

Esperanza

My great-grandmother loved lollipops.

I can only remember ever seeing her once, a red lollipop stuck in her mouth. She loved candy, adored every brand. Yet lollipops were a special treat, a tiny bit of light in a world full of absent memories. Her frail hands, wrinkled and a cold brown, loosely gripped the plain white stick with so very little strength. The lollipops, emphasizing apparent innocence that lay within my great-grandmother. I seem to remember her embracing my grandfather, as I imagined she would do with all her children, although there was a sort of emptiness that suggested she had forgotten who he was. Strange, how memory distorts itself so easily.

Her name was Esperanza, the Spanish word for hope. That word suggests a sort of whimsical feeling, intangible yet ever present. It rolls off the tongue before ending abruptly, as one realizes just how impossible it is to attain such an emotion. Hope has a tendency to become so fake, so artificial. It is an abused word, overused as so its very meaning is corrupted with a sense of commonality. And, with that cursed feeling, comes the status of being mundane. Yet to me, her status as a family member, as an ancestor, prevented me from applying any of those terms to her.

Grandma Hope, as she was often referred to, was a figure of myth to me. I can only remember her near her very end, in the final years of her life. Her memories had long since escaped into an emptying void, and perhaps she lost herself there too. I, of course, will never know. I met her empty, a shell in the eyes of a bouncy little girl. Yet something about her remained present, something so innately human. Perhaps it was the way her hands gripped the lollipop's white stick, seeming as if she was about to drop it while somehow keeping it in her fingers. The way she held on while all else said she should not be able to.

My grandfather spoke of her in what I perceived to be a fond manner, his eyes glazing over as he recalled little stories in relation to her. Transported into nostalgia, he would mention her in his stories about when he was a kid. The time he was throwing rocks with and at his friends and they chipped someone's tooth, the time he got left behind by the Greyhound bus with his devilish little brother. Grandma Hope always made her way into those stories, inserted in somewhere in the narrative.

I believed that my grandmother was a perfectly amazing woman. I would imagine her in a kitchen, preparing food for the three rowdy children who were tearing up the small house. I could see her in a flowered apron, setting a glass bowl with steaming contents onto it. I thought that perhaps she cut up my grandfather's tamales, waiting quietly while he chased after his younger siblings.

Perhaps my grandfather would have been wearing a striped shirt, mud smeared all over it from the day's earlier activities. His little brother would likely wear overalls with the same earthy substance splattered on his cheeks, the reminders of morning play. Meanwhile, their little sister, Olga, would be wearing an unstained white dress, little pink buds scattered about its print. They would cheer at the discovery of hot tamales on the table, devouring the food like the wolf pups they were.

I imagined my grandfather's life to be like that: idealistic. My brain did not comprehend the poverty in which Grandma Hope had found herself in, nor the immense strains of being a widowed Mexican-American in the forties. To me, the small house in which my grandfather grew up would be uncluttered because of cleanliness and not because of scarce money.

Grandma Hope loved dancing. My grandfather would always laugh when he mentioned that. I would imagine my great-grandmother in a red dress, heeled feet flying across the dance floor. I could feel the rhythm of her feet, matching the beat of salsa perfectly as she whirled across the room. I had only ever met Grandma Hope in her elder years, but I could so easily see her as a young woman out for a night of dancing.

Eventually, that salsa turned into a tango. The rush of self-expression, the drive to show off, it all morphed into a more subtle artform. It was dancing nonetheless, and the red dress that I saw Grandma Hope wearing turned itself from a fearsome whirlwind into a gentle sea. My great-grandmother's hands flew from being high in the air to on a man's strong shoulders, obliging to dancing with a lovely partner.

Grandpa never talked about that partner. It took me years to discover his existence, and then the image of my great-grandmother began to morph into something different.

I still imagined her dancing the night away, flying in a solo dance and flourishing in a duo. It was a beautiful image still, the love blossoming between the two. Grandma Hope had spent so many years without her husband, visiting his grave and managing the children he left behind. Finally, in her eyes, she had found a chance to be free herself, unburdened by the chains of motherhood.

While my great-grandmother spun across the dance floor, balanced by a new dance partner, my grandpa was alone at home with his brother and sister. He and his brother plotted against Olga, their little sister, still dressed in that clean flower dress of her's. Eventually one of the trio would grow hungry, and then the other two would quickly follow. Then the three children would return to the kitchen, this time without their mother. They would search through empty cabinets, finally coming up with a few lollipops that they had found tucked away in the corner.

Gleeful fingers would weave their way through thin paper, tearing it off and then stuffing their mouths with hard deliciousness. My grandpa and his siblings would smile, all previous rivalries between the brothers and sister forgotten as sugar was consumed. Time would be lost as the three continued through the lollipop stash, hunger long forgotten and endless desire now replacing it. The three radiated naive bliss.

That was when my great-grandmother would return home, with her dance partner's hand in her's.

The three children would scurry off, leaping into bed with lollipops still stuck in their mouths. The dance partner would chuckle and make a light joke at the children's expense. Then Grandma Hope would smile and laugh in response.

I don't have an image for that dance partner. I cannot place any face to him, only height and hands. I imagine him as someone tall, muscled shoulders looming over the three children. He must have been handsome, I know that much. He remains nameless in my mind, but I imagine my great-grandmother must have whispered his name many times, her entire self possessed by her love for the man.

I imagine they must have been dancing for long hours after sunset. I can see Grandma Hope whirling around on the dance floor, lights dying her brown skin every color of the rainbow. Her hair, pinned up earlier that day, would come loose as she spun around and landed in his arms. He would have grinned, bright and straight teeth catching the light as they were pressed against each other.

They would return home, hand in hand. This pattern must have repeated itself, spanning years, and the lollipop stash disappeared at his request. He grew comfortable in my grandfather's home, and he must have thought of himself as a father figure for the three children. He never married, he was never an actual father to my grandpa or his brother.

When I first learned of this man, whose name has been purposefully lost, I found a new image entering my mind. Grandma Hope would return home, and go into her bedroom to take off her earrings and let down her hair. He would then look at my grandfather, or perhaps his brother, and a frown would appear on his face.

He would tell them that they should not be up so late.

They would respond with a snarky comment.

His hands would grab theirs', and he would drag them into a room on the far side of the small house. His hands would be large and scratch my grandfather's wrists. I could see him restraining my grandfather, just a boy in his early teens, with one hand. The other would undo his belt and then send it flying through the air.

Perhaps Olga would wait for her brothers to be released. She must have not gotten what my grandfather and his brother did, or at least as frequently. She and her brothers grew, and I imagine she found herself listening to her siblings' cries in that room more and more often as time went on. Olga would quickly outgrow her pink budded dress, and perhaps she would fall into the fifties trend of wearing polka dot dresses.

That's how I imagine her, waiting outside the doorway for her brother to leave the room. Grandma Hope must have been doing something else, must have been off somewhere else. Maybe she was in the kitchen, or out dancing and waiting for him to come meet her. Wherever she was, she was not there.

I imagine that when he was done testing his belt, Olga found herself being yanked into the room. I try not to think about it, but images of rough hands tearing at polka dot fabric haunt me, as do the echos of her cries as he did the unspeakable... and then there was betrayal of when my great-grandmother took his side.

Decades later, my grandfather embraced his mother. I thought then that he was thinking of everything that she had done for him. Now I wonder if he was thinking about everything she did not do for Olga.