

Madre,
Ella todavía está aquí

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In dedication
to the lost children of Spain and to those who never stopped
looking.

I.

Youth was a fickle mistress. One moment, she was a kind soul, who only gave and gave years to come. But through the veil of kindness was an unspoken truth- she gave and gave lies disguised as your mother's *tartas*. Youth was there, present and watching through a piercing gaze. She stood and stood patiently until it was time to take the child she had raised. Then Youth fled up North, leaving you broken and lost.

There was an image Youth had painted in my head at the early age of six. I dreamt of a family- a loving husband fond of books and mysteries, two troublesome daughters named Emma and Amelia, and a shy son named Louis. Maybe a cat or a dog would come into the mix, I hadn't planned out a pet yet. Life was perfect in the visions I had, from the shining sun to the cozy, little home we would build. I thought of baking cakes, pies, and *tartas* to please the kids and even my sweet tooth, of growing up and going to school and learning science, of giving my mother roses each day.

First, six-year-old me had a dream. I cherished this dream and wrote a letter to *Los Tres Reyes*, praying that it would come true. The dream was of a sibling, someone I could play with and laugh and dance in the rays of the sun. War had not stained my young mind, and I purposely avoided looking at the shadows of fear on my mother's strained face. When my mother, oh, my mother, pressed a small hand on her belly, a wave of surprise and awe flooded my body. I felt a kick, followed by another, and then I cried in life's simplest joy, "Madre! Madre! Algo está aquí!"

"Es un bebé." My mother responded, reassuring that what *algo* was only an unborn child. My dream had come true at last and all I tasted was happiness.

The months after my mama announced her pregnancy, I occupied myself by knitting. My mother taught me while my father came from work. Onesies, dresses, suits the little things my mother from yarn ornamented our small living room. I learned early on to make shoes and bows and hats. We didn't know the gender, such magical marvels of technology had not been invented yet, so we made clothes of all types to guess.

Youth raised me and watched as I took an eternity making clothes for my sibling, as I rambled to my mother and my father about how fun taking care of them would be, as I told stories to the unborn baby while my mother sat by the fireplace. Youth watched and silently gave me the next months, the remaining months of my mother's pregnancy. Then Youth took what it had raised and shattered it, leaving me in the haze at only six.

II.

Time flew in the blink of an eye. Quite frankly, I was amazed. Seeing my mother's belly grow and the way she caressed it, lovingly singing to it every night had moved me. My mother was beautiful. She had long, raven curls that bounced with each step and freckled that reminded

my father of the night sky. She was small and frail, and pregnancy had taken a toll on her, the dark circles under her hazel eyes proving such. Yet she was radiant, she was glowing.

Life at six is a blur for me, no matter how hard I try to remember. The memories come to my fingertips as fragments, little-scattered stories that danced around the truth. I remember the childbirth, the bloody night where my mother cried and cried as nurses rushed to her aid. I remember the night we heard a cry, because we all heard a cry that night before the baby's chest rose and heaved and fell. Silence followed and as the doctor picked the little human up, he only looked at my mother and handed her with such delicateness.

"She's a girl!"

Mother had tears in her hazel eyes and she cried out of joy. Father looked at the baby with love and affection. I stared at the chewed-up raising and laughed. She was my sister!

The moment her hazel eyes opened, something stirred in me.

My mother rocked the baby in her arms, cradling her gently and shushing her cries. Father lightly touched the crown of her hair, black curls just like my mother. The baby calmed down for a few seconds.

"Look," My mother whispered to me in our native tongue. "Meet your little sister."

We held the baby for a bit before it was time to hand her back. One of the nurses took her to clean her properly and to check that everything was accurate. Meanwhile, mother and father chattered about names. The topic had never been spoken of since we didn't know the baby's gender. Dad had said *Julián* at some point, mother had said *Lina* at another.

Then the doctor arrived with a stern face, one written with disappointment and shame.

"She's gone."

I remember the wail my mother let out that very night before passing out. I remember the screams and the way my dad held her tight. I remember the confusion, the questioning of what had happened to my sister. I remember my father shouting, asking for answers as to how we all had her in our arms and suddenly she was gone. I remember asking, wondering how I watched my sister's chest rise before falling and how it had fallen permanently.

The doctor never gave us the body, ignoring the pleas of my mother to see her dead child. He left our little family in shards and we were left picking at the pieces. Most importantly, youth took my innocence that night and seemingly my sister then fled.

III.

My father awoke on a Sunday. He was up and running, putting on his good brown leather coat he reserved only for special occasions. He dressed in his best shoes and shook me in bed, beckoning me to wake up.

My father, if memory did not disappoint, never woke so early on a Sunday. It was his only free day from working so hard and mother had made it a rule to not disturb him. As my initial surprise toned down, I dressed in a navy-blue dress and let him braid my black hair. We left my sleeping mother, but father had stressed that giving birth had taken a lot of her energy.

I wasn't stupid. Naive, perhaps. I had seen mother crying the night before, clutching to my dad. She was suffering and mourning the loss of her baby, the baby she wasn't even allowed to retrieve the body of.

