

Beer and Bearing

— Arely Anaya —

BOWLING BALL

My family members find joy in telling me stories about my dad to make up for the years I spent without him. They have a way of telling the same stories in different tones at different times in the past to fit their personal image of him. The only story that has remained consistent is the bowling ball story.

Bonfires were the best times for him to get drunk. I thought he looked less of a fuck-up when everyone was getting shit-faced, too. But he always found a way to stand out anyway. He was that guy everyone watched, laughed at, and decided they never wanted to get as drunk as him, or maybe they did.

This night he bragged about how strong he was, how much pain he could take, and now he needed to prove it. He made bets that he could hit his head against a bowling ball like a pro soccer player because apparently having a random bowling ball in your yard and being intoxicated can easily trigger an argument like this. Before anyone could argue that he was bullshitting, it was in the air. No one reacted quickly enough, still chuckling over how much he was talking out of his ass, as he stared up at the ball with his bloodshot eyes. It came back down and when thoughts like *Holy shit he's actually going to fucking do it* crossed their minds for the first few seconds, he was already swinging his head against it like the macho he knew he was.

Eight years, eight months, one week, and three days without my dad was a lot easier than I'd like to admit. I've only spent the last few years communicating with him through phone calls without ever seeing him. He's

told me how much he misses me, how pissed he's been about the years I spent without trying to get in touch, and how my mom screwed him over. Then he usually says he doesn't want to talk about that although he brings it up all the time. At one point, he also told me he was going to die from some rare disease, maybe to scare me into loving him more. All I thought was if he were ever to die, it wouldn't be from something rare. It'd be from one of his addictions.

He's never forgotten to reassure me that he truly does want to see me again. But anytime we've planned to meet he's had some dull excuse not to: car problems, getting fired from his job, wanting to get his life together a little more.

Now suddenly he has no more excuses.

As a sophomore in college on a random Tuesday, all I want to do is get ready for school in peace while still mentally complaining about the hour-and-forty-minute commute. Instead, my dad calls and I think we'll repeat a conversation we've already had. He'll bitch and swear at me in Spanish about something that happened years ago and I'll take it until he ends with how much he loves me and hopes I'm doing good, all in under three minutes, and I'll wonder if he's drunk. But he surprises me this time by asking for my new Illinois address. My stomach drops because not only has my mother always told me to never give him my personal information in fear that he'll kidnap me, kill me, or both while being away from Minnesota, but I'm also living with my stepfather's brother. I picture my drunk dad trying to break into our home and choosing to set it on fire because we won't let him in.

I take too long to answer. He swears under his breath and chuckles in an obviously non-amused manner before asking, "Why don't you want me to know where you live? You're scared of me or something?"

"No, I'll give it to you." I'm not surprised at myself giving in. "I'm on the corner of 23rd and Thomas."

That's it. I'm just on a corner. I'm too scared to say which one but that's as good as I can give him and I wait for him to take it without arguing, hang up, and let me get back to getting ready for school because I don't want to have to ask when he plans on showing up. I'll deal with that some other day. I get ready to hang up, setting my book bag on my desk to fill it with medieval textbooks.

He chuckles again, making me go still, and I don't want to know what's so funny but I ask anyway, "*Qué?*"

His voice softens, "*Mija*, I'm only a few blocks away from you."

I look out my window, sensing someone is watching me but the street

is as busy—yet calm—and as familiar as any other day.

“I’ll text you my address so you can come see me.”

His voice doesn’t soothe me.

I turn away from my window and end up staring at my closed bedroom door for no reason. It’s been more than eight years and he finally wants to meet, without backing out, like we’re just pals ready to catch up instead of a father and daughter separated by alcoholism and domestic abuse.

“Right now?” I quickly regret asking a dumb question.

“When the fuck else?” his rigid tone stabs and makes me want to apologize for no reason.

“OK, *está bien*. See you in a bit.”

He hangs up without saying goodbye.

WATER AND OIL

Some people just don’t mix. What I’m trying to understand is what part of trying for twelve years is worth it? I never found the answer with my parents. I can’t bring myself to ask years later but I know they’d deny that my three older siblings and I spent our childhood standing in between to keep them from killing each other. It came with small risks.

I followed my dad down the stairs wondering if he’d tumble down from how drunk he was and spill his beer because that would’ve been an easier way to end the night. My mom yelled from the top of the steps to have the last word in their argument over another thing I’d never remember. All that comes back is the way he turned back around with his wide bloodshot eyes and his mouth in the middle of a sinister growl. It evaporated the human in him. He was a demon charging up toward my mother, and my siblings and I moved as fast as always to get in between them. We tried pushing him back down. He pushed and fought against us, kids, while my mom looked down at him with a blank face to show she wasn’t scared. As long as we were there to protect her, she was never scared.

I was every time.

