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THE WAR STARTED TODAY. Maybe it's been many days. I don't really understand *when* things start. Suddenly they're happening around me, and people are here I knew from before. I'm not very good at thinking, so for me the war started today opposite Grandpa's house.

That was hours ago. I feel like I got years older all at once. I look at things the way you do when you miss them. It seems they're not here. "This is the patio of a house. On this patio there's a medlar tree and a big clay jar of water; then a black goat. House, jar, patio, black goat, tree. If someone covers my eyes, I can point to those things without getting any wrong: tree, black goat, patio, jar, house." But it's as if they'd erased my memory and left me lost far, far away. I keep hearing one word: "warwarwar." That word seems to be hammering. (Other words break apart, don't exist anymore.) You can't place war, but I feel like it's watching on all sides, another body moving about inside me. The war. Suddenly it's something that's known me for a long time. A long dark corridor where little by little Papa stops smiling.

We were getting ready for the fiesta of Cristo de la Laguna. La Laguna's the city where we live. Auntie had almost finished

putting my linen dress on me, the one I was wearing for the first time. She couldn't get the bow tied right. "You're nervous, Auntie," I said, turning around, and she shook her head. I looked through the small glass shutter. "There's something funny going on today," I thought, seeing her face in the shutter. Auntie's a little bit old. I love her so much I think she should be my mother. She's nice and she doesn't have any children. Auntie makes underwear for a clothing store. They don't pay her very much, but she helps Grandpa, who makes packsaddles. When she's paid extra, I get toys and the usual dresses. (I don't think this will happen anymore. Don't know. I feel sad and confused.) At night, while everyone's asleep, the sound of Auntie's sewing machine travels all the way across the street to my house, like a locomotive that stops in lots of villages. Sometimes I don't close my eyes until her room gets dark. (I think the white threads turning up in her hair these days fall from the lamp during the night.)

"That's your dream, Auntie," I said as if remembering out loud. "Which one?" she answered, surprised. "Sewing," I said, and she answered, "Yes," looking at me for a long time. Her eyes welled up and she seemed beautiful. I gave her a hug: "Thank you, because if you didn't dream I wouldn't have dresses." She trembled and I understood. Maybe she heard the war before I did, because she's older and thinking is like having a presentiment of things. Of course, I was dying to look at myself in the mirror. Papa would be home soon and I could hardly wait for him to see me. He's happy when I wear a new dress. Opens his arms carefully, kneels, and smiles at me: "Where's my ugly little lady?" he says. I run to stand on his thighs and he hugs me until I can't breathe. Then he stands back and spins me round and round so my skirt billows out. As I circle past I see him getting a kiss ready and he starts to sparkle. Mama says I'm his girlfriend, but she says that because she's jealous. She wouldn't be able to understand that, for me, Papa's an enchanted city. Today when he comes back . . . "Auntie, if you don't hurry up, Papa . . ."

That's when the bow Auntie was about to tie crashed against her scream. From deep inside the scream I saw Mama appear with Chicho and Grandpa behind. "The war, it's the war," she was screaming. The noise was bringing the street closer to us. Bolts were banged shut. Trucks, shots, shouts flew back and forth. Dreadful blows made the glass rattle in the doors and in the shutter where Auntie's reflection was before. You could tell people were upset. They seemed to be carrying those hoes Grandpa uses to break up the ground at El Barbado when he digs up potatoes. Everyone was racing around so much the corners were coming loose. The wood on the walls was creaking and colliding with the floorboards. We were all part of the same tremor. "They want to get in," I said, touching Mama's arm. "Mama." She paid no attention, hugging my brother, like always. "Auntie, Grandpa, they want to get in." Neither one of them heard. I was scared. "I want to hide," I said. I felt jealous of Chicho and held out my arms to Grandpa. But they were busy pushing furniture against the doors so those people couldn't get in. My ears started to ache. I looked for Ñeca on the shelf, hugged her the way Papa hugs me, and crawled under the bed. I tried to think: "The war's made of so much noise; if the shots keep up, my ears will burst." But the only thing I knew was that I felt very alone. I pressed Ñeca against my chest so she couldn't hear and she said, "Aaaaaaaa," as if it all made her ache.

