the strength. *Ya se que te tienes miedo, pero si le pides a Dios, el te da toda la fortaleza.*

I sat up and turned to face Mami as she rested her back on the bed frame. The sun through the beige curtains made everything look yellow. *Nomas da le gracias*. She caressed my

cheeks with her rough hands. The digital clock on the nightstand showed the time in red letters. It was 11:34 a.m., I'd be at lunch now if I hadn't been sent home for hyperventilating in the courtyard.

After she picked me up that day, we stopped with the *senora de los tamales*. She was packing up her grocery cart already until Mami asked her if she had any left. *Tengo verdes de pollo, y rojos de puerco, solamente esos.*

Mom looked down at me and asked me which I wanted; I told her green and a *champurrado*.

Deme tres verdes y un champurrado. We walked on, I offered to carry the sweaty plastic produce bag full of warm tamales. At home, we ate them alone, the house made quiet by my siblings being at school and dad at work. I twirled the corn husk knot that wrapped the tamales at the ends, turned it into a bow and placed it on my finger. *Mire mami, soy un regalo.* I tried making her smile.

But she stared at the empty black velvet sofa that once comforted Addie. Hiding the sudden sadness, she pressed her lips together and tucked them into her mouth. She did this when she tried to hold back tears. *Claro que si hija, usted es un regalo mío.* I wrapped my arms around her neck, staring closely at her eyes swimming in tears. Holding me tightly, she picked me up and took me to the room she shared with dad. We sat in the freshly made bed. It smelt like lavender and dad's sombrero, comfortable. She reminded me how powerful prayers were in moments of anxiety. *Ansiedad* – a new word I learned that day, both in English and Spanish.

I twisted the pink beads on my bracelet, wondering if God listened more to my prayers if they were in Spanish. I wanted to tell Mami that I wasn't afraid anymore, that being in her warm arms made everything feel safe. I wanted her to know that I didn't know why the headaches and stomachaches went away once we got home. But I couldn't find the words in Spanish to tell her that.

She brushed my hair with her fingers and told me the story of David and Goliath, how unbelievable it was to everyone that David defeated someone so mighty and big. *Ya vez, David pudo derrotar a Goliat.* She squeezed my thin brown arm. God is bigger than Goliath, bigger than your fears, Kari. *Tu también no debes de tener miedo.*

There are things I couldn't tell her because to question the Bible, was to question God, and to question God was to not be a Christian.

Goliath didn't have a gun. If he'd had one, he would have defeated David. Murderers seemed stronger than anything God did. They had the power to take away a life in a matter of seconds, for no reason.

That I couldn't tell her.

The God in Long Beach is Different

Jesus revived a mother's son because he loved her. He felt compassion for the woman as she wept over her dead son's body.

"Young man, I say to you, get up!" – he lived again. It was that simple.

The night Addie was shot, Mami prayed restlessly for a revival that would never come. But she wept for 90 days at the realization that her son was never coming back. Crying out to God, *Diosito, quita me este dolor*. God - Jesus didn't feel enough compassion for my mother. He didn't answer our prayers. Those beautiful things were not for inhabitants of Long Beach. That was the first time I lost some of my faith, I was 7 years old.

Pastora told us that we had power over the dead, over the sick, the hopeless. It meant very little to me as I sat uncomfortably in that hot stuffy room. The only thing I prayed was that just this once, *Pastora María* would turn on the AC. Sweat covered my back against the plastic covered chairs. The hot air made my white church flats moist and gross. Every Sunday felt like a chore I wanted to skip, but mom always thought it was the rebelliousness in me. She asked God to give me obedience.

I resolved to sit still in that warm church room to give her one less thing to worry about. Trying not to compare our congregation to the "white people church" in Orange County Lupe took us to sometimes. There, they fed us goldfish crackers in paper cups while we watched VeggieTales at the kids' service.

"I don't want to go to Mami's church anymore, it's boring and I hate it when they start praying. They always take so long." I sat in the back seat of the Honda minivan as Lupe drove us home from Cottonwood church, hoping she'd try to convince mom to join this church instead.

“Kari,” she used my nickname whenever she tried to reason with me. Her dark brown eyes followed the road ahead of her. She explained to me that mom wasn’t comfortable at this church because the services were in English.

“How come all of the fun churches are in English?” I breathed warm air onto the window next to me. With my index finger, I drew smiley faces waiting for my sister to respond.

She sighed, “One day, we’ll make a church of our own. It’ll be in Spanish and still have all the nice things like this one does.”