He threw his beer can in her direction and missed her head by nearly an inch. Beer had spilled all over my head and face. It burned my eyes and I screamed, thinking I was going to become blind. But then I thought, let me scream louder so I can distract him into thinking I’m really hurt. He ignored me and gave up trying to get past us. He punched a hole in the wall and stomped down the stairs.

24-PACKS AND GHOST STORIES

It was my younger sister's seventh birthday and it was spent at my dad's friend's house. I was eleven. We were treated to cold Little Caesars Pizza, Kool-Aid with not enough sugar, and bland conversation with questions about how my mother was doing and what a surprise it was that she had allowed us to spend the night away from home. My dad and his buddy drank endless twenty-four packs over talk about mostly nothing. I was forced to spend most of the night sitting at their dining room table staring at his wife's innocent obsession of taping deflated balloons of Tweety Bird across their walls along with staring at the clock.

Hours past midnight and the wait was over. We were going home but I was too anxious to get in the car with him. I got in knowing exactly how drunk he was. He took his time to get his seatbelt on and find a station that was playing catchy corridos but he kept accidentally clicking back to the station telling ghost stories. A woman spoke of her husband dying eight months ago and she still saw his face next to hers every night when she slept in her bed. I glanced at his face too many times to notice he didn't look an ounce of sleep deprived. He looked as awake as when we had first gotten to his friend's house or maybe more.

The second we were out of the driveway he started speeding. If the sun had been rising, it would've been an easy sight to distract me from thinking how the vibrations of the engine were reaching my chest and keeping my back and head stuck to my seat. All there was to see was the black sky, empty roads, streetlights and, most of all, the speedometer. My sister sat quietly in the backseat making me almost forget she was there. When I remembered, I started picturing us crashing into a lamppost and her skull shattering through the windshield.

I was too afraid to ask him to slow down because a dumb question could easily mess with his temper, especially when he was drunk. So, I just sat there without realizing how much my hands were dripping with sweat and how hard I was breathing until he started laughing, stopping me mid-thought about death.

He slowed down and said, "I'm only joking. Don't ever drive like that."

I walk down Thomas and take a right on 22nd. I can't think of another time I've felt this anxious besides the moment I stood in the parking lot of a funeral home four days after my older brother had died and I couldn't bring myself to walk inside. I feel just as scared. But I also feel just as nauseous as the time I chugged down spoiled milk as thick as pudding. I can't help thinking my dad is going to do everything my mom repeats to me anytime I bring him up to her.

Kidnap me, kill me, or both.

I turn left on Lake and right on Broadway. I slow down the closer I get to the address he texted me because I've been on this main street dozens of times to commute to school. He's walked on this same street as me, for I don't know how long, and I'm just learning this now. I stand in the middle of the sidewalk blocking my eyes from the sun as I stare further down the street. He's at one of these many storefronts. I get distracted by how vibrant everything looks at the beginning of the week and how my mood doesn't match.

Mothers walk out of the Torres grocery store with plastic bags while their little ones run ahead of them with Manita lollipops and Pelon Pelo Rico candy at the corner of their lips. Aracely's Bakery has their main doors wide open with balloons tied to the handles. I think about the tamales and gorditas they've been promoting since they moved to this new location. People enter and exit with white paper bags and an employee walks with a tray of bolillo bread. He walks down the sidewalk in the direction I should be going.

I follow him and I stop when I see him enter El Taconazo restaurant. That's when I see my dad step out to hold the door open. I know it's him. He's the same short man with black hair and a mole on his nose. He has an apron on with work boots and it's such a familiar sight, remembering all those years he worked as a cook. It's familiar yet different. I wasn't sure what I was expecting eight years to do to him, but all I see is his mustache is gone, hair grayer, skin more worn like he's been wasting away, getting older, and a slight rash on his cheeks. My mom would automatically say from drinking too much.

I walk in his direction and he doesn't stop to stare at me or say hello when he finally sees me. He hugs me. I'm five feet tall and I feel taller than him. He feels shriveled up. I force myself to smile to keep from crying. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to cry. My dad is a hard-ass. I think if I cry he'll swear at me. But he starts bawling against my shoulder. I've seen him tear up a few times in my life but never have I heard or seen him sob. It sounds painful, like eight years were the result of me abandoning him instead of the other way around. I push the thought away because I want to feel this moment. It's only my dad and me, although we're in the middle of a busy sidewalk and main street with constant traffic and people. I don't hear anything besides him crying against my ear until he finally breaks the embrace. He takes a quick, deep breath, trying to wipe those tears away as quickly as he had let them go because a man like him isn't suppose to cry like he just did.

He says, "*Vente, mija*, let's go inside."

He walks me into the restaurant, holding my hand like I'm three years old again.

I keep all of this a secret from my mom. I try calling my dad again throughout the rest of the week to ask when he wants to meet again. I can't help getting this odd sense of hope that this is going to become a regular thing. My dad is back in my life. But he sends me to voicemail. Call after call and text after text while on the train, on the bus, and between classes. I continue trying all weekend and nothing.