The city of Madrid was breathtaking, to say the least. I had grown up there all my life, yet I had never really roamed as much as I wish I had. We live in the poorer sections, where the homes were ugly and broken from the outside. The inside was a goldmine if you got past any physical aspects of the property. Mother claimed we had no business running around places that weren't school, home, or the market.

In retrospect, mother figured we were too poor to even have a fun night out in the cinemas other kids went to or the fairs with huge piles of *dulces*.

Father and I went straight to the hospital where Ma was attended. For a man who was childish and funny, he surprised me once more when he began speaking in a stern tone to a lady behind a desk.

"I want the body back."

"We buried it, I'm sorry."

My father left unconvinced. He took my hand and we went back home, where mother was up and making breakfast against my fathers complains.

IV.

Rumors flew in our neighborhood, tales of the murders of nuns and priests and so many innocent souls. There was a war in my beautiful Spain and we were immune to it, blind to it. Mother hid me in blankets from the horrors of the world while our neighbor, Martha, rapidly spat out elaborate pieces of the war.

"There are rumors." She said with such highness as if she was spreading the word from God himself. "Rumors of children being stolen at birth and sold to rich families."

My mother, my poor, beautiful mother, dropped the plate she had been drying and it broke. The old plate, used so many times, fell into tiny pieces and became lost beyond repair- just like my mother's heart.

V.

"What was her name?"

"Ella."

VI.

We planted fake tulips made of rubber in the garden. We knew they weren't real, that they wouldn't grow or stretch to see the sun. We knew they wouldn't halt in their growth and wilt. We knew they wouldn't die.

We planted fake tulips made of rubber in the garden each year. We did it to honor Ella because there was nobody to bury. We buried flowers that would never die instead.

We planted fake tulips made of rubber in the garden each year. When we had planted six, I was twelve.

VII.

The war was over. But even in its death, even in its burial, there was a sense of rage and fear in the air. The other countries were at war while we were left to put the pieces of our Spain together.

The Civil War was over, but its terrors were still much alive in our mind. There were so many tales of things happening underneath us, so many stories of how blind we had become. Death and Youth were still here, ready to take anyone at any time.

At the age of twelve, I had learned to cook. I could sew and knit, I could bake, I could clean, and I could garden. I went to school and greeted my dad with a hug at six. I helped my mother prepare dinner and I did my work.

My innocence was gone. I was thrown into the real world. I was twelve and terrified of growing up. I had seen my sister's face and melted into her eyes only for her to be taken by Selfish Death. I had seen my mother spiral into depression and wrinkles of worry become carved into her face. I had seen my father's spirit die with my sister and I could see him growing tired every day.

I was terrified of losing them both- the woman and man who raised me and asked for nothing in return. I was scared that one day, they'd die and join Ella.

The thoughts chased me in my dreams and in my wake. When mother and father sat down on the couch and requested for me to join, the thoughts left.

"I feel like she's alive." Mother whispered, grabbing onto my hand. "I feel it in my heart and I've felt it for so long."

My father looked at me with concern. Shaking his head, he massaged his temples and began, "There is...gossip about children being stolen at birth. Doctors say they are dead when really, they are sold to rich families who wish to adopt."

If you lived in Madrid and attended school, you'd know the adoptions were more than an urban legend. We all knew about the stolen children and how authorities never helped families find them. The possibility that Ella wasn't dead was something I had thought of so many times, but never had the courage to bring up.

"I want to find Ella." My mother said softly. "Ella todavía está aquí."

VIII.

The sadness ran through Spain, just enough to mobilize us. The sadness ran through us, just enough to spark something in us. We moved, Madrid moved. We moved in rallies,

protesting peacefully and asking for justice. We begged for our children, the children stolen by the very people who swore to help us in our times of need.

“Give us our children!” We cried in the streets, holding banners and signs. “Give us our children!”

We were rejected. The police only laughed in our faces and screamed, “Leave! Or we shall imprison you all!”

Defeated, we left.

The sadness stayed with us for our whole lives. Yet the spark came back, and it shone brighter within me.

The next week, Mother and Father walked by my side, banners in our hands. Screams filled our lovely city.

“Ella todavía está aquí!”

We screamed again for the next years, one day per month.

IX.

“We can find Ella. We can find Ella.” My mother prayed. “Lord gives us the strength to find Ella. *Ella todavía está aquí.*”

Pale fingers reached in to swoop more dirt, burying the little flower we had just planted. Another Tulip adorned our garden.

Seeing my mother plant another Tulip fueled the fire within me. The tulip brought rage; the anger at the defeat and the rapture of the innocent, the victory evil seemingly had since the Civil War, the sadness that runs through all of us are families were torn apart. Ella would have been seven now.

Ella was also gone, plain and simple. I would also find Ella because I knew it would bring peace to my mother.

Ella was still here, and I’d find her.

X.

One night, I woke up. I was merely thirteen. My body was aching, my heart hurting. In the moonlight, I felt odd.

I need to do something.

