ESSAY

In-Between

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Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

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Saturdays were for Pa. That was the agreement my parents made when they split. Ma wasn't fond of the idea. They weren't on good terms, yet she had to share custody. She hated driving to Grove Street to drop Francisco and I off at Pa's hangout spot, the local *cancha*;

even though it was just a twelve-minute drive. Unlike our father, Ma made all the decisions regarding my brother's and my well-being: making sure we were fed, we went to school, we had a place to sleep and clothes to wear. She went so far as to use English more often at home, encouraging us to learn since we went to a monolingual school. All Pa ever did was spend a few hours with us and pay child support, which he missed more than a couple of times. This eventually led Ma to close the child support case in attempts to prevent him from going to jail. She did it for us. She knew how much we cared for him.

"Cristaly, Francisco, *ponte tu ropa.* We're leaving," she howled across the hall. I grabbed the clothes she placed on top of my twin–sized bunk bed and put them on. I slipped on my *chancletas* and headed to the minivan outside our building. We lived here for years. We watched people leave and come in; we watched the building change and age. Everyone knew us. We were the loud Puerto Ricans who played loud music and only talked by yelling.

I was already sweating. Being in the car didn't make it better. We had no air conditioner. The AC fan blew out a couple of months ago, and we never bothered to fix it. Ma blasted bachata music and tried to talk over it. She rambled on about how I have to watch over my brother, that I'm the eldest, and that Pa was unsuitable to take care of us. I didn't pay too much attention. Every week it was the same speech — the same remorse. She regretted having kids with him. He was immature, irresponsible. She was young and imprudent. He was in his twenties and she was in her late teens. He was her escape from her strict parents. Her way of rebelling.

When we reached the park, Pa was standing next to his friends with a half-empty beer. A short man pointed us out to him. He walked up to us. My brother and I got out of the car. "I hope you take care of them like you do with that Heineken." *Why does she have to be sarcastic?* Ma had no filter. If she was pissed, everyone knew. So, they got out of her way. Pa, on the other hand, was used to it. He challenged her. He tried to outwit her. He always ended up losing.

"Ha, no worries."

Ma drove away. We waited until the car disappeared. Once she was gone, we walked down to the three vendors that were centered in front of the playground. Each was surrounded by *borrachos* who cluttered the ground with cigarette butts and bottle caps. Their children were in the playground. Pa tried to make me play with them but they only spoke Spanish. Barely

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understood English. I started to forget Spanish. So, I avoided any interaction at all cost.

Pa went up to Lita. He smiled at her, asking for the hookup. Her husband was next to her. He nodded. She instantly unwrapped the pre–made flour *tortillas* and layered them with *frijoles*, egg, *bistec*, and *mantequilla*. Her final touch was a chunk of *queso duro* sprinkled all over. She was robotic, having done this often enough that it was a habit. Lita grabbed the plates beside her and handed them to us alongside two banana sodas and another cold *cerveza* Pa asked for.

"Pa, *y los tenedores*?"

They laughed. He passed the sodas and plates to us. "Mami, *nosotros somos Hondureños.* We eat with our hands. We don't use forks," he said as he closed one hand, making the sign for eating.

"*Pero, no quiero que mis manos, umm, se. . . se. . . ensu. . . ensucien*," I stuttered, making the most obnoxious whining sound possible.

"*Mami*, that's the point. You get to feel how heavy the *baleada* is." He plodded his way to the bleachers left of the vendors. My brother and I followed. We went up the steps to the first row and sat down. It was much louder here compared to where the vendors were. I felt uncomfortable. There was tension — too much of it. People were frustrated. Players were being yelled and cursed at to pay attention. I focused on Pa. He grabbed the *baleada* in his massive tan hands. He bit into it like a burrito. There was no crunch like the *tacos hondureños* or *tortillas* he usually got us. The ingredients oozed out onto the tray. He picked up the spilled food and placed it back inside. Some of the *frijoles* leaked onto his white shirt. He wiped it off as if nothing happened. It was messy. Pa was usually messy.

I held my *baleada*. He was right. It felt heavy. It barely fit in my hands. The *tortilla* was soft with bumps from the burnt spots. I tried mimicking the way Pa ate. I bit into it like a burrito. The smoothness of the *frijoles* and the *mantequilla* surrounded my tongue. The taste was strong. It had a pungent, ripe taste from the *queso duro*, mixed with that of the fresh avocado. It was different compared to the rice, beans, and *plátanos* Ma cooked at home. Each bite was new. One moment sweet and the next sour or salty. My brother didn't enjoy the food as much as I did. Yet he ate all of it. Halfway through, my shorts tightened and pressed against my waist. I was full. I knew I couldn't eat another bite.

"*Pa, ya, ya terminé.* I can't have anymore."

"*Mami*, why you ask for the *baleada si tu sabías que no puedes terminarlo*?"

"I dunno."

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He took a deep breath and grabbed my tray. He already knew that I wasn't going to finish it. I never do. Pa learned after the first time to only order one, because he was going to end up with another one later on — typically from me. The banana soda had flushed out all the remnants of the *baleada* taste, leaving a nauseating feeling in its place. The soda didn't really have a banana taste, and I still doubt there was anything resembling actual bananas in it. But it was our drink. It was from Honduras.

The cancha was our dad's Honduras away from Honduras. So it became ours. It was the closest thing we had to it since Ma forbade Pa from taking us to his homeland. But we went to hers. We visited Ponce. We experienced it. "Honduras is the land of violence," she often said. The thought of us traveling there terrified her. In her mind, we would stick out. She was probably right. We would stick out. We had lost our *lengua*. We abandoned it. We became Americans only, and for years, it remained that way.

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