

A Song for the Ice Cream Man

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The sand felt good beneath Miguel's feet. The salty water toyed with his toes. He liked that. How the waves came onto the beach as if for that purpose alone—to play, to tease, to remind him of his mother.

“Te cojo los deditos,” she'd say as her fingers danced above his crib.
I'm going to grab your toes.

And he would giggle, as little boys do at their mother's games.

Miguel stared out over the water, over the black sea, to a horizon that embraced the retreating sun, and he smiled. But his smile was not that of heartfelt joy. It was, in fact, as if the thing was forced upon his face—a brutal violation, a rape of expression.

He continued to look towards the light because he could not look at the waves—he knew well what he would find if he did. As always, though, Miguel looked and saw what he always saw: the dead, bloated body of his wife being beaten hard against the rocks, like dirty laundry in the hands of an old washerwoman.

An alarm sounded.

Miguel sat up quickly in his bed. His wife would have, at that time, touched him lightly on the shoulder and asked if he had awoken from a bad dream. Then she would have comforted him with a kiss, and a whispered “I will make some café con leche.”

Sonia would have done so without even thinking. She would have done so, gladly, had she not died some six months earlier in a brutal car accident.

Miguel, out of habit, rose slowly. Even though his wife's body was absent from the bed, it did not matter. Careful, his mind would still say. Do not get up too quickly or you will wake her.

Yes, his wife was absent from his side. Her touch, absent from his skin. Her face, absent from his eyes. But in his heart she was as close to him as his own flesh, flesh that now draped on his thin form like a too-large coat on a too-small man.

Outside, Miami was gripped tight in that moment of neither day nor darkness, the sun seemingly caught in the sky like a lightning bug in a child's fist. In the sliver of escaping light, Miguel went to make some café, remembering as he did that he had run out the day before.

"Mierda!" he said out loud as he entered the kitchen, the cold tile floor reminding him that he had also forgotten to put on his slippers.

He opened the door of the refrigerator, peered into the bright, emptiness of it and shook his head. With a deep sigh, he decided he would stop at El Frutero and get some café before beginning his workday.

Miguel hadn't been to El Frutero in quite a while. Although he liked the people and the social routine it provided, going there had simply become too depressing. After Sonia's death, everyone treated him as if he were not a husband turned widower, but a child made an orphan. He would approach the counter and conversations would cease immediately, cut off about as swiftly and mercifully as a mangled limb in a battlefield hospital.

The women, more noticeable than the men, would shake their heads slowly. Their bodies, though busy with work, would nonetheless slump under the weight of sympathy and sadness. Their pity made everything he put in his mouth taste bitter, even the perfect cubes of sugar. So, he stopped going. Had he put his mind to it, Miguel would have calculated that it had been two months and three days since he had last stood at the restaurant's counter.

Miguel dressed, grabbed the keys to the ice cream truck, and stepped out into the morning. Already the air was thick with heat. Nothing new for Miami—it was, after all, July.

He walked to the truck and got in. The old smell within always revived him. He liked the comfort it offered so selflessly. By the time he had warmed the engine and nudged the gearshift into drive, the sun was already seizing the cloudless sky, a sure victor.

Pulling into the parking lot of El Frutero, Miguel quickly recognized several of the men there, most of who frequented the place as regularly as nuns did the confessional. To Miguel, they were neither strangers nor friends. They were self-chosen exiles, Cubans who worked as hard as he did with blood as red as his.

As they drank their cafés, the men allowed themselves the opportunity to share the sort of important news rarely reported on TV. Mostly, they discussed who was hiring, who was firing, who was in need of a job, and whose wife was caught having an affair with whom. It was never gossip, for men did not do such things. It was simply an exchange of information. And the conversation, when spread thin like butter on hot Cuban bread, would always turn to how difficult life was, and how little money they had to send to their families still struggling in Cuba.

“Oye! Mira! Miguel!” Rosa called from behind the counter, having wanted to do so from the moment she had seen his ice cream truck turning into the parking lot, but choosing to wait until he was within earshot.

