

## GHOST STORIES

My grandmother is all skin and bones. She lies in the hospital bed, morphine weeping steadily into the IV drip. I taste the saltiness of the tears streaming down my face, wipe them away with my hand, then squeeze my grandmother's fragile hand once more. She squeezes back faintly, and gives me an almost imperceptible smile, but her eyes are closed. I hope she is drifting through a dream she doesn't want to wake up from. She does not know who I am, only that I am here, offering comfort and a hand to hold as she crosses to the other side, the unknown. It's better than having to do that alone. Still, I wish she had a last moment of clarity. I wish she remembered who I was. I wish she remembered who *she* was. "Te quiero," I whisper fervently, willing her to understand. She needs to know that she is loved.

Death is a right. We are all entitled to the same end, the same rest, the same peace—no matter who we are. We earn it through the very act of living. I am not haunted by death. I am haunted by the ghosts of the things left unsaid. Instead, I'm haunted by the words left unsaid and the questions left unanswered, by the reverberating silence that echoes in her absence. Worst of all, I'm haunted by the idea that she forgot her own stories. So I cut yellow flowers, and place them in a vase to mourn the unspoken words, the unanswered questions, the untold and forgotten ghost stories.

My grandmother taught me about the power of stories through the retelling of her quiet rebellion, how she hid books that were forbidden by an authoritarian regime in Cuba.

Silently, she passed them into the hands of others, preserving not just words, but voices—realms of thought and feeling she refused to let be silenced, refused to let vanish, refused to let become ghost stories. Stories are so important that when a society silences its stories it is haunted by the ignorance born by the ghosts of forgotten lessons and ideas.

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Weeks later, I received her ashes in a cardboard box. I hold it gingerly in my hands. It feels lighter than I expected. She didn't leave much behind: a few sets of clothes, a pair of shoes. How strange—a whole entire life reduced down to a little box and a pair of shoes. And all the photos, of course. A museum's worth of photos, and memories, and stories. In the end, it is through stories that I honor her, through the retelling, rekindling, of my memories of her. Though a part of her lives on in my blood, I feel the vacuum she left—a quiet that aches. So I speak out into the void, and I discover that even the hush of death cannot conquer the words she passed on to me. I remember her not only through the love I had for her, but in the stories I tell—a balm for the ache. This is how I keep her alive: through the echo of her voice in mine, reverberating in each line I speak or write.