

## Say Hi To Me, Papi

When I want to see my father, I look for him in the park. Mami doesn't know. It's been so long since she's seen Papi that she probably forgot all about him. On school days, I walk three blocks on Sacramento Blvd to catch the Division Street bus to Roberto Clemente High School over on Western Ave. I don't see Papi then because he stays out on the other side of Humboldt Park over by North Avenue and California, near T&C Meat. They can roast a pig there so good! Almost as good as that time my grandfather and the uncles cooked a whole pig on a homemade spit in the backyard of my godparents' house on the south side, over on 25<sup>th</sup> Place. The uncles dug a hole in the ground and helped abuelo build a fire in the dirt. That hog cooked until its skin was the color of burnt caramel. Neighbors who weren't even Puerto Rican came by, lured by the smell of roasting pig. That was before abuelo went back to Puerto Rico, back when we were a family.

Mami and I huddle together in the cold while we wait outside T&C Meat with other Puertorros—the procrastinators who didn't preorder their pernil or people like us who only want a few pieces of lechón. We have been doing this for a few years now; it's our Noche Buena tradition, just like Midnight Mass is for some people. The lucky ones picking up their orders cut the line, embarrassed to be so special but unwilling to wait with us common folk. Mami and I keep our bodies to ourselves and try to avoid men touching us, but it's not easy in a crowd. It's never easy. Even before I became a señorita, my mother taught me not to look directly into a man's eyes, to keep my distance, to respect myself by protecting my body because no man would. At school, they call me stuck up because I don't giggle or wiggle or put out like some other girls.

People come out of T&C Meat carrying aluminum foil trays. When one Hercules balances three containers on his shoulder, people start talking about how he has a party going on and can they be invited. ¡Oye! ¡Chacho! ¡Compai! Wasn't he fulano's brother or fulana's husband? The street stinks of car fumes and city living, but every time the door opens, we breathe pernil and arroz con gandules and it's like we're on the island. It makes everybody happy and nobody minds that they have to wait. Everyone says Feliz Navidad or Mari Crisma like we are one big family. It starts to snow and I squeeze Mami's arm. Snow on Christmas Eve meant you got what you wanted for Christmas. I think Christmas would be weird without snow. That's why we're not in Puerto Rico getting a suntan for New Year's. Another reason is we don't have money for plane fare.

Mami and I sidestep un tecato sprawled on the sidewalk outside T&C Meat. I keep an eye out for Papi. I look for that man who used to be a giant to me, carrying me around on his shoulders way past the time I should have been walking on my own. Across the street in the park, I see some guys standing in front of a steel drum but it's too far to see their faces.

Inside T&C Meat, we wait in one line to get a number and then another for service. Mami says a Santa María for the pernil to hold out. Jovan Musk Oil, hair spray, cigarettes—smells as familiar as rice and beans—mingle with roast pig seasoned with garlic, lots and lots of garlic. I take out my inhaler. Don't worry, I tell Mami. I'm not really wheezing. I'm okay! I promise! We luck out and we buy lechón for Noche Buena. We walk home and I make a wish on the single star bright enough to shine above the streetlights.

The next day is Navidad and we take a plate of arroz con dulce to Lucy, our downstairs neighbor. Lucy pours homemade coquito in juice glasses and breaks out the música típica Navideña records. Something about that music with that old fashioned singing through their noses and the cuatro strumming and el güiro scraping gets the women crying over how they used to go round with their men in parrandas, surprising people in the middle of the night with asaltos, singing the-give-me-rum-and-food-or-I'll-cry songs until dawn. More coquito, more tears from Mami and Lucy about when they were jíbaras fresh off the plane from Puerto Rico, back when they were señoritas y tan jugosa and had *it*. Ay bendito, if they knew then what they knew now and used *it* like they should have used it, they wouldn't be crying Christmas Day in a cold Chicago apartment.

Mami lets me drink one glass of coquito. I tell her I'll take a plate of arroz con dulce over to Elena, my friend two blocks down. Mami says no, but Lucy pours her more coquito.

"It's daylight. Es Navidad. Nothing bad will happen to her," Lucy says.