The men turned. And they looked. Yes, the man walking towards them was very much Miguel. Pedro and Tomas looked at each other and shared a confirming nod—they knew the story they had heard of him selling the truck the week prior was not true.

“Buenos dias,” Miguel said with an obligatory smile as he approached the counter.

“Buenos dias,” the men replied, smiling along with him.

Yet it was sincerity, not ceremony, that made the men react warmly. The truth was that Miguel had been missed. He was as funny as

he was quiet, a simple man who picked his words as carefully as a young girl would pick flowers for her first love.

“Un café?” Rosa asked, knowing quite well that was why he was there.

“Si, gracias,” he said.

The men stood, watching him as they sipped and slurped from tiny white paper cups. He looks tired, thought one. He looks grayer, thought another. How thin, thought Rosa as she poured the café.

“You need to eat something,” she said and went to get the bit of breakfast she felt he needed but had not asked for.

Miguel did not respond. Instead, he stared at the café for no other reason than because it was there, and he was there, and it was as black as the waves in his nightmare.

Rosa placed a warm guava pastry before him.

Miguel gave a nod and said “gracias” just as he took a bite, the flakes of it falling onto his worn work shirt.

Everyone continued to stare at him in silence. Finally, Jose Peña spoke.

“Oye, Miguel! I guess the ice cream truck’s been doing good for you. My son says you are always out of those chocolate ice cream bars he likes.”

Miguel paused pensively.

“No, I have them,” he said as he took a languid sip. “I just think your son needs to go on a diet.”

A wink from Miguel, followed by relieved laughter from the men. Jose called him a son-of-a-bitch and smiled. And with that, the routine was begun anew, and the men remembered it was a day of work, and to work they each went.

“You want something more?” Rosa asked, wiping down the counter and collecting her tips, not that the coins and pesos mattered much since she was the owner. Still, the men did it because that is what one did. After all, who would not tip for good service?

“Si. I’ll take un café to go,” Miguel said, and Rosa began brewing more.

He was glad he thought to do so, considering how little he had been sleeping.

“Gracias, Rosa,” he said as he put his money on the counter and took the small Styrofoam cup.

“My pleasure, mijo,” she said and took the money without looking at him directly but watched him intently as he walked away.

“Que triste,” she said under breath. *How sad.*

Settling back into the truck, Miguel thought about how much his life had changed over the past few years. The turns that he did not see coming, the canyons that he could not climb out of, the caverns that kept him closed away from the world.

“Asi es la vida,” he said with a sigh.

That’s life—a saying intended to soothe one’s spirit, he supposed, but only confirmed that life would be no different had he control over any part of it.

It was a little past nine when he got on the highway. Today, he decided, he would go up to Broward County. It was where he headed when the local neighborhoods would get congested with other ice cream trucks. Had it not been for Rosa, he never would have considered going up north where the rich people lived.

“Kids up there have money. Go see for yourself. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Of course, she had said those words when his Sonia was still alive and planning their future. “For our house,” he remembered her saying as she put every spare dollar into her money jar. Since getting the ice cream truck at the police auction, they had saved almost five thousand dollars. The money had been barely enough to cover the funeral expenses.

Miguel always disliked the drive up, unlike the drive home, which was something he always looked forward to. As he saw it, if it had been a good day, he was happy. If it had been a bad day, he was still happy because it was over and he could think of tomorrow. But the drive up always made

him feel uncomfortable. The huge houses, the parents, always intimidated him. One time a woman even asked if he could break a hundred-dollar bill. Of all the things he could have said, he chose, “No. Tomorrow,” almost as if she were asking for a flavor he had run out of. Even the children, at times, made him feel less than.

Still, Rosa had been right. He rarely saw other ice cream trucks in those neighborhoods. For a time, Miguel anxiously drove the streets, fearful that there was a law he was breaking. Then one day a policeman bought two Eskimo Pies from him.

As Miguel approached his usual exit, he remembered that he had wanted to try a new neighborhood another exit up. It seemed to him that the further north he went, the more money there was. Today would be the day for him to test his theory. Besides, finding a neighborhood would be easy. He would simply follow the sounds of sprinklers and laughing children.

