

JANELLE GARCIA

On Billboards, In Dreams

Sara felt the moment her cousin, Marina, was born. Yes, they were born minutes and miles apart, but Sara came first, and she knew the moment Marina took her first breath; she felt it. It felt as if someone had stuffed one of her ears with cotton and pressed one of her eyes shut until the moment Marina was born, and then all at once she could see and hear everything. She tells Ella this now, although it's not the first time.

"Why the moment my mother was born?" Ella asks. "Why not before, in utero, when you both truly began existing? And I won't even pretend to understand your analogy. So one eye and one ear is tuned into your body and the other to hers? How could your newborn mind even understand what you were seeing or hearing, much less recall, now, over fifty years later, what that felt like?"

Sara agrees that perhaps her analogy is a poor or confusing one. Maybe it was more like someone flinging a window open so that she suddenly became aware of not only what was happening in the room, but also outside, on the street below. But without a doubt, she remembers. She remembers everything since the day she was born.

Ella sighs and fumbles with her purse then begins combing Sara's hair. Sara lies on her side, her back to Ella, and she can feel Ella combing her hair straight out and away from her head in a gray fan that must cover her entire hospital pillow. She wonders if it makes her look like she's running or flying or maybe just resting at the bottom of the sea.

"So this window," Ella says, "are you hanging out of it, looking out? Or are you clear across the room and only guessing that the sounds you're hearing are the sounds of traffic or someone getting mugged? Is it a tiny window with frosted glass or one of those that go from the floor to the ceiling?"

Sara says forget it, just forget it. She's sick and too old to play this game. Call the nurse; she's ready for sleep.

It's been fifteen years since she last saw her daughter, Ella. These are the things Marina remembers about her: what her fingernails looked like—bitten to the quick, the tips of her fingers extending round and meaty beyond the truncated nails. The heat that rose from her head and the sweat that soaked through her hair almost immediately whenever she fell asleep. Toes that always smelled slightly vinegary even when they were clean. The give of her face whenever Marina kissed it. How her widow's peak, stark and black, cleaved her pale forehead in perfect symmetry. Eyebrows that furrowed together, nearly meeting in the middle, like two fingers stretching for each other, just out of reach.

But as a whole, Ella's face is impossible to recall. Her face only comes to Marina in dreams.

During the day, Marina looks for that face everywhere, and sometimes she finds faces that are close enough. Baby faces and toddler faces and five- and six-year-old faces seem to outnumber the faces of older children and young women and adults.

Today Marina spots a little girl at the grocery store with a face shaped just like Ella's—the broad forehead, the pointed chin. The little girl must be four or five years old. She smiles, and her tiny teeth, spaced far apart so that no two teeth touch, are just like Ella's. But it isn't just the teeth and the face. The little girl has Ella's ears, too. And while the nose is not quite right, the possibility of Ella's widow's peak, hidden underneath the girl's heavy bangs, remains. The little girl does not just resemble Ella, she could be Ella.

Marina drops the cantaloupe she was squeezing, and it falls to her feet with a dull thud, cracking open and spilling its stringy seeds all over the speckled linoleum. The girl's mother turns and stares at Marina, and Marina immediately feels guilty. She's sure the woman has read her thoughts. She's aware of Marina's momentary certainty that this woman purchased Marina's own daughter illegally and smuggled her over from Cuba. She knows Marina's plans to follow her to the grocery store parking lot, where Marina will steal her daughter back while the woman loads her groceries into the trunk of her car, distracted and unaware.

Almost daily, Marina has to remind herself that Ella is no longer a five-year-old or seven- or twelve-year-old—she's a grown woman and a complete stranger. If Ella were to pass her on the street today, Marina wouldn't recognize her because she's too busy searching the faces of little girls.

Sara dreams Marina's dreams. She discovered this when they were just four years old. Marina regularly slept over at Sara's house because her mother worked nights at a hotel in the La Habana. On one of those nights, they both awoke at the same moment. In the dark, they cried and told each other about the teeth they had seen in the wall. Terrified, they waited until morning when they began searching behind Sara's father's crucifixes for the teeth, each one yellow and filed to a point, that had gnashed at them in their dream. Each dream thereafter was the same for both girls. Marina would describe one of her dreams, and Sara would agree she had dreamed the exact same thing. This continued until they were about seven years old when Marina refused to tell Sara any more of her dreams.

"You don't really dream my dreams," she told Sara. "You just wait for me to tell you what I dreamed, and then you just agree with me. You're lying."

To prove her wrong, Sara began calling Marina first thing in the morning each day, detailing whatever she could remember having dreamed about the night before.

"I was you, and you were at the beach, and you lost your favorite pair of red shoes in a big wave. You were flying over your grandmother's house, but you didn't know how to land, and you crashed into her roof, and she was mad and called you a devil, and you told her devils can't

fly, only angels can. You were trying to scream because you were lost in the dark, but no sounds came out, and you tried to run, but your legs didn't work, and then you said wake up, wake up, wake up, and you did, and so did I."