I was crying and there was lots of confusion, but I heard Grandpa calling me so he could hide me in the room at the end of the patio, before you get to the one with the goats and the chicken coop. Behind us, the house was about to cave in from the blows. Screams slid over the roofs from the street to the patio. Soon, when those people moved on, the street would swallow us up. I felt panicky when I thought of the huge throat that was making that noise. "Here it won't be so dangerous," Mama said. Her green eyes were red. Auntie was talking fast, as if to herself: "This was bound to happen. They know Santiago's a Republican. They'll kill us. If we'd only known. Why didn't

anyone warn us? How were we to know? And to think that Santiago's not with us. None of you say a word. If only there were someone here, a man I mean. Juan! Juan!" She was calling next door, to Uncle's house. "Oh my God, such awful things; to think we didn't know," she said, and she looked nervous and ugly. I felt sorry for her, and I spoke to her lovingly: "Auntie." Uncle answered from the other patio. "Quiet. This will all be over soon, don't talk anymore." Mama was still trembling. "They'll do us in." Nearby, the goats were chewing their cud. We could tell it was the goats because the sound they made was different from the other noises. "Ma-ma-ma," Chicho repeated tirelessly. It's almost a word and he wants to be understood. Grandpa took me on his lap. He didn't say anything until I asked him: "What about Papa?" Without him I'm always alone.

I thought about the street. To me it looked like a long dagger. At the end, a blurred shape faded into nothing. When I go out to play and they tell me I'm not allowed to go past the corner, I always imagine that the world ends where the street does—that the last curve, the last tree, are the entrance to heaven. There's a world only as far as I can see? Yes, Papa said. And doesn't the war come from behind the world, from outside it? Yes. But when Papa's driving and the road continues, if we stop to look at the sea or climb the mountain to have a picnic, the world continues. Then it's always a road that never ends. Now I was seeing Papa way in the distance, at the end of that road, at the end of the world, fading into nothing.

I felt so afraid I wouldn't get there in time to save him that my whole body hurt. I thought about the birds and wanted to be one of them in order to reach Papa; looked for Grandpa's eyes so I could ask him again. "Papa's at the newspaper, *niña*," he said. "But those men are coming to get him, aren't they?" I felt his knees stiffen under my behind.

I imagined the street again. Now it was becoming a dark hollow that stretched on and on until it dwindled away. Then,

from deep inside me, which was now the deepest part of the hollow, Papa was walking and his body was made of linen. I tried to run to him and hug him, to warn him not to come. But I felt my linen dress pressing against me. And linen Papa was me hugging myself because I was afraid. I touched my dress and now it had no shape, it was a dead dress. Mama and Chicho seemed to be one trembling person. Grandpa's knees got pointy, like two thorns. I stroked my dress harder, imagined I was touching Papa's body, wherever he was. Auntie was twisting my curls, and her fear was coming through them. I felt much better because between her and Grandpa someone was taking care of me. But, "What about Papa?" Grandpa shivered, and then he rocked me like he does when he wants me to fall asleep. "Be quiet, niña," he said, "he'll be here soon." His voice got drier: "You'll see, he'll be here soon." I thought it was a lie. (He's worried because he suspects I don't believe him.) I smiled to fool him. Grandpa's eyes clouded over and he pressed his lips to my head. The top of my skull felt warm because of his breathing. He sat that way for a long time.

From the street came a rush of words: "Drop your weapons, hands up, open the door or we'll knock it down, up with the Right, down with the Left, death to them, death." They kept saying the same thing over and over as if they didn't know how to say anything else. I noticed that my heart was getting smaller or that they were locking it up with lots of keys. "Go to sleep, niña," Grandpa urged, squeezing me tight against his chest.

"Niña, niña, niña, niñaaaaaaa." Another familiar voice. I fell into it like falling in emptiness. Crying. Underneath, Papa smiled, sparkling as if it were morning. Now I couldn't tell where the noise was coming from. Walls shaking, painful jabs in my ears, terrible cold freezing my forehead, the wrinkles in Grandpa's neck jumping over my face like ants. I cried harder. Tried to get free. "Papa, paaa," I shouted. I forgot all the people, the street. I had to find him, because something was getting

hard, something that's always soft inside, that Grandpa's hands release when he plunges the sewing needles through the pack-saddle leather, that I can't see although it scratches my skin when Papa kisses me. I fell and managed to crawl to the patio. But suddenly a crash pushed the house toward us, like someone falling on his back. I stopped. What was it? The war? While those men came closer, the wood in the house moaned as if they were hurting it. I felt sorry for the house because it couldn't run away, for Chicho, who kept saying "ma-ma-ma-ma-ma," and for Grandpa, who was old.

