

Tío Miguel's Window

FICTION

Luciana and Javier were crouched in front of Tío Miguel's door, his thunderous snores reaching the children's ears through the cheap wood.

"Abuela said we shouldn't go in while he's sleeping," Luciana said as she kneeled behind her cousin, ready to head down the stairs at a moment's notice.

He rolled his eyes at her. "Come *on*, he has those cool toy soldiers on the shelf above his bed. We need them for our experiment." Javier was a chubby eight-year-old boy with big cheeks and thick glasses that magnified his bright green eyes. His skin was darker than hers, a light toasted brown as if he'd been left out in the sun too long.

"We can do it without them. We can get the roses from Abuela's garden and get the thorns instead. Let's just go, Javi. *Please*, before we get into trouble."

"No one even noticed that we went upstairs, Luci," he said. "They're too busy talking and drinking like always."

Without waiting to hear her next words, Javier cracked the door open, making sure not to let go of the squeaky knob before crawling inside on his hands and knees. Luciana followed reluctantly, staying always a few inches behind him so she could be the first to escape if Tío Miguel woke up. The carpet scraped their knees as they embarked on their mission, and while Javier was focused on getting to the shelves above the head of the bed, Luciana noticed the old, dark stains that were scattered across their path.

She had been in here a dozen times while Tío Miguel was out doing errands for Abuela, but it felt different with him there. The room seemed smaller with the plaster walls and the lumpy queen-size bed that occupied most of the space, hardly leaving any room to move around. A single window lay directly across the bed that looked out into the garden of the house where Luciana and Javier planned to carry out their experiment.

"Get over here," Javier whispered.

Luciana had fallen behind. Her cousin had already climbed on top of the bedside table at the far end of the room and was reaching toward the shelves. She hurried over to him and looked up to his looming figure.



"I'm not going to be able to reach them from here. I'm going to have to step on the bottom shelf."

"Don't, Javi! What if it falls?"

"It won't."

She glanced over at her uncle, his belly rising and falling with a bear-like magnitude. She couldn't see his face from where she was crouched, but she gathered enough courage to climb onto the bedside table just as Javier began to step onto the shelf. The top of the bedside table was covered with a sheet of glass under which lay a shabby arrangement of black-and-white photographs of Tío Miguel with his siblings. Luciana's eyes lingered on them as she tried to make out which of the siblings was her father, but her eyes darted to her cousin who had almost knocked over some of the frames on the shelf.

"Careful!"

"I almost got them," he hissed.

She was about to respond when he began to lean over to hand her the two soldiers. Without waiting for more instructions, Luciana began to climb down the table, using the round knobs of the drawers as footholds. They crawled half of the way toward the door before exchanging a glance and deciding to make a run for it all the way down the stairs.

Javier was right. No one had noticed that they'd gone upstairs. The adults kept on chatting in the living room while they took sips from their glasses and laughed at jokes. The two cousins passed by casually before heading out the back door to the garden. As soon as they were both outside and away from the family, they let out a long breath. Luciana was still holding on to the soldiers but relaxed her grip once she glanced down at her hands and noticed her white knuckles.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

They were over by the far-left corner of the garden next to Abuela's rose bush where they had already set up an orange bucket to be used as a mixing pot. The grass was yellow from the lack of rain, and the rose buds were just beginning to sprout. Javier started picking the few flowers that had bloomed, carefully avoiding the thorns.

"I thought we didn't need the roses."

"We do. We need the soldiers *and* the roses. I told you like a hundred times, Luci."

"What's the potion for again?"

Javier sighed and was about to explain when both of their moms walked into the garden. Tía Mari, Javier's mom, was a petite



woman with short black hair and pale skin. She had a mom belly even though she'd had Javier nearly nine years ago, but the rest of her figure was lean and graceful. Luciana's mom, Karmen, on the other hand, was a tall, strong woman with brown hair that reached her shoulders. They were both clutching cigarettes between their fingers and took turns lighting each of them. The moms looked at the children and smiled, but their attention didn't linger.

"Lilia told me he had another fit last weekend," Luciana heard Tía Mari say. "They had to call the doctors because he kept screaming about there being spies in the house or something. He tried to break the window in his room."

"*Dios*. I just think it's unbelievable how they keep denying that he has a problem. Especially Señora Lilia. They keep blaming it on the motorcycle accident that happened thirty years ago, but we all know he had a problem long before that."

"I know. Poor Miguel."

Luciana and Javier were trying to listen to what their mothers were saying, but some of their words got lost in confusion and youthful ignorance. The two women shook the ashes off their cigarettes every once in a while before putting them back in their lips.

"Most of the time they treat him like he doesn't even exist," Karmen went on. "When he greets everyone . . . when he talks . . . Everyone in the family treats him like he's a bother. But what fault does the poor man have?"

"Different times, *cuñada*. They still see those things, mental illnesses, as taboo, *sabes*?"

"It's a shame."