Marina would deny that she had dreamed those dreams or simply say she didn't have a dream at all until the night they both dreamed that Marina's mother died.

Her skin was blue and purple and her body bloated, and a terrible smell came from her mouth, which hung open. Marina leaned in close, crying and begging her to wake up, when large red ants began crawling out of her mouth and nose.

Sara called Marina triumphantly in the morning, describing each dreamy detail down to how Marina's mother had smelled just like the dead dog they had passed on the side of the road two weeks before on their way to school. Marina began sobbing into the telephone and refused to walk to school with Sara that day. Afterwards, Marina's mother made sure the daily calls stopped. Sara and Marina never spoke of their dreams again.

Marina doesn't have any pictures; she didn't take any with her the day she left Cuba. She was traveling by sea on a homemade raft, after all; she had to travel light. The raft could capsize at any moment; she knew that—plenty of people told her that. Everyone had a story about a brother-in-law who angled his body the wrong way when a small wave approached and upended his raft, sending him and all his carefully rationed supplies into the night sea, or a distant cousin who sent everyone tumbling into murky waters after trying to snatch a fish out of the ocean barehanded, or a former neighbor who simply fell out of her raft while urinating off the edge, going in ass-first with her panties tangled around her ankles. Pictures were just impractical. Losing them to the roiling Caribbean was another disappointment Marina chose to avoid. And more than that, she didn't need pictures of the very people she planned on being reunited with very soon—just picking out her favorite pictures was too final a gesture.

It's why she doesn't have a single picture of her daughter, Ella. She sometimes wonders which picture she'd rather have now if she could have only one: a snapshot of Ella as a cherubic infant, all soft and fleshy, toothless and wide-eyed in her bassinet, her plump right leg kicked over the side and flashing the pink sole of her juicy, unlined foot or one of Ella as a girl of six in her school uniform, her arms and legs grown thin and knobby, and her grin revealing too-large, serrated incisors that her small, still-practically-a-baby face hadn't yet grown into.

There was also that picture of a toddler-sized Ella biting into a lime wedge, her mouth twisted into a half-frown and one eye squeezed shut. It was one of the pictures Marina had kept taped to the edge of her dresser mirror—a picture she glanced at once a day, at least. She remembers the picture, but she doesn't remember the moment itself, when she let Ella bite into the wedge of lime and snapped the photo, leaving a blurry slice of Marina's arm and hand floating along the left edge of the photograph—proof she'd been there. She regrets the loss of the memory more than the loss of the photograph.

She doesn't have any pictures of Sara, either, which is why coming across a picture of one of Sara's billboards quite by accident while flipping through a Cuban travel guide at a bookstore causes her to react the way she does.

A small caption describes how many Cubans "revere Sara Sobretodos, a well-known revolutionary activist and popular symbol of the Communist movement." The billboard is one that Marina has never seen herself—one of Sara chopping sugar cane in the countryside, a machete resting on her shoulder and her face upraised to the sky while in the background, others chop on, heads down, backs bent, several of their machetes caught mid-swing.

It's just a picture of a picture of an idiotic, staged scene. Marina knows this, but her heart still races, and soon her ears begin to ring. She fumbles through her purse, her hand groping blindly for a pen she is sure is in there. The travel guide clutched in her other hand, she feels the zipper of her wallet, the teeth of her keys, a tube of lip balm, and several individually-wrapped throat lozenges before her fingers close around a retractable pen. Carefully, her face inches from the picture of Sara, Marina traces a curled handlebar mustache onto Sara's unsmiling face.

The mustache just makes Sara look comical. It's not the effect she was going for at all, so Marina begins slashing away at the pocket-sized book with her pen. First she goes for Sara's face, her eyes, her machete, then she's attacking the entire page, shredding not only the page with Sara on it, but dozens of the pages behind it.

Marina can feel the cashier watching her, and it's not long before an officious looking woman, clearly the store manager, stomps towards her, cordless phone in hand. She keeps her distance and calls out: "Now that is vandalism, and I will call the police."

Marina pays for the book, but she refuses to take the bag the cashier holds out to her. Instead she yells. She orders the cashier and the store manager and anyone else within earshot to take their dirty propaganda and put it in the bathroom so all of their customers can wipe their asses with it.

Marina sits in her car with the engine running. Twenty minutes pass before the shaking in her hands subsides. She doesn't know what seeing Sara in the flesh will do to her. And Marina's afraid of seeing Ella too, of reuniting with a woman that will not meet a single one of her expectations, particularly the illogical ones that insist Ella did not grow into a woman at all but remained suspended as a six-year-old somehow, just as Marina left her, in her school uniform, her braids loose and uneven, her eyes bulging with tears.