They were all talking at once. I could hear isolated words: "Your weapons, the Right, the general, the Left, up with, down with, long live, death to, damn them, up with him, down with them, scoundrel, fox, bastard, dog, flag, rape, morals, road, the whole street, that way, patria, this way, shots, search, search, search, national uprising, long live the general, there's no light, prison, search wherever they are, search, search." Several of them appeared. They wore dark caps and gray uniforms. Rifles hung from their shoulders. I looked at Mama, who was pulling at my curls. Squeezed Grandpa's sleeve with one hand. "They're the arribistas," he said when he saw them. With the other hand I pinched Auntie's fat arm. "They're the arribistas," she answered. They said things I couldn't hear or understand. "Where's he hidden?" one of them screamed. "Who?" Grandpa asked. "The little boy," someone else said. (I looked at Chicho sucking on his pacifier, his eyes opened wide); Grandpa stared right at them. "Are you talking about my son?" One of them who wore shields with flags painted on them and ships on his sleeves replied that this was no joking matter and called to some others. "Where's the man of the house, you old sot?" they said, shaking him and kicking over two pots of ferns while they talked. "I am," Grandpa answered. I looked at him. "He's Grandpa," I said, and they all laughed. One ordered the others to search the workshop and the shed where Grandpa keeps the straw. Some of them I recognized because they used to visit Papa on Sundays and I could see from the middle of

the patio how they were turning the shop upside down. (Grandpa sits there as soon as it gets light, making packsaddles for people who come from the country, which means they're all very poor and have donkeys or horses or carts, because they're peasants who live far away near El Barbado, where the mountains keep you from seeing the sky. No one in La Laguna knows how to measure the back of a mule like Grandpa. The mules really smile at him when he's finished, prancing around as if they were going to eat him up, because that's how they thank him for understanding them. Grandpa pulls at their ears, their snouts, their hides, and I've even seen him take off their ticks and then tend the wounds. And when one-eyed "cho" Pedro el Tuerto or "señá" Encarnación Perejila ride off up the path, on their mules, he rubs his hands together happily, as if relieved of a great burden. Then he goes inside and starts to work on the packsaddle he was making before. Sometimes I hide in there to scare him. Grandpa's nice and he doesn't talk much. Some days he says things that make me laugh, but he never lifts his eyes from what he's doing. He has a paddle he uses to spank me on the behind if I'm bad, but at night, when he eats his oatmeal from the big cup, he makes a hollow on his lap and lets me sit there so I can blow on the oatmeal and cool it off for him. Then he plays a lullaby on his guitar so I'll fall asleep, sings coplas in a soft voice, and rocks me gently. I don't go to sleep right away, and then he tells me about something that once happened to him long ago. Auntie says we often fall asleep together. "You're the same age," she says, "two children." He *is* just like a friend. But to me he never stops being Grandpa.)

I remembered all those things as I watched him while the men searched his shop. They came back through the shed, bringing Yolí and holding him up in the air by his fur. "Yolí," I shouted, and he tried to sneak away. "Yolí," I said again, and he ran over to lick me. We hugged each other. I thought of Papa. "Where is he?" I asked the tallest man. Now I wasn't afraid. They were looking behind the wardrobes, under the

beds, searching Grandpa's trunks and making a lot of noise. Outside, trucks and shouts seemed to shatter the street. "Who?" they asked. For some reason, Papa began to appear in that group of gray figures, as if he were one of them. "Where's Papa?" I murmured, crossing Yolí's paws around my neck and looking at Mama and Chicho who were still trembling. I went up to the tall one. "Hey, where is he?" The man pushed me to one side, and I saw the dark street again. Auntie and Mama were crying. Mama was saying, "My husband," and Auntie was saying, "My dear brother." "For the last time," the man shouted next to Grandpa, "where is your son, you old brute? There's a warrant out for his arrest." He shook him. "Answer." But Grandpa lowered his eyes. He looked more stooped from where I was watching and he seemed even farther away. I saw that the man was shaking Grandpa and I wanted to hug him. I felt that I loved him more than Papa because he was there and he'd wilted. I placed myself between the two of them. "He doesn't know," I said, letting go of Yolí, "but I do. He's at the end of the street." I looked at the others. "Today there is no street, niña," one of them explained. The racket continued. Suddenly I hated Papa for not being with us, for not looking after me or defending poor Grandpa. More men arrived; they said something in secret and left together. One of them pulled my curls. Auntie got nervous: "Now they know where he is; what will they do?" and she ran after them. Mama followed her, complaining silently to herself, so she could hear their answer.

Grandpa walked toward the shed. It was dark because there's no lamp. In one corner Yolí's always tied at the foot of the cistern and in the other corner Uncle puts the bus tires he collects; on some planks up near the ceiling where it's damp, are the packsaddles with rotten leather that Grandpa will fix so he can sell them as good as new. "Life," I heard him say as he walked, and I sensed that life, whatever it was, even if I didn't know, was moving in the same direction as Grandpa: toward the shed, the dampness, the cistern, Yolí tied by his



foot, all that deflated rubber ("Today there is no street"; now it will always be today, I won't forget this day), and the rotten packsaddles too, "worn out for the road, ready for sausage," like in Grandpa's song.