Once off the highway, Miguel looked and listened for a suitable street to turn onto. He found one by the name of Sonrisa Drive.

Normally an ice cream man would, at that time, turn on the music that would announce his presence to the children. The very music that would draw the little ones to him like sailors drawn by the songs of mythical sirens.

Sadly, the contraption that created music was not working and Miguel did not have the money to fix it. As a substitute, he put a cassette in the ice cream truck’s tape player and raised the volume as high as it would go. It did not work as well and made him grate his teeth from annoyance, but it was better than hearing the rasping of the truck’s tortured engine. Who would be drawn to that sound, he would think to himself and smirk. Mechanics?

Miguel turned down a street lined with huge palm trees. He drove slowly as he looked at the houses that were bigger than the ones in his usual neighborhoods.

“Coño!” he said with amazement as he looked at the huge homes.

It was a neighborhood de dinero. So amazed was he at the grandeur of the homes that at first he did not hear the little girl who was running beside the truck. After a few seconds, he saw her in his rearview mirror and pulled over.

The little girl ran up, huffing. Miguel walked to the back and slid the counter's door open.

"I am sorry," he said, leaning on the counter. "I did not see you."

"It's okay," she panted, her ponytail coming more undone with every breath.

"What would you like?"

It was his favorite question to ask the children, and the reason he liked what he did, at least, when he remembered to like it. He enjoyed the expressions it would produce on their impatient faces, their tongues licking at lips that eagerly anticipated the cold sweetness. What would they like? It was as if he were opening a world of possibilities for them instead of an innocent freezer door.

"I need to think a minute," said the chubby little girl.

Miguel smiled. He wondered where she had come from. She was most clearly Latina. Miguel reasoned she was the daughter of a maid. In that neighborhood, a Latino homeowner would be unlikely.

"Do you have everything on that sign," she asked, pointing with two crumpled dollar bills.

"That is a very good question. I will check," Miguel said, although he knew quite well that he had everything except Rocket Pops. Still, he felt like being playful.

Miguel opened the doors of the freezer as if he were a magician about to conjure up its contents. He pulled out samples of each like rabbits from a black top hat, an action accompanied with appropriate amazement from the little girl.

"Let me see. Yes, I seem to have everything."

"I don't see a Rocket Pop," she said, standing on her tiptoes, surveying the sweet display on the counter.

“Ah! You are right!” Miguel said with a snap of his fingers. “I sold my last one to the President of the United States.”

The little girl smiled, knowing it was a lie, and loving that he had told it.

“You’re making that up!”

“Not at all. Rocket Pops are the only ice creams the President of the United States is allowed to eat. Tell me,” Miguel said, “what are the three colors in a Rocket Pop? If you get it right, I will give you an ice cream for free.”

The little girl thought a moment, her eyes creeping to the corner of her head toward the pictures on the side of the truck.

“Red, white, and blue!” she yelled.

“Very good! Red, white, and blue. The colors of the American flag. Congratulations! Now, what would you like?”

“An Orange Push-Up, please.”

Miguel pulled it from the stack and handed it to her. He did not know why, but he was thoroughly enchanted with the girl. Perhaps it was because she was so much like him, misplaced.

“Why don’t you play any music?” she said as she tore the top off.

“I am afraid it is broken.”

“Can’t you fix it?”

“Yes, but that costs money.”

The little girl looked down at the grass and the drops of ice cream that were settling on the blades like rain. She leaned on the truck and placed the two dollars on the counter. Miguel looked at them.

“What is this?”

“To help you fix your music.”

The tenderness of the action made Miguel smile warmly. He looked at the little girl and said, “Thank you. That is very nice of you, but it is okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The little girl shrugged her shoulders and took the money she was obviously determined to spend.

“Can I see if my mother wants an ice cream?”

“Certainly.”

“Okay. I’ll go ask her what kind she wants. Don’t leave.”

“I will stay right here.”

“Cuantos años tiene?” he said to himself as she ran into the house with the peach-colored door.

