

El nacimiento
BIRTH

On one side of the glass was the face of Miguel—day zero. On the other side of the glass was the face of Santiago—year five.

The glass reflected back his look of astonishment and the mole on his right cheek. Like the button of a blouse. Like the point of a question mark. And there was only one question on Santiago's mind as he observed his little brother in the crib on the other side of the glass: "Why is he so beautiful?"

Everyone, in fact, thought he was beautiful in a special way. The grown-ups hovering over Santiago kept saying so out loud, like a lullaby. Everyone who passed through the hospital corridor and paused before the glass would, at a certain point, say so.

"He's beautiful," they'd say. He was beautiful compared to the seven other newborns, five boys and two girls, some of whom were quite ugly, each of whom was beautiful to their own mother. But Miguel was beautiful to everyone, beyond a shadow of a doubt. While they were looking at him, he turned over and—where he found the strength was anyone's guess—rolled onto his side as if he might pick up and leave. His backside peeked out from underneath the pale blue blanket to reveal a small mole on his buttock. Like the point of an exclamation point.

A nurse entered the room and spotted the boy on his side among the other babies. But when she went to set him on his

back, she couldn't help herself: she took him in her arms, held him to her bosom, squeezed him, and kissed his forehead. For a moment, she stole him. Or maybe he was the one abducting her, carrying her off. That was how Santiago witnessed Miguel make his first conquest, a few hours after the boy had taken his first breath, consummated without a word, not even a look; it was as if Santiago were watching a TV show on the other side of the glass.

When the nurse recalled that Miguel's brother—addled by unanswered questions—and other people were watching on the opposite side of the glass, she placed her hand under the baby's thighs and lifted him in the air like a trophy. Miguel took a breath and contemplated things from on high, from the perspective that he would have all his life, scanning the first slice of the world in front of him. Then, as if to grab hold of it, he reached out his arms and half closed his minuscule fingers, and his lips formed what actually appeared to be a smile, the first of a million, which emerged out of nowhere, like the sun when it rains.

"Why is he so beautiful?" asked Santiago again.

"He's so beautiful," someone repeated out loud, then began clapping. A round of applause erupted, which broke the silence and made Santiago's knees shake. It shook the peeling blue walls, the waxed floor, the foundations of the Hospital Regional, the dusty road, the white houses of Mérida, the Paseo de Montejo and the Cathedral of San Ildefonso, the sandy dunes that stretch skyward—the whole sky shook. The universe trembled before Miguel's beauty. All at once the other children in the room, roused by the commotion, began to cry.

Those with prostate or lung cancer, or with bone, liver, and brain metastases, were sleeping on the floor below. On the floor above, wizened old people lay dying on mattresses that reeked of urine. On the floor in between them sunshine

poured through the windows to bless this celebration of Miguel.

The nurse walked out with the newborn and, amid the applause, handed him to Vicente Moya. The man hesitated before taking the child tentatively by his underarms, struggling to find a grip. Stone-faced, proud, the man himself was very handsome. Miguel and his father regarded one another for the first time, under the watch of a handful of relatives and onlookers who had gathered on the landing. It was a sacred scene; the applause faded. No one was breathing now. Vicente Moya didn't smile because he never smiled. He looked at his son as if he were expecting Miguel to speak first. Miguel ran his fingers through the man's thick moustache, tugged them—tickling him a little in the process—and, instead of tearing at his moustache, tore from his father a smile. A splendid, extremely rare, precious smile.

They say that was the only time Vicente Moya ever smiled. They natter on about how, had he smiled that way a little more in life, crowds of *mujeres calientes* would have jockeyed to replace the plain woman he'd taken for a wife. Others suspect that he never even smiled that morning at the Hospital Regional, just grit his teeth and grimaced. But the truth is that Vicente Moya lifted baby Miguel and, after flashing a smile, managed to string together a complete sentence.

“¡Miren que guapo!” he shouted with a hint of surprise.

“Look at how handsome he is!” he repeated with deep satisfaction.

In response, another intense round of applause erupted, and Hermenegildo Serrano, the baby's elderly grandfather, a dancer who hailed from the state of Jalisco, switched on the battery-operated tape deck he carried with him everywhere, which always played “Jarabe Tapatío,” and began to hop about on his spindly legs in the folk style of the land of his birth. The happy music flooded the ward, and while Vicente Moya began

wiggling his hips and Miguel rocked to the rhythm, everyone clapped and swayed as they formed a procession to bring Maria Serrano the *guapo* son she had just given birth to—the son now held in the air like the baby Jesus.