As quickly as I have hope, I give up.

BEER CAN AND GRILLING TONGS

Whenever I invite my friends to my house, I want them to see a fake image of my home life. Whenever my dad invites his friends, he lets it all hang out. I used to think having company that wasn't family meant my dad was going to get his shit together but no. I was young enough to be taken off guard every time things got out of control.

One second I was watching *The Fairly OddParents* in the living room. The next second I was running out to the yard behind my older siblings where my parents were grilling out with my dad's friends. The sun was setting when the night went from my parents bickering to my dad throwing a beer can at my mom but missing terribly and accidentally hitting a pregnant guest.

Way to go, Dad.

My mom chased after him with grilling tongs, snapping at his nuts and dick. She accidentally tripped, falling onto her hands and knees. My dad took the chance to grab her by the hair and drag her throughout the yard. My siblings and I tried breaking them apart. He kept pushing us away in a single shove. We fell onto the grass like the wimpy kids we were. My siblings quickly scrambled to get up and keep trying. They weren't crying like I was. I kept taking grass to the face, some of it getting stuck to my wet cheeks.

EXPLOSIONS AND ALUMINUM

The only light in the living room came from the television. My dad held his beer can in his left hand as he sat in his recliner. His elbows were on the armrest, his right thumb on his chin and his index finger stroking his mustache, focusing on whichever 90s action movie was playing that Saturday night. I sat in front of the screen with my eyes as wide as they

could go, watching white actors and their mouths as the Spanish translation failed to match.

I moved from the television and went to the coffee table lined with Miller Lite cans. I grabbed an empty can and held it in my left hand, too. As a three year old, I wanted to be like my dad. That thought quickly evaporated as the movie started getting more intense. The actors started running from gunshots and explosions ignited the screen.

My index finger was in the can and I was rubbing it along the inner—aluminum rim, slicing my skin. I hadn't noticed it until my dad jumped from his chair and carefully pulled out my bleeding and stinging finger. I closed my eyes thinking he was going to get mad. Instead he swore at himself. I opened my eyes and he started to pick up his empty beer cans from the coffee table.

The elevator has been stuck on the twelfth floor long enough for me to be late to class while I stand in the lobby.

I get a text from an unfamiliar number, "*Hija, hola*, I need to talk to you. *Soy tu tía Marica*. It's about your dad. 773-555-6532. Please, call me."

I step back from the elevators as far as I can to lean up against the wall. I reread the text a few times for any clues that can indicate what happened to my dad. All I can think is he's dead. It makes me not want to call her. I don't need news like that today or any day. But the not-knowing part starts to make me nauseous so I call. She answers after the first ring and I might actually be right.

"Honey! How are you? It's been so long!"

Small talk. She's really trying to make this easy on me. "Yeah."

"Oh, sweetie. I wish I were calling on a different occasion. . . . Your dad. . ."

I hold my breath.

"He got detained by immigration the day he saw you. He was driving home drunk and got into a car accident. He had an arrest warrant for past DUIs. Where are you living right now? We can pick you up and drive out to go see him. It's only a few hours from Chicago. We tried gathering the money to bail him out but they won't let us. On the way there we can talk about what we should do next. How old are you? I'm sure you can work something out. What's your address? I'll pick you up."

I sigh deeply, annoyed that it's been over eight years and nothing has changed. I don't need this. I've only seen him once. That doesn't mean I have to take care of him now.

"I have class."

She's quiet for a second, clearly taken aback by my lack of eagerness to help my dad, before suggesting, "Can't you skip?"

"I don't know."

"Talk to your professor and call me back to tell me what time I can go get you, OK? I'll talk to you soon, sweetie."

I hang up without saying goodbye. I lean against the wall for another minute until the elevator finally reaches the lobby. I look around at other students and wonder about the ones having a worse day than mine.

I don't call my aunt back.

I try to fall asleep knowing I could be doing homework. But that isn't a good enough reason to stay awake tonight. My phone rings, lighting up my dark room, and it's an unknown number. I sit up and answer, thinking it's the same robot lady telling me fake details about winning a trip to a resort.

Instead I hear, "This call will be recorded and monitored. I have a collect call from—"

My dad's voice breaks through to state his name, "Javier Acero."

He sounds embarrassed.

The operator continues "—an inmate at McHenry County Correctional Facility. If you would like to accept this call, please press five."

I don't have to answer. I could hang up. I wouldn't have to deal with any of this. I could go back to having no dad. Eight years without him were easy. I stare at the streetlight outside my window wishing it were closer to light up my room. I think of the night my mom, siblings, and I left home permanently while he slept. I try to imagine what he might've felt when he woke up to an empty house. Taking a deep breath, I try to imagine what he would feel now if I ignore him.

I give in and accept the call.