I don't see a single person as I slip on the snowy sidewalk down Sacramento. No squad cars today patrolling up and down the boulevard like they do 24/7. I don't pass drug dealers or gang bangers. Maybe even cops and drug dealers and gang bangers take Christmas off to be with their kids. No packs of dogs that roam the park. I squeeze my fingers together inside my mittens to warm them, keeping one hand on top of the aluminum foil and the other under the plate of arroz con dulce. Snow crystals dangle from tree branches, snow piles on the sidewalks like great mounds of sugar. Humboldt Park is a snow kingdom. I imagine myself a fairy princess, no, a warrior princess in

search of her father, the king. I pass the flower garden with the stone bison where Mami and I like to walk spring and summer. I used to think the bison were buffalos until Miss Madison corrected me in front of the whole class. “They aren’t buffalos, Zoar-Rye-Duh. They are By-Sun.” When I was little, Papi used to lift me up on the back of the huge stone buffalo-bison. I was scared, but I knew nothing bad would happen to me with Papi holding me.

I stop for a second to catch my breath. The cold isn’t so good for my lungs.

Sometimes, Papi takes cover at the Fieldhouse where some of my friends hang out after school. They have arts and crafts and ping pong and lots of things for boys and girls like me. Mami doesn’t let me go because she worries about things that can happen to me when she’s not around to protect me. I worry that Mami will ask Lucy to drive her around looking for me. Maybe Lucy will pour her more coquito. Mari Crisma, mujer, Lucy will say.

Eight long blocks, I’m back on the north side of Humboldt Park by T&C Meat. Three men hover over a steel drum. I wonder if they are the same men, frozen through the night and only now beginning to thaw.

Could it be—?

“¡Papi! ¡Papi!”

There he is. My father. Papi’s face all dark with beard and his black hair pulled back in a ponytail. The sleeves of his army fatigue jacket are too short for his arms and I feel sorry for his bony wrists, red from the cold.

“Papi. Hi, Papi. Merry Christmas, Papi,” I say.

“Mari Crisma,” say Papi’s friends.

Say hi to me, Papi.

Maybe he doesn't recognize me because of my coat and hood. Also, I've grown some since he last saw me.

I yank off my hood. "It's me, your daughter. Zoraida."

"¿Zoraida?" Papi squints at me.

"¡Sí, Papi! ¡Zoraida!"

I'm sure he smiled at me.

"Got any spare change?" One of Papi's friends walks toward me.

Papi waves him away.

"I brought you arroz con dulce. Mami and I made it with lots of raisins, the way you like it."

"I like it?" Papi rubs his eyes.

I edge closer to my father.

"Got any spare change?" Papi's friend sticks out his hand.

I hold out the plate of arroz con dulce. My father takes it.

"Merry Christmas," I say. "From me, Zoraida."

"¿Zoraida?" Papi looks down at the plate covered in aluminum foil. One of his friends takes the plate from him.

"Yes, Zoraida. Zora. Your daughter," I say. "Don't you remember, Papi? You always called me Zora even though Mami didn't like it."

"Got any spare change?" Papi's other friend holds out his hand.

"When are you coming home, Papi? I'll talk to Mami, make her take you back," I say.

I want my father to hold me, to tell me that I'm pretty, to make me feel safe and beloved, to protect me from the guys in the neighborhood. I want him to help me with my math homework, to tell me that I'm as smart as any boy. I want him to be the way he was, back when we were a family. This is what I want for Christmas.

“Come home with me. We can be a family again, Papi. You and Mami and me. Zoraida.”

“¿Zoraida?” Papi says.

“Zoraida, Zora.” Don't you remember, Papi? Don't you remember how you loved me?

“Zora.” Papi looks at me like he remembers how we would sing La Cucaracha, stomping all over the floor, pretending we were killing roaches, and bursting into giggles when the downstairs neighbor poked the ceiling with a broom; like he remembers how he would hold my hand on the Little Dipper roller coaster in Kiddieland every time we took the ride; how he would buy me all the cotton candy I wanted and how when I threw up over his shoes, he didn't even care.

I pull off my mitten to take my father's hand.

Papi holds out his hand. “Got any spare change?”

I dig in my pocket for the ten dollars that abuelo sent me for Christmas. I hand over the money still in the envelope with por avión in blue.

“Mari Crisma, Papi,” I say.

Papi takes out the cash and drops the envelope into the steel drum; the fire gobbles up my grandfather's handwriting. I want to say, Papi, there was a letter! From abuelo! Your father! But I don't.

My father turns away, holding his hands over the fire, fingers spread out to catch the heat.

I run through the park. It start to snow and my checks are soon wet from the snowflakes. I stop to pull out my inhaler, taking a puff. When I was a little girl, my father ran alongside me in the snow. Papi would scoop me up, flying me up, up, up in the sky. I was safe in my father's arms. I run toward the sidewalk, the thud of my boots hitting the pavement the only sound except for the distant howling of dogs. I run home.