

Myrna and Ivelisse

by Richie Narvaez (c) 2021

Years later, Myrna sat in the back booth at Burger King. Outside, cars, busses, trucks, shoppers filled the streets under the elevated train on Broadway. In here, low, bad music hummed. The floor was sticky, the red booths were cracked and nasty, and the fluorescent lights over her head were busted.

Myrna cleaned her daughter's face and hands again and when she looked up, her sister was standing there, finally.

"I thought you hated this place," Ivelisse said.

"Don't sit down yet." Myrna got up and placed three unfolded napkins on the seat. Ivelisse rolled her eyes.

"This was the most practical place to meet," Myrna said.

A half-eaten burger and fries sat on top of neatly arranged napkins on top of a tray.

"Can I have some of these fr—ugh, they're cold."

"You were supposed to be here a half hour ago," Myrna said.

"You're lucky I even showed. You call me up in the middle of the day and you think I can just get up and go. Just because it's Saturday doesn't I'm not busy."

"I apologize," Myrna said. "Were you doing something important when I called?"

"My nails. Don't give me that look."

Myrna tried to relax her face. She managed a tired, tight smile. "You know what I always admired about you?"

"Say what?"

“*Admired.* You have always known how to find joy in the simplest things. It doesn’t matter that you didn’t have money or a man around, you always seem to be happy.”

“What the hell is this? Is this what you called me for when you never call me? Are you going to finish that burger?”

“Oh my god. Listen. Look at you. You’re a year older, but you looked ten years younger. Me, I don’t think I was ever happy for a moment. Not when I got my law degree. Not when I got my job at the firm or paid off my co-op. Not when I found the man I thought I wanted to spend my life with.”

With her mouth full, her sister said, “My secret is twelve hours of TV a day and anything with cheese on it.”

Myrna said a silent prayer, then out loud she said, “I need a favor.”

“You want one of my kidneys, I bet. I’ll tell you right now, you can k—.”

“Keep your kidneys! *Ai.* I need you to take Jasmine.”

“Babysit?”

“No, more than that. Take her and be her mother. Raise her like she’s your daughter and not your niece.”

“’swhat?”

“She’s a few months old,” Myrna said. “In time she won’t remember who I was.”

Myrna saw the recognition in her sister’s eyes now. Now her sister saw her puffy eyelids, the new bruise on the left side of her face, which, she had to admit, was not unusual.

“You’re freaking me out,” Ivelisse said. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“The funny thing is, I was the one who never wanted a family. I was the one who wanted a career, remember? You were the one who wanted to be a mother, and then after your operation—”

“Don’t remind me.”

“And I was the one who always warned you to stay away from bad men.”

“And then you ended up with one, and he’s a doozy.”

“Exactly,” Myrna said. “But none of us has to worry about Alfredo ever again.”

“What do you mean?”

Ivelisse her followed Myrna’s eye to a duffle bag that sat on the sticky floor next to the booth. A red patch grew on the side.]

“Tell me now that you’re going to take care of my little girl,” Myrna said.

Ivelisse stared at her. “But . . . we can visit . . . “

“I know what jails are like. I’m not going to jail.” Myrna picked up her daughter, pudgy-faced, milk-breathed, precious. “Take her.”

Ivelisse held the baby clumsily, at arm’s length. “Of course.”

Myrna noticed then that the hum of the crowd ordering and wolfing down food had quieted. She took a backpack from the seat next to her. “All of her things are here. Leave before things start happening. There’ll be money for you.”

They both were crying now. “I’ll see that she goes to college. She’ll be a doctor or lawyer.”

“Or she won’t,” Myrna said. “Maybe she’ll spend her weekends just doing her nails and eating cheese. Whatever. Whatever makes her happy.”