
HOW FIRE IS A STORY, WAITING

BY MELINDA PALACIO

My grandmother caught the flame in her thick hands.
Curled fingers made nimble by kaleidoscope embers.
Fire burns hot and cold if you know where to touch it, she said.

I watched the red glow spit and wiggle as it
snaked down the thin timber, a striptease,
born out of the festive sound of a half-filled matchbox.

Through orange windows framed by obsidian eyes, I saw the child she once was.
A little girl who raised herself because her mother had a coughing disease.
Blood on her mother's handkerchief didn't stop her from dreaming.
Maria Victoria was going to be a singer with her deep, cinnamon stick voice.

She watched *novelas* in the kitchen while waiting for dough to rise.
Her body, heavy with worry for two families and three lifetimes. She tucked
Mariachi dreams under her girdle. Lullabies escaped on mornings
warmed by her song falling into gas burners turned on high.

The flame on a stove was never the same. It had a bad hangover,
didn't remember the many matches lit when its starter broke down.

My grandmother rolled paper into a funnel,
stole fire from the pilot to light the stubborn burner on the right.
Crimson burned blue on the white paper, its folded edges
curled black like a lace ruffle on a skirt.

The finicky flame can't comment on its magic.
The thousands of tortillas and pancakes cooked over the years.

How I burned myself roasting a hot dog campfire style.
How a melted pencil smudged under my sister's eyelid makes her beautiful.

My grandmother noticed the time, almost noon.
She needed to make three dozen tortillas to feed her family of thirteen.
The show over, she blew the match into a swirl of gray squiggles,
snuffed before it had a chance to burn hot on her finger.

Funny, how fire is a story, waiting.



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