The children watched as they tossed their cigarettes on the grass and stepped on them before going back inside. Luciana moved closer to her cousin and muttered, "What was that all about?"

"I don't know. My mom says he's crazy."

They got a spoon from the kitchen and began crushing the petals into mush. Javier was doing most of the work while Luciana occupied herself with tearing off the petals. She enjoyed the soft, slippery feeling of each petal and found it extremely satisfying when she neared the end of the bud. There the petals were layered more snugly on top of each other, trying to hold on to their strength by clutching to one another. She tore each one carefully and dropped it in the bucket.

"Once the petals are all squished, we add the water," said Javier, still working diligently. "Not that much. Just enough so it turns pink. Then we add in some grass and the thorns from the roses. The soldiers go in last."



"Are we going to drink it?"

"Don't be a dummy. We're just gonna rub it on our hands."

"Okay, so we rub it, and then we turn into the soldiers?"

"Yeah, and then we can sneak into Tío Miguel's room and find out if he's really crazy."

When they were done tearing all the petals off the roses they'd collected, Javi ran back inside for a cup of water and poured it along with blades of yellowing grass he pulled from the ground. Luciana mostly watched her cousin do the work, leaning in once in a while to toss more grass into the bucket.

He began pulling off the thorns from the stems one by one. Luciana tried to help, but she pricked her finger on one of them, and a drop of blood trickled down her palm. She suckled on it as she went on helping her cousin until they were nearly done with the potion. All that was left were the two toy soldiers that they'd rescued from the dangerous heights of Tío Miguel's shelves. They were a trophy, a representation of their bravery, and she noticed that Javier was nearly bouncing with excitement as they finished their experiment.

They each held a soldier and exchanged a glance. But just as they were about to drop the toys into the bucket, a roaring, stuttering voice came blasting into the garden like a siren. They were quick to dump the toys into the potion as Tío Miguel came out to greet them.

"Where are my beautiful, beautiful *sobrinos*? Come give a hug to your Tío Miguel."

He came thundering toward them like a giant. His steps were clumsy and loud before he stopped to wrap his suffocating arms around Javier first. He hugged him so tight that he lifted her cousin off the ground. Luciana could see the discomfort in Javier's eyes, one that had faded over the years as he grew accustomed to his uncle's embraces. Tío Miguel's face was filled with joy as he held his nephew, making any trace of insanity difficult to spy. Luciana thought that maybe that was it. Maybe people didn't like Tío Miguel because of the way he loved so intensely, the way he threw himself at people with open arms and expected the same kind of affection in return. She could understand this. She could understand because when it was her turn to be hugged, she felt the same kind of dread as her cousin. Tío Miguel's big belly was hard and swollen when he pressed her against him. It was a belly hard from medication as she'd heard her mom say. His breath smelled of stale saliva, and his face was puffy from his sleep-induced trance. His arms seemed to crush her, and she struggled to get away from his scratchy stubble that rubbed against her cheek.



“How is the most beautiful girl in the world?” he said in a childish manner, his tongue tangled in his words. “I love you. Yes, I love you. *Niña b-bonita.*”

“Thanks, Tío,” Luciana replied as enthusiastically as she could before she began to pull herself away from him gently. Once she was free, she scrambled over to Javier, and the two of them watched their uncle tumble back inside to the kitchen, where Abuela Lilia stopped him to shake a pile of colorful pills into his hand. Before he disappeared completely into the house, Luciana heard Abuela’s voice, “Take your medicine and don’t bother the children, Miguel.”

“That was close,” Javi said after a pause.

Luciana nodded before turning her attention back to Javier who was already reaching into the bucket. He didn’t have to ask her to join him because she followed his lead instinctively. They both winced as the spikey mixture scraped their hands, leaving cuts along their palms and fingers. They continued in silence, fueled by a shared curiosity to find out what was wrong with Tío Miguel, to finally understand why no one ever wanted to talk about him. After only the soldiers were left lying at the bottom of the empty bucket, the two cousins sat in silence, waiting for their experiment to work.

When they returned home, however, the only things they were left with were shallow cuts on the crevices of their hands and disillusioned hearts. Javier blamed it on Tío Miguel’s interruption. He said that they’d waited too long to rub the potion on their hands, so their wish to become the soldiers was gone in an instant. Luciana would not admit it, but she found her cousin a bit strange and silly sometimes; she often went along with his crazy ideas just to avoid the boring conversations of the rest of her family every weekend until she could go back home.

What she hadn’t told Javier, though, was that she’d taken the toy soldiers with her that afternoon instead of putting them back like he’d asked her to. She’d hid them in her backpack when he wasn’t looking and only took them out in the car on her way home with her parents, the darkness of her surroundings protecting her from any suspicion. For two weeks she kept the toys under her pillow and would take them out during the night to hold them in her hands as if that would provide her with answers. Out of all the crazy ideas Javier had had, the potion had been the only one she’d had any interest in because she really *did* want to know what was wrong with Tío Miguel. She wanted to know why everyone in the family only offered him fake smiles and a fraction of their attention. Maybe his voice was too loud,



his hugs too tight. Maybe his brothers and sisters just didn't like him. Maybe he did something bad to them when they were kids. She wanted answers, but every time she asked her dad about Tío Miguel he would tell her that he fell off his motorcycle when he was fifteen, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. "He hit his head really hard when he fell," he'd tell her.