How old could she be? Seven? Perhaps eight years old? Miguel sighed deeply as a distant, unwelcomed memory barged into his thoughts. It was a memory that sent him back as many years, he was sure, as the little girl had been alive. He had hoped that one day he would forget the whole thing. But then, how could someone forget the unforgettable?

Eight years ago, when he and Sonia had first arrived on the shores of America, they were happy beyond words. He and his wife had not only escaped Cuba, but also the misery that penetrated the hearts of the men and women who saturated its soil with labored sweat.

It was not until they were both examined by U.S. immigration that they learned Sonia was two months pregnant. They had no money, no way of taking care of a child, nothing but each other. And although their love was enough to sustain the souls of a million children, it was not enough to nourish the body of one. Circumstances, then, determined that they would have to put their child up for adoption.

The seven months before the birth of what would be a girl, Sonia and Miguel lived in a small, furnished apartment provided by the adoption agency. Neither one of them smiled very often during that time, nor did they enjoy much of anything—Sonia would cry on a regular basis. Whenever they went out in public and were asked about the baby, they would change the subject. In many ways, they did their best to ignore it altogether. But, the little thing inside Sonia would not have it. She would

kick until her mother's stomach was rubbed. It would be those times, when Miguel would run his hands along his beautiful wife's belly, that he would feel both the elation and heartache of fatherhood.

The little girl ran back.

"She didn't know what she wanted so she's going to come out," she said. "What's your name?"

"My name?" he repeated, surprised. "Miguel."

"Hello, Miguel. I'm Patricia."

"Very nice to meet you, Patricia," Miguel said and extended his hand to her.

"I like the way you say it in Spanish. It sounds nice."

"Doesn't your mother say it Spanish?" Miguel asked.

"No. My mother isn't Latina like me. I was adopted."

"You were?"

Patricia nodded.

"Yes."

"How old are you, Patricia?" he asked, trying hard to keep the feeling in his heart from his voice.

"Eight years old. I'm going to be nine September tenth."

"The tenth?" repeated Miguel.

It could not be. No. It could not, he heard a voice inside his head say. It was a coincidence. It was the fantasy of a man with nothing in his life except an ice cream truck. He looked at the girl. The dark hair, the dark eyes, the features in her face that should have made her a stranger, but somehow did not.

"Hello!" a woman called out.

Miguel looked up and saw a very tall, very non-Hispanic woman walking toward him. Patricia ran and grabbed the woman's hand.

"Mom! Come meet Miguel!"

Patricia led the woman to the truck. Miguel's mind was not only swimming but caught in a riptide.

"Miguel, this is my mom. Miguel is Latina, like me."

The woman smiled at her daughter. "Yes, he is," she said as she winked at Miguel. "But he's not Latina, he's Latino. With an 'o.' It's masculine."

"Oh."

The woman looked at Miguel who, up to that point, had heard nothing but the rush of the blood in his veins as clearly as if it were a raging river he was standing in the middle of.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked, concerned.

"Yes," Miguel lied.

"You look very pale."

"Do I? It is the heat. I think I need to sit down."

"Sit here, Miguel," Patricia said. "I'll sit with you."

Miguel stepped out of the truck and breathed deeply. He walked over and sat on the grassy curb.

"Would you like me to call an ambulance?" she asked.

"No, no. I am fine."

"Let me get you some water, then."

"Thank you. That is very kind of you."

The woman left. Patricia remained seated next to him. She looked worried.

"I am fine, Patricia. It just gets hot in the truck sometimes."

"If you say so."

Miguel did not want to ask the little girl any questions, but he could not help it.

"So, your parents, they told you were adopted? And that is okay?"

"Oh, sure. They picked me special. My birth parents couldn't take care of me, so my mom and dad had to help them."

The words she said, how easy they were. How very simple it all was in her eyes, clear and unclouded by sacrifice. He envied her.

“I am sure your birth parents were very sad to give you away,” he said, stumbling over the word “birth.”

“You look sad, Miguel,” Patricia said, her hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, no. I am fine,” he replied, forcing a smile on his face, distant from the emotion in his heart.