There was a notebook next to my nightstand. Ella’s crib stood by it, shrinking in fear when I approached. With one gesture, I grabbed the little book and began writing.

Yet I seek.

Writing poetry sets my heart free. It’s the wind soothing my skin, cooling my nerves and lifting my spirits. It’s the sun, feeling me and letting me know it will be alright. And it is the oceans, the oceans I have crossed and the ones that lie within me and Ella.

I write for Ella. I look for Ella. I march for Ella.

XI.

*Father is gone
I ask to where
She says,
“Looking for her,
in the afterlife.”*

XII.

*Youth is a fickle mistress,
who was nice at once,
adorning our heads with flower crowns
and kissing us goodnight
and gave and gave and gave*

*Youth is a fickle mistress,
who grew tired
so, she snatched our dreams
and blurred our sight
and took and took and took*

XII.

Life takes a bitter turn. Graduating at eighteen and with heaps of poetry under my belt, I had no hopes of really getting a profession. I would have to pursue the arts, for I love them, yet tuition is pricey and I know after father's death we do not have enough.

We migrate to the United States. We seek the American Dream, the comfort of finding a new place, a new home. Our Spain was torn due to years of corruption. Ella was in our hearts, she would always be. It was time to wake up now and move on.

Ella's sole memory could not soothe us. Moving on would be all we could do, all we could really think of. Years of fighting were left in the dust as we left our little shack of a home behind. We sold our belonging- the crib included- and under the sun, we ran.

The twelve tulips, however, remained untouched.

There's a state called Arizona- we heard it was nice and warm. We ache for warmth, so we flee. We arrive and we both get a job in a coffee shop (somehow!). As time moves on, we save enough for an apartment, rather than renting with a lady from Mexico.

After a shift in the coffee shop, I waited for my mother to finish. She had an hour to go and as we had no car, we would walk through Phoenix's streets together.

My poetry book was out, and I was writing. My muse had been, ironically, the coffee itself. Distracted by the words flowing through the pages, I did not realize a woman approaching me. She peeked at my book, look through the poem and with a smile on her face, cleared her throat.

“You are a true artist.”

Seeing my confused face, she retracted herself and spoke in Spanish.

I was twenty-three when I met my longtime-friend, Anne. At twenty-five, my first real book of the gut-wrenching tales of Spain was published.

XIV.

Ella’s name slips between sips of wine during a dinner. Anne was speaking rapidly of my next move, of what stories I should tell and how I had moved the American public. She also scolded me about my English.

“Translators can get it wrong! You need to practice your English!”

When I spoke of my sister, Anne noticeably perked up. She looked up from her planner and leaned closer, motioning me to continue.

I did. I spoke of it, of how I began writing, of how our parents marched to the police for her, of how small I felt. I did not speak of it all, the horrors we had heard, the crying and the weeping, not my father’s death. I did not bring up the tulips.

“You can find her. There are so many resources you have as an author! As a-”

Laughter fills the room. I shake my head, mouthing a *no*.

“I have tried. She is here in my heart. Ella todavía está aquí.” I answer. “Todavía.”

XV.

*Where are you, mother?
“I am with your father,
searching within the stars.”*

XVI.

Youth left my grasp so long ago. I watched as my life got up and left- just like that. In my lifetime, I wrote books. And even if I wished to stay behind the curtains, Anne needed money for my next book, *Ella todavía está aquí*. It wasn’t about Ella, not completely. It was about all the children missing, about the remnants Spain had left. It was something small, just to fill the empty void within me and the persistent guilt that I never found her.

There was news in Spain of lost children finding their parents. They were being reunited, after so long. My mother did not live to see that day. Her last days were in the hospital, trapped within the bleak, gray walls. She wept and wept until death took her.

I was forty and still not married. I didn't want to be married. There were no pets. There was no troublesome Emma and Amelia, no shy Louis. It was just me, all alone.

"Next."

A woman stepped up. I didn't look up, not at first. Instead, I reached for a copy of another released book- *Las Dulce Vidas*- and my hand flew over the page, ink blotting the cover.

Then I met her eyes, a mesh of blurry green and brown. Hazel eyes, to be precise. Freckles decorated her pale skin, almost glowing. She reminded me of my mother, back when she was young and still had something to live for. She smiled kindly, accepting the book.

"Ella?" It left my tongue before I could register what I was saying. There was a sharp pain in my heart and I bit back a cry.

The woman looked confused. Shaking her head, she clarified, "My name's Valerie."

"I'm sorry." Laughing sadly, I rubbed my head. "You look like someone I've been looking for, actually."

"Well, I hope you find them. Good luck, they're still out there."

Then Valerie turned and walked away. And to my mother, oh my mother who may rest in peace, I had said the same thing once.

XVII.

The next Spring, when Winter had finally decided to leave, and the heat came back in waves, I planted flowers. I planted a bundle of tulips for my sister, roses for my mother, and forget-me-nots for my father. The flowers were all real now, so they would grow and flourish and die. I'd plant them again until the flowers wilted once more.

The next day I set out early, bag in hand and an umbrella in the other.

It was time to find Ella.