“It’ll have a T.V. for us!” I chimed in.

“Yes, Kari.” She glanced at me through the rearview mirror. Her black hair swept up at the sides held together by a brown plastic clip, made her face look lighter. She pressed her red-colored lips tightly together. The fear in her eyes was familiar. My head felt heavy suddenly.

I recognized those short responses, worried eyes, and the soothing sweet voice from the night she told us Addie had died. Feeling jittery, I became silent. I thought about church instead. *Why couldn’t the Spanish service in Long Beach have fresh air and clean chairs like the English service?*

My sister’s boyfriend died that night. A little more than a year after my brother. We prayed for his revival, but Jesus didn’t listen to us that time either.

This was the second time I lost some of my faith. I was 8-years-old.

There was a division, I started to see that these were two different realities. I believed that God gave the white people better things. They had bigger churches with nicer chairs and separate rooms for children to learn about God’s power, his compassion.

At the “American church” as Lupe referred to it, Pastor Mark taught us about grace. As *God’s disciples we need to give grace to those who need it the most, even if we may think they don’t deserve it.*

Pastora urged us to have faith. In our tiny church on MLK street she’d yell out *Hermanos y hermanas* - brothers and sisters pray healing over the dying! Pray it over the dead! God is a God of miracles!

How could we pray for anything else when people were getting murdered because of the color of their skin? We saw people die around us all the time.

I saw the difference. The white people cared about giving and having compassion, while we prayed for survival.

“Ellie, does dad love us?” I watched as she placed the pancake mix into the waffle maker. Her chubby tan finger covered in the yellowish liquid, pressed the on button, staining it.

“Why would you ask that?” She wiped her hands on a napkin.

“It’s ‘cause dad doesn’t ever hug us or say ‘I love you’ and I always see my friends’ dad do that.” I kept an eye on the waffle-maker to make sure our late-night dessert didn’t burn as my sister thought about my heavy question.

Ellie’s 4 years older than me. She knew much more about our family matters. She had answers to almost everything – like why Mami cried so much when Valentin Elizalde was murdered. *He reminded her of Addie*, she whispered to me. Or why Mami always prayed for us before we left for school – *she’s afraid something will happen to us if she doesn’t pray, Karina.*

I knew Ellie would understand why dad didn't do the stuff my friends' dads did. She'd know why dad didn't take us shopping for new uniforms before the school year began or why he didn't know what my favorite color was. Normal dad things.

Jamie talked about her dad with admiration whenever Ms. Groff asked us to share something about our weekend. She'd perk up when it was her turn, tug at her dark blonde pigtails, "I went with my mommy and daddy to the zoo in Los Angeles. I got to hold a bird in my hands!"

I pretended not to care when both her mom and dad came to pick her up from school or that they often volunteered to chaperone field trips. Besides mom and dad didn't speak English well enough to help with one of our trips. But still, it stung a little.

"I don't know Kari. Some dads are different. Those are white people dads. Us Mexicans don't do that, it's silly to do those things." She smiled assuredly. As if her equating unaffectionate dads to whiteness would ease my resentment towards my affectionless father. It didn't.

I understood that white people were different than us. They had better churches and sweeter parents. I grappled with the idea that there was a weakness in showing your children love, but it never seemed right.

Ellie knew it wasn't right, but she didn't want me to know. She knew there were many factors to the brokenness in minority families. Dad grew up in the 1950's, in Mexico, work was the only thing his family cared about. He didn't understand how to be affectionate because his parents were never like that with him. He came to the United States in hopes that his children wouldn't have to work at such a young age, but rather go to school. In the midst of that search

for success, he forgot that love was the vital thing missing from his childhood. But I didn't know that then, I just knew that we always ended up with less.

“No te preocupes mija,” Mami whispered to me as I cried in her arms.

I wondered if God hardened dad's heart like he did to Pharaoh. Lupe taught me that story. She said God did that on purpose because he wanted Moses to have faith. Moses must've felt the same way I did, frustrated at tests like these. It wasn't fair that we always went through tests awaiting better days.

Mami told me she loved me so much it compensated for whatever love was missing from dad's end. That wasn't enough.

The realization that there were better lives out there for people that didn't look like me was the third time I lost some of my faith.

The God they believed in was not the same God I believed in. He wasn't the same God that people of color cried out for. Their God was always on their side.

It became clear. They never had to pray for any of this. The people in Long Beach pray for things that won't come because the God in Long Beach is different.