I glanced down toward the far end of the shed, where the clear yellow straw makes me think of light, moving. Grandpa was a shape that looked like another corner of the platform in the middle of the shed. I went over to the medlar tree. Wished I could have reached a medlar and opened it. Medlars are the same color as straw, and they're soft. "Grandpa." I heard him sobbing. Maybe he was dying. "Death to them, death to them," those people were saying.

"Niña." Grandpa was calling me. I walked across the shed without realizing it. "Listen," he began, "Papa will be on another island for a long time." "Why?" I asked. "Politics," Grandpa said. He tried to explain this to me quickly. "Imagine a sidewalk with a different camp on each side. Since the two are separated, see, they're enemies. Papa is on this side, and he lost." I didn't understand very well, but I searched for his eyes. "What did he lose?" Grandpa thought for a moment. "Well, freedom, you, me. He won't be able to see us." I thought about where he would go then. We could go if we knew where he was, or I could go, even if neither Mama nor Grandpa nor Auntie wanted to. I remembered what the uniforms had said: "morals . . . patria . . . rape." (Which one would be the place?) Grandpa moved his eyes close to my curls, as if he were looking for a handkerchief. (He's going to cry.) His hand was hard and it felt heavy as it brushed my forehead, heavier than when he wanted me to fall asleep. "Grandpa, what's in your hand?" I asked. "A fixed thought," he answered, but I didn't understand. His voice was dry again. Like when he has heartburn. I was sitting on his knees, watching how the little bits of straw crisscrossed and played on the floor. "Papa will go to an island called jail," he said. Out there the street continued: voices, shots, distance. Jail, jail, I thought, and I said, "What's that? Grandpa, what is that?" I

asked, raising my head. I lifted his face by the chin so I could look into his eyes: "What is that?" "We'll find out later," he answered harshly.

Auntie and Mama came. They were still crying and that made them seem funny. My brother had stopped repeating "ma-ma-ma"; he was crying too, lying on Mama's shoulder, and he seemed to understand the danger. He'd bitten through his pacifier and there was a hole in it.

Now I don't want to hear anymore. Behind me a whole lot of sentences are breaking nice ugly Auntie in two—Auntie who said "my dear brother" when she talked about Papa. But I escape to the patio. Auntie's something way out there, the street. Like a wall collapsing violently. Mama's fading too. It's like one mute tormenting another. There are no screams in her kind of suffering, and that makes her more tiresome. She and Auntie are on good terms now, although they never got along well. Grandpa, who's more alone, is a "sowing" plagued by droughts—he calls his vegetable garden a sowing. "Droughts aren't germs, but they sure make you sick," he says. Even Auntie speaks her mind sometimes, but not so often, not so often. The floor seems to be falling in too. I need to think. But something's pushing me, and I feel weak. An invisible hand's spinning me round and round. My dress swirls, billows out. I keep looking: tree, jar, straw shed, black goat. Everything's swirling in circles, like when Papa . . .

The word "prisoner" comes from prison island. I'll look in the dictionary: "He's being held prisoner." Prison from from . . . I don't know. "We'll find out later, jail, we'll find out later, a fixed thought, we'll find out later." Grandpa. That meant, "jail is a fixed thought." I go back to the shop. "Listen, Grandpa, jail is . . ."

I won't ask any more questions. All four of them are over there, staring at the floor. Hard to see them very well now that it's getting dark. They seem like little shadows playing

together. I'll go pick up the ferns, their dirt's fallen out. Those men kicked them. I run to the kitchen. "Mules," I'll shout at them, Grandpa will make them some packsaddles, "mules." But no, they're gone now, everything's quiet. It seems as though there's no kitchen left. My ferns, broken, covered with some bitter green liquid. "Mules, mules." Poor Papa. I think how one day they'll beat him the way they did the ferns; Papa's heart will be green like that and release the same acid juice as when they hurt him, and there won't be any hands to pick him up.

But, what did Papa do? Today was the fiesta. He should have come home early. He likes to walk under the candles they light when the procession comes out of the tower at midnight and there are two rows of people all the way to the plaza, at the foot of the mountain. Then the city belongs to us like at no other time. Besides, now there's no fiesta.

I hear Auntie's voice. "They've declared war. They'll spill blood among themselves, all of them sons of the same patria . . ." (morals . . . patria. . . rape) I cover my ears, don't want to listen anymore.

"Waaarwaaarwaaar." That word will shatter me. I'm afraid and it's standing guard; I'm cold and it's standing guard. And Papa out there disappearing. "Where can he be?" Now's when I really miss him. He was coming back from the newspaper, smiling. No, today I won't see him, he's hidden in the war. In the house, Grandpa and everyone's calling him in secret, but he doesn't hear. He's walking beneath that uproar, in the street.

And now I won't grow. I feel as if I've already grown up. A war can arrest children. Even though children don't fight and don't go to prison and last longer.

Children can wait.