

Madre Patria

My mother was telling my father she had that dream again—the one about the dying horse. It wasn't a dream so much as a memory that came to her in sleep: She was nine years old, riding in the passenger's seat of her father's Chevrolet as he drove her and her sisters to the farm in Fusagasugá. On one of the long, dusty roads of the savanna Mami saw a gray horse walking along the ridge of grass—so thin you could count every rib, his back sunken as if he were carrying a thousand ghosts. The horse wobbled along, unsure of every step, and Mami begged her father to stop the car, said the poor horse was starving and that they needed to feed it, give it some of the fruit they had packed in a basket in the back of the car, give it some of the water they had brought in bottles all the way from the capital. But Mami's father said, Don't worry, my darling, the horse is fine, just bored and tired. Told her they had to get to la finca before dark or some guerrilleros might stop them on the road and start some trouble.

Mami cried, told her father the horse would die and it would be their fault, but her father kept driving, promising her that they'd come back this way tomorrow on their way to pick up some new chickens for the farm. He'd drive the trailer and said if the horse was still there, they'd bring him back with them and have one of the ranch hands nurse him to health. My mother didn't sleep all night, waiting for her father to have his morning tinto and his first cigarette before he was ready to get back on the road to find the horse. When they came to the same spot, the horse was still there, lying dead on the grass, its mouth wide open with flies gathered at its nostrils.

Mami told Papi the dream like it was the first time, and he listened, detail by detail. Finally, he told her that it was because we were in Colombia that she was falling into nightmares. Papi hated coming to Colombia, always said this place never did him any favors, and it was only because Mami's sister was here that we ever came back.

"This country is a giant cemetery," Papi said. In a way it was true, most everyone Mami had ever loved here was dead. Every visit to Bogotá was marked by a full day of leaving flowers at the tombstones of relatives I never met, including Mami's parents.

Mami got mad when he talked like that, said they were both born of Andean earth and we should honor it.

"Es que no entiendes, Maria. This country doesn't want us back."

On the cot next to me, my brother pretended to sleep. We were assigned to our cousin Símon's room. He and my prima Sara preferred to bunk with each other in Sara's room rather than be with either one of us. Even though we were all close in age, us kids didn't know what to say to one another most of the time. Símon and Sara were four and six, and Carmen was going through this phase of dressing her kids in lederhosen and embroidered jumpers as if they lived in the Swiss Alps or something.

I poked Cris with my finger. "Do you hear them?" I knew he was awake. He always kept his eyes closed for a long time after he was conscious in the morning just to eavesdrop on the world. I was seven and Cris was ten but he had skipped a year of school and this always made him seem much older to me.

“I’m not deaf,” he answered, eyes still shut.

My aunt’s house was cold. The climate is static in Bogotá: always cool with only a taunting sun breaking through the fog of the Andes. But they didn’t have heaters and Tía Carmen insisted that it wasn’t because she was cheap— nobody in Bogotá had them. So we slept under alpaca blankets so heavy that we couldn’t move all night, packed into the mattress as if we were being smuggled.

Mami and Papi were silent on the other side of the wall. Carmen gave them the guest room, which was furnished with things that used to be in Mami’s childhood home. Every time we visited she would say, “So that’s where that dresser ended up,” or “I remember that lamp.” It annoyed Carmen, who said it made her feel like Mami was accusing her of theft, and they always got into a big fight that resulted in both of them crying and the husbands trying to calm them down.

Carmen would tell Mami that she had changed and that the United States had turned her into another kind of woman. This made Mami cry even more and it always took her ages to fall asleep, with Papi offering her words so soft I couldn’t make them out through that flimsy wall. Cris always fell asleep the minute he hit the mattress but I stayed awake for hours listening to the sounds of the apartment, the car horns on the carretera below, the echoes of a city I didn’t know.