

# A PICTURE TAKEN ONE SUNDAY, MANY YEARS AGO

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Here is the street. Here are the trees that line it.

This is the coconut tree where once, while playing with your cousins on one of those Sundays you spent here with your parents, you stepped on an anthill. That Sunday you learned that it was good to have a man around the house. You could not make yourself hurt the ants even though they caused you so much pain. All you could do was to run inside the house and cry.

Here is the anthill. Or to be more precise, the remains of it after your grandfather poured kerosene on it and set it on fire.

Here is the *acacia* in front of your grandparents' house, the one you leaned on to on those Sunday afternoons of your youth, with arms crossed, eyes closed, and counting down while the neighborhood kids hid themselves. This is the same tree you climbed the summer you were eight because you didn't believe your mother when she told you that girls don't climb on trees. Only monkeys and boys climb trees, she had said.

You still didn't believe her even after you fell and broke your arm.

That was how you came to spend the rest of that summer with your arm in a cast. That was the same summer you began learning to love reading. Your father bought you many books; all of them about beautiful princesses. Your father liked to call you his little princess.

In those books your father bought, the princesses are known throughout the kingdom for their beauty and kindness. But they are also envied and hated by others for these very same qualities, usually by their stepmothers and witches. In one story the princess is locked up in a tower, condemned to spend the rest of her days there. In another book, she is condemned to a death-like state by eating of a poisoned fruit. Always, in these stories, a prince comes along to rescue the princess, and they would live, as the book tells it, happily ever after.

In the book where the princess is jailed in a tower, the prince climbs up using the princess' long, blonde hair; in the other, the prince is so enamored by the princess' snow-white skin and blood-red lips that he kisses her awake.

You wished that summer that you had blonde hair and snow-white skin and not the oil-black hair and brown skin you were born with.

You also read about that girl Alice, and how she fell into a rabbit hole one fine day and came out in a place called Wonderland. You wondered then, like you still do sometimes, late at night, when your husband is sound asleep, if it was that easy to go to another world and leave everything you know behind.

Here is the neighbor's car, a broken Volkswagen Beetle that hasn't moved since before you were born. The same car you hid behind all those Sundays you spent on this street, where once, when you were ten, a boy from the neighborhood kissed you.

You were surprised because it didn't feel as disgusting as you thought it would be. You actually liked it, and you were naïve enough, being ten, to brag to your cousins about it. You learned that weekend never to trust anyone completely, not even family. You weren't allowed to play with boys anymore, because your mother told you that boys were dirty and didn't take baths.

You didn't believe her until you met the fat bully who pulled your hair and called you names. But even then you understood that not all boys were like the big fat bully, and they were not all like the boy who kissed you either. Boys were an unknowable country that you were kept away from with all-girl schools, strict and watchful *yayas*, and high walls like the ones that closed out your grandparents' house from the rest of the street. You imagined yourself that princess trapped in the high tower.

Here is the house.

This is where you spent countless Sundays with your parents after morning Mass.

This is where your mother grew up. You remember her telling stories about her childhood here. How once she fell off a tree in the backyard, how your grandfather was furious with her and your grandmother. Girls don't climb trees, he told her. She must have believed it for her to tell you the same thing.

Here is your mother standing in front of the house. Like you, she didn't look like a princess in the stories. That is your father next to her, and your grandfather next to him; your mother's prince and her father-king. That is you in front of your mother. You look so much like her.

You wonder now, looking at this old picture and realizing how much you and her were alike, if your mother ever read about the princesses, and wished herself one; or of little Alice, and if she ever wondered what it would be like to fall into a rabbit hole one day and disappear from this world and into Wonderland, and never come back.

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