Between the floors of the dying, a dozen people were celebrating as if there were nothing in life but life, beauty, Miguel's smile, the cheerful sun, cheerfulness itself, mariachi music, a new and brighter future, as if his birth gave rise to hope, as if on the upper and lower floors a miracle might occur.

At the end of that procession headed up by Vicente Moya, with Grandpa Hermenegildo and his tape deck just behind him, followed by a few neighbors, the nurse, and others who just happened to be passing by and were now laughing, dancing, and singing with joy, stood little Santiago—forgotten. He listened to his grandpa's favorite song, which had become his favorite song, and followed a foot behind the procession with his head down.

In Room 6 of the second floor of the Hospital Regional, Maria Serrano was waiting for Miguel. She heard the music in the hall drawing closer. She had seen her son for just a minute, just as he came into the light. The doctor had held him upside down by his ankles and spanked him, and Miguel had let out a burst of breath.

"He's got a small mole on his tush," said the doctor.

Then he turned him right side up to get a look at his face.

"He's beautiful," he added, and handed him over to the nurse.

Until then that was all the mother knew about Miguel, that and an upside-down glance that she'd managed to get as she craned her neck from the bed of the delivery room. The music from Grandpa Hermenegildo's tape deck was now three steps from the door, now two, one more. In came the heavy tread of Vicente Moya carrying wispy Miguel, who floated in the air

like a dark-haired angel. When he appeared in Room 6, soaring to “Jarabe Tapatío,” the women lying on the cots next to Maria Serrano all melted and sighed in unison. But she held her breath and, with all the strength she had left in her body, extended her arms to receive what was rightfully hers.

Maria Serrano had never been beautiful. That fact had been more apparent ever since she’d married Vicente Moya. She’d become the ugly wife of a handsome husband—that was that. Likewise, as soon as Miguel had finally landed on top of her, it was immediately clear that from then on, this woman—pale and exhausted after giving birth—would also be the ugly mother of a handsome son. Had someone handed her a mirror, had someone shown her a picture of her first embrace with her newborn, perhaps she would have come to the same conclusion. Then again, perhaps not; there were some things Maria Serrano seemed incapable of seeing. In her white gown on the steps of the church, she had simply smiled, the way she was smiling now, the way she had smiled five years ago when little Santiago had landed in her arms.

Ah, yes, Santiago, who was entering Room 6 behind the others, beneath the action, noticed by no one. No one except Maria Serrano, that is, who seemed incapable of seeing certain things yet always saw them.

“*Es hermosa adentro,*” they said about her. “She’s beautiful on the inside.”

So, while all eyes were on Miguel, Maria Serrano lifted her own and found Santiago behind the crowd. Felt him, more than anything.

“Santiago,” she whispered, holding Miguel tightly.

“Santiago!” she said again, louder this time, so that he’d hear her.

But she was drowned out by the shouts and music. So Hermenegildo Serrano pressed the off button with his withered finger and stopped the music cold. As the music died, so



did the shouts. A hush fell over the room, the kind that reigned over the other two floors of the hospital.

“Santiago,” Maria Serrano whispered sweetly.

The crowd parted, made way for the contracted body of Santiago, his fists clenched, his eyes solitary and wounded as he looked at the intruder in her arms.

“Come here,” Maria Serrano commanded.

Santiago finally screwed up the courage to approach his mother. His brother. He ran to the edge of the bed, placed his hands on the sheets, and breathed in Miguel; the baby, he thought, smelled like cookies.

“What do you think?” the woman murmured.

Santiago didn’t know how to unscramble his thoughts.

“He’s beautiful,” he repeated mechanically.

Maria Serrano looked closely at him; her eyes penetrated deep inside him.

“You are too,” she said softly in his ear.





Guayaberas y palabras en el viento
GUAYABERAS AND WORDS IN THE WIND

When he needed to, Vicente Moya spared no expense, and he always dressed elegantly on account of his line of work. Guayabera salesman.

“Tu trabajo tienes que llevarlo contigo,” he believed. You must carry your work with you.

Every day he wore the shirts he sold. Even in the rain, even at funerals. They fell straight down his massive back. In his untucked white shirt, Vicente Moya was always the tallest salesman. He didn't smile in the shop either, yet he knew how to sell guayaberas because he lived in them. They looked perfect on him, eye-catching, worth more than they were: you wound up buying one without even wanting to.

The truth is he liked his uniform. He knew it the day he first donned one, as a boy, on the occasion of his second cousin's wedding. The following morning he turned up at the Casa de Guayaberas in a guayabera and asked to be hired on a trial basis. The owner of the store wore thick lenses but saw far. Noticing a couple of clients enter, he turned to young Moya.