Still, the fact that she hasn't yet burnt Sara's letter is a good sign.

Sara asks the nurse for sleeping pills. Her head hurts, she says, and she hasn't slept in days. In truth, she doesn't want to sleep without the pills because without them, she dreams, and in her dreams, she dies. Sometimes her dead body is on the front page of a Miami newspaper. Sometimes her death is broadcast on every television station—the day's top story.

Sometimes, she can see herself on the ground nearby, a crowd of onlookers gathering around the large mound that is her body. Each time she doesn't mourn or cry, but instead dances and shrieks and hugs herself, her body small and compact, her hands unmistakably Marina's.

The nurse frowns at Sara. "Another headache?" she asks. "Better order more tests. That is a bad sign, Señora Sobretodos."

Sara's tired of telling the nurses her last name is not Sobretodos. They refuse to call her Sara Torrez. They say Sobretodos meaningfully whenever they see her, determined that no one forget who she is.

The nurse walks off, and Sara is left without sleeping pills. She can't tell if she is more tired of fighting sleep or of dreaming the dreams. She struggles to pull herself out of bed and slides into the chair at the corner of her room. At this time of day, the sun shines directly through the window across from the chair. Through the glass, the heat from the sun is magnified. The heat makes Sara uncomfortable, which in turn keeps her awake, so she extends her arms and legs as far as the narrow room will allow, exposing as much skin as possible to the light. Last week, she managed to get a sunburn this way, and the peeling skin kept her occupied for days. She wants the sun's light to burn her, to keep her awake, to keep the world around her so bright, it will never be dark again. And just when she thinks it's working, just when she's sure she'll never dream again, she falls asleep.

The letter arrives in a thin envelope marked international post. Even the quality of the paper feels foreign, not white enough, slightly too brittle, as if the tree bark resisted its transformation to stationary. Inside are the words "Come home" and nothing more. The paper and the envelope both smell of sunburnt skin and aloe, and Marina knows the letter is from her cousin, Sara.

She regrets not having any pictures of the real Sara, the one who always wanted to be behind the camera because she hated the way she looked—the way she made everyone look so small and how that, in turn, made her look so much taller, bigger. It was why Sara only liked the pictures of herself where she was photographed up close and alone, without any person or object to act as a point of reference for scale or proportion. Pictures of Sara in front of the sea or sprawled in the grass were the best. Pictures of her sitting in a chair, any chair, or standing next to her father, who, for whatever reason, always hunched whenever Sara stood near him, were the worst. And yet, Sara agreed to all those ridiculous state pictures of her marching alongside crowds of children, many of them clinging to her legs with flags in their fists, ready, it seemed, to scale her and stab their flags into the top of her head. Then there was the series of billboards in which Sara defeats an imperialistic Uncle Sam by squeezing him between her thumb and forefinger, poised to blow him into outer space with her gigantic, pursed lips.

The Sara of Marina's youth, the one who walked with a pronounced hunch, shoulders rounded, arms crossed around her collapsed chest, so obviously trying to make herself

smaller, is undetectable in all of the public images.

Now her memories of Sara are much like her memories of Ella: just fractured bits. That is, until this dream. Marina sees Sara's face, not just in pieces, but in its entirety, with all of its subtleties and severities. She is whole, within reach. Her body a solid thing, casting shadows. And her face, with all of its curves and angles, smiles down at her, talks to her, looks at her, all of the rancor from their last parting erased. Marina can even smell her breath, a mixture of chamomile and peppermint. But then the dream is over before Marina can ask to see Ella—Ella, who was supposed to stay with Sara, who was never supposed to leave her side until it was time for her to join Marina in Miami. She cries just as Sara's face fades with the dark, leaving in its place a dull ache in her head and in her chest, as if she's been holding her breath for too long.

Sara always said she could feel the moment Marina was born because she was born first, and shortly after taking her first breaths, she felt Marina enter the world and take hers. It was her window, she told Marina. She could hear the things Marina heard, see through Marina's eyes, feel what she felt. "If only," Sara often lamented, "you could feel what I feel, too."

Now Marina wonders what Sara could hear through that gaping window in her mind. If she was quiet and without distraction, everything, Sara often claimed. Except that when Marina left Cuba, when it became clear that she would always be here and they, despite Sara's vague assurances, would always be there, she imagined political boundaries and geographical distance sealing the one-way path from Sara's mind into hers. No passport, no passage.

Yet the letter arrives: a single thread, the finest silk from a spider's web, imperceptible until you have unknowingly walked into it, and your skin's countless nerve endings register its ghostly presence. A thread cast across worlds, to be severed and forgotten or to be rewound, bit-by-bit, to its origins. "Come home."

Marina feels the thread brush against her cheeks as she goes through her dim house, steering clear of her unmade bed, averting her eyes from her picture-less walls. Its pull is gentle and persistent, and bits of her begin to submit.