“Here you are,” the woman said as she returned with a glass.

“Thank you. You are very kind.”

Miguel knew the water would do nothing for what was wrong. Cool his throat, yes. But it was a placebo, a sugar pill. It could do nothing more.

He finished the water and stood up slowly, handing the glass back to the woman.

“Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Do you want an ice cream? I would like to return your kindness.”

“No, that’s fine. I really came out to see what all the fuss was all about. Patricia came running in saying you gave her a free ice cream. I was, well...”

“You were concerned. You are a good mother. She is a very special little girl,” Miguel said as he got back in the ice cream truck.

“Yes, she is. We are very lucky to have her.”

“Mom!” Patricia suddenly shouted. She pulled her mother down, whispered in her ear, then said, “Can I?”

The woman paused briefly, then nodded.

“Don’t go away, Miguel! I’ll be right back!” Patricia yelled as she ran.

The woman smiled, then noticed that the phone she heard ringing in the near distance was hers.

“I’m sorry. I’m expecting a call from my husband. We’re going to Disney World. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“All right, then. It was nice meeting you.”

“You too.”

Miguel stepped back inside his truck not knowing what to think or do. How strange life was, running unpredictably hot and cold, like the old water in his little apartment in Hialeah.

“Miguel!” Patricia called musically as she poked her head out her front door. “Cover your eyes!”

He did.

“Are they closed?”

“Yes.”

After a moment, Miguel heard the little girl slide something onto the counter.

“Okay. You can look now!”

He uncovered his eyes and with a wrinkled brow picked up the box before him.

“Open it!” she said, smiling wider than he had ever seen a little girl smile.

Miguel carefully lifted the lid, releasing its contents.

“See? It’s a music box,” Patricia said proudly. “An ice cream man has to have music or else no one will know he’s there.”

Miguel held the box in his hand. The music was the sweetest melody he had ever heard. It embraced him.

“Do you like it?”

“Si. Gracias, Patricia,” he said softly. “It is very wonderful.”

“I have to go inside now. Will you come back and visit?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Okay, Miguel. Adios! Thank you for the ice cream! I’ll see you soon!” she said and ran back into her house.

Miguel walked to the front of the truck and put the music box, still playing, on the passenger’s seat. He sat a moment and wiped his hands across his damp eyes.

As he drove away, Miguel knew he would not return, just as he knew Patricia would soon forget him. The only sign that he had ever been there would be a dustless little spot on a dresser where a music box once sat. In time, Patricia’s memory of the music box itself would fade, along

with the monsters in her closet and the voices of her dolls. That day would simply become one of many in her childhood, unremarkable.

Patricia, the little girl, would forget Miguel because she did not need to remember him. Perhaps one day, Patricia, the woman, would look for her birth parents and she would find, of all people, the ice cream man. She would marvel at how they had once met when she was a little girl. And he would show her the music box, so well preserved, like the day when she had taken it from her dresser and slid it onto his counter. And she would love him not simply because he had kept it, but because he had cherished it as if it had been her voice that flowed from the tiny springs within. And they would cry together as fathers and daughters sometimes do.

For now, the little girl had a life Sonia and he would only have been able to see on television. And for the very first time, Miguel knew the decision he and his Sonia had made had been the right one. They had not given their daughter away, as he had thought. They had given her a home, a family, a life beyond what could be theirs to share.

“Que lindo es,” Miguel said of the music as it waned.

Then, he began to hum the tune himself. Que lindo es, he thought as he recognized the song for what it was—a lullaby like the thousands he had never sung. Que lindo es, he repeated in his mind. *How beautiful it is.*

And as he drove away from the splendid houses and the trips to Disney World, the ocean unexpectedly came into view. It was so blue, so unlike the one in his dreams, that Miguel had the overwhelming desire to take the rest of the day off, if only to feel the sand beneath his feet and look at its waves without fear.

“Porque no?” he said to himself as he parked his truck and began to remove his shoes. *Why not?*

Why should Miguel continue to work? Why would he have to? Why, when it had been, already, a very good day?