“Sell three shirts to those two and you're hired.”

Vicente Moya puffed out his chest, took a deep breath, and headed over to the pair of strangers who would decide his fate. A step away from them, he held out his arms as if he were going to hook them around their necks.

The store owner looked on from a distance; he couldn't hear a word of what was said. The two clients began to nod, then followed Vicente Moya around the store, where the latter





moved as if he'd been born in the racks: he dished out advice, waited outside the fitting room, expertly ran his hand over the cloth, now and then stood in front of the mirror as if to show them a pose or a new style of standing. He returned to the counter with four guayaberas and the two men at his heels.

"I took it upon myself to offer these gentlemen the fourth one on the house," he said. "You can deduct it from my salary, naturally."

The old man took his time to absorb all that had been said, pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose, and quickly worked out what had just transpired.

"*Muy bien*," he finally exclaimed, and drew up the bill.

After that, Vicente Moya became the Casita's best salesman, the only one always wearing a guayabera, even on his days off. And when the old owner passed on to the next life and was replaced by his son, Vicente Moya was given a raise. Which is why he managed to save a little something every month, why he was always dressed as if for a wedding, and why, when the situation demanded, he would spare no expense. Like the time he organized the party for Miguel's homecoming.

Maria Serrano carried her baby out of the Hospital Regional a few days after she'd given birth, at the end of a torrid afternoon. Without anyone's having noticed, the maternity ward had lost a ray of light, as if someone had taken down the Christmas decorations. From that moment on, the lights came on in Casa Moya, where it would always be Christmas, or at least for as long as Miguel was there. One continuous party for which Vicente Moya spared no expense—he would no longer spare expenses: *fiestas* and music would follow Miguel forever. Perhaps that was why, unlike his father, the boy never stopped smiling.

In his third-hand Ford which he drove without a license, Grandpa Hermenegildo kept the tape deck blaring, and, when



mother and son climbed out of the car together, they were greeted at the door by a dozen musicians dressed like cowboys who rolled out a red carpet of *canciones rancheras* on the Moyas' front yard. Six violins, four trumpets, a *vibuela*, and a *guitarrón* heralded the arrival of Maria Serrano and Miguel. All around them were giant bouquets of paper flowers, long tri-color ribbons, and a stream of friends, relatives, and neighbors who had just arrived or were about to arrive. They came from all over Mérida in groups of ten, a hundred. Word had spread throughout the city that Vicente Moya had had a son, a beautiful baby boy, and that the guayaberas salesman was offering *papadzules* and *panuchos* to whomever stopped by to shake hands and welcome the newborn.

His shirt open, a small cigar tucked behind his ear and protruding from his hair, smashed on happiness and tequila, Vicente Moya clutched an empty glass that swung in the wind. He looked disheveled, down-at-heel, his beauty even more bewitching than usual, softened by the effects of alcohol and fatherhood. He went out to meet his wife and son, danced a few steps as he had at the Hospital Regional, gathered up Miguel with his free hand, and lifted him in the air while raising his other hand, as if he were offering both son and glass to God.

Then he kissed Maria Serrano, a kiss that the people of Mérida would talk about for years to come, the women especially. A spontaneous, dramatic, photogenic kiss that, had he been more lucid, Vicente Moya may never have agreed to with all those people looking on. Mothers would tell their daughters about that kiss. They'd say that, on that warm May evening, perched on the palm of Vicente Moya, Miguel suddenly looked down—and took his eyes off God—and learned from his father how to kiss a woman. The daughters, on the other hand, would tell their mothers in the years to come that the lesson hadn't been lost on the boy—not in the slightest.



Santiago was still a child, yet somewhere inside him that scene was imprinted on the film of his soul, as it was on the soul of everyone present. He looked on from the arms of one of Maria Serrano's friends, who squeezed him tight but not tight enough. And when the kiss was over, he couldn't hear his father's voice, the voice of Vicente Moya, who had turned away from his wife and was calling him by name, calling out loudly. "Santiago!" he cried, "Santiago!" Despite being drunk, his father sensed an absence of weight in his left hand—in his hand that held the glass all the way up to the arm attached to his heart; something, or someone, was missing. "Santiago!" cried Vicente Moya. But Santiago didn't hear him. His name got lost on the wind as the crowd latched onto three quarters of the Moya family, as a stream of bodies swept them up, engulfed them, to honor the newborn Miguel, embrace their embrace, celebrate beauty and love, and earn the tortillas they'd been offered by the man of the house.