But her speculations were interrupted when her dad got a call from Abuela Lilia. Luciana had only heard one part of that conversation, the part where her dad tried to calm Abuela down by asking what happened and if she had called the doctors. She could vaguely hear her shaky voice and sobs coming through the speakers of the phone. Her dad wouldn't explain anything to her, and her mom would hug her and tell her not to worry, but it finally dawned on her when her mom pulled out a black dress and told her that they were going to Abuela's house that afternoon.

When they arrived, they weren't greeted with the usual avid hugs and eager kisses. There were people she had never seen before, and everyone talked in hushed voices as they walked around the glass dining room table where there was a large framed picture of Tío Miguel placed in the center.

Her dad put his hands on her shoulders and told her to go give a hug to Abuela Lilia. She did what she was told and noticed the shiny tears on Abuela's wrinkly face. She didn't ask many questions; instead she went on a mission to find Javier who had crawled under the long dining room table to play with his Gameboy. She joined him, their bodies covered by the long white tablecloth.

"I think we should go to his room again," she said to her cousin.

Javier would not look up from his game. His glasses hung low on his nose and the colors of his screen danced on them like tiny ghosts.

"There's probably blood and stuff."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know . . . I heard my mom say that there was blood or something."

"So we should go check it out," she said. "Find out what happened."

"Maybe we shouldn't . . . my mom said we need to be around Abuela Lilia."

"What? Are you scared?"

"No!" He crawled out from under the table and stood up quickly, closing his Gameboy in the middle of the game he was playing. "Fine," he said. "But you better not start crying when we get there."



This time it was Luciana who opened the door to Tío Miguel's room. The knob felt big in her palm, and she pushed the door open slowly, as if he were still there, snoring in his bed like last time she was here. Despite the room being empty, the air felt heavy with a presence, with the weight of whatever had happened there. She stepped in to find the bed bare of sheets, just a sunken mattress with yellow stains covering the surface. But as she looked closer, she could see darker stains by the foot of the mattress that continued onto the floor. These stains were bigger. They seemed to seep past the surface, as if they were sinking to secure their place in the world, and the red, opaque color was beginning to turn brown at the edges. She continued bravely, aware of her cousin's footsteps behind her. She never told him that she'd kept the soldiers from the day they made the potion, and she didn't tell him that they were tucked away now in her backpack.

"Luci, my mom said we shouldn't come up here."

She turned to look at her cousin and considered his implied request. "You can go downstairs if you want. I'm just going to stay here for a bit."

"Fine," he said quietly. "Just hurry."

She heard her cousin scramble down the stairs to join the rest of their family. There was no laughter that drifted upstairs now, only whispers and the occasional sob. And as she stood there on her own, she noticed the small size of the room, the overcrowded space that left almost no room to breathe. She imagined Tío Miguel pacing around the room like a caged bear. She remembered his loud laugh, his babbling voice that went ignored. The echo of it seemed to ring throughout the room like a remnant of him, a forgotten voice that still wanted to be heard. She knelt on the floor, her knees feeling the familiar rough sensation of the carpet, and she took out the two soldiers that she had sneaked into her pockets before going upstairs. She looked at the folds and crevices in the green plastic. Her hands had healed from the cuts that the potion had left on them, but she still remembered the sharp sting of the scrapes and her wish to figure out what was wrong with her uncle. She was only now beginning to accept that his life would remain a mystery to her.

The base of the mattress had empty drawers on each side. She opened one of them and laid the two soldiers inside on their backs. She hoped that even after the whole room was cleared out, there would still be something left of Tío Miguel in there, even if nobody else knew about it. She closed the drawer carefully so that the soldiers wouldn't be disturbed, and as she got to her feet again she noticed something that she'd missed when she'd first walked into



the room. The window that overlooked the garden was gone. Only sharp edges around the frame remained, poking out like bared teeth.

She returned to join her family downstairs, but this time kept close to her mom, who was again smoking cigarettes with Tía Mari in the garden. Javier was also with her, eyes glued once again to his Gameboy. He tuned out their voices, but Luciana listened to them as she tore grass out of the ground to keep her hands busy.

“Señora Lilia is distraught. She never thought she’d have to see one of her children die,” said Karmen.

“I can’t imagine what she must be going through,” Tía Mari replied. There was a long pause in which Luciana watched her mom and her aunt take drags of their cigarettes. Tía Mari put hers out in the ashtray, crushing the orange flame against the black plastic filled with ashes. “But between you and me, *cuñada*, it’s better that he died before Lilia because who would’ve wanted to take care of him? Not you. And certainly not me.”

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