

HIPPITY-HOP

The ripe oranges that weighed down the branches along Avenida de Luciérnagas had gone unpicked for weeks. Now they covered the ground, their once-bright skins shrunken and wrinkled with dry, brown blotches. The air, hot from the afternoon sun, carried a sickly-sweet aroma enticing swarms of lazy wasps to consume the unexpected bounty. There were no irritated hands slicing through the air to chase them away; no screams of stricken children preceding the thwack of a rolled-up newspaper that signaled a swift death. The insects moved as if in slow motion.

It was almost five in the afternoon. The stone walls of the house at number one hundred and thirteen gave off the heat that had accumulated during the day. This used to be the time when the streets of the old residential neighborhood of Santa Cruz came to life after siesta. Every open space would resound with chatter. The occasional roar would go up from the men hunched around the little tables over their games of rummy: “Look at him, cheating again! What a conman! You said you were out of spades!” Other times, you might catch moans of pleasure wafting from open windows, promises and compliments uttered in the heat of the moment. The streets filled with the clamor of boys snatching scooters from each other; the curses of the old women almost knocked off their feet as the boys careered around the corner without warning. Sometimes, a busker with a mahogany guitar around his neck on a fraying strap would play a melancholy tune. It evoked an incomprehensible sense of nostalgia, even in those whom fate had graciously spared the torture of a broken heart. The loud voice of the vendor rang out as he peddled his wares, tiny donuts soaked in orange blossom water, which tasted best straight from the bubbling oil.

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But for many weeks now, the city's energy had been heavy, stale, and ominous, like the oppressive stagnation of air before a thunderstorm. People were staying put in their tightly bolted homes for fear of a fast-spreading pandemic. Whoever had the means sent the servants to do the shopping once a week, and hired governesses to look after the children, who had finished the school year early. Montserrat wasn't fond of her new nanny. María Jesús was stocky, she wore men's pants, and her lips were tightly clenched in such a thin line that the girl had once asked her how she managed to whistle. "Why would I want to whistle? Only commoners communicate in such a barbaric way," came the reply. She had also wanted to ask María Jesús how she managed to kiss – because Montserrat's mother had always kissed her goodnight so gently and softly on the cheek – but she abandoned the idea, figuring that asking such a question risked sacrificing her slice of teatime nougat.

Now she sat on the floor of her bedroom, lazily tracing invisible shapes on the terracotta tiles with her finger. Much to her governess's frustration, she had grown bored of all her toys, including her once-loved wooden puppet Pedro; the monotony of the endless days locked up in the house had made her apathetic and slothful. "Montserraaaaat! Open the shutters in your room. Time to let in some fresh air," came the voice of María Jesús from downstairs. "I always say, the origin of disease is stuffiness. I'd have put paid to this whole pandemic long ago. Open all the windows wide and drench the streets in chlorine, rather than locking ourselves up indoors and marinating in germs." Montserrat got up and dawdled over to the large, west-facing window. Struggling, her tongue between her teeth, she unbolted the heavy wooden shutters; there were patches where the dove-gray paint was peeling off. It reminded her of a scene from the week

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before, when she'd watched the cook scaling a slippery fish, its multicolored scales flying off in all directions under the blade of the knife, its cloudy eyes seeming to watch the girl right back.

She was about to return to her spot on the floor when she noticed a wobbly white speck on the ceiling. She craned her neck to get a better look, when suddenly, as if on cue, the speck leapt onto the window ledge. And then – hop – onto the window frame! And hippity-hop, onto Montserrat's dress! She bent down to take a closer look at the speck, but it leapt again.

Montserrat felt something warm on her cheek. She turned back toward the window; if she leaned out slightly, she could see the gates of their estate down below. The wrought iron formed an intricate pattern that looked like dragonfly wings. On either side of the gates were massive red brick columns topped with gas lanterns. Every day, half an hour before nightfall, their footman Enrique went out with a small ladder under his arm, climbed to the top rung, and carefully slid the wick into the glass dome while turning the valve on the base. Then the warm, honeyed light poured into their courtyard, rinsing the stone exterior of the house.

But the sun was still high above the horizon, its elongated rays making the flecks of mica in the stone walls sparkle. Montserrat squinted and stood on tiptoe. Just across the street, opposite the gates, she saw a figure reflecting light at her with a small mirror. He reminded her of the purple dragon from the legend her grandmother used to insist on telling her, not heeding the terror in the child's eyes. But this dragon didn't look scary. He had a round belly covered in white down, which stood out against the ripe plum color of the rest of his body. Between his disproportionately large feet, each with three plump toes at the front and one bent to the back, lay the curled tip of his hefty tail. The dragon twisted the mirror again, sending the little white

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speck into a swirling dance along the window ledge. The girl's hazel eyes widened as she shifted her gaze back and forth between the strange creature and the speck of light. Her mouth gaping, she held on tight to the edge of the window ledge. Noticing her curiosity, the creature across the street turned around, almost tripping over his long tail. He looked back over his shoulder and started to shift his weight from one foot to the other, as if performing a kind of cumbersome tap dance. This amused Montserrat immensely. The first dragon she'd seen in real life, and he was a dancing one! The dragon seemed pleased. He pulled a flower with a long, hard stem from behind his ear. The petals were frayed at the edges and went from intense magenta to dark violet in the middle. Montserrat's nostrils picked up the sweet, honey-spiced scent of cloves. She thought of Christmas Day, when her mother would pierce orange skins with the little brown spikes. The dragon seemed to know what she was thinking; he started sniffing the flower, sneezing loudly, then sniffing again and sneezing again, on repeat. Every time he sneezed, he sent a spray of multicolored droplets into the air. Montserrat burst out laughing. The creature seemed to delight in this, and moved straight on to another trick, conjuring a bucket and a piece of rope out of thin air. He dunked the rope in the bucket, raised it above his head and started tracing shapes in the air. All of a sudden, he was surrounded by undulating bubbles, shimmering with copper in the afternoon sun, frolicking and spilling into each other like the big, slippery seals that played in the oceanarium Montserrat had visited with her parents last winter. Glimmers of rainbow spheres reflected in her wide eyes. How she wanted to chase after them, jump into the air and try to catch them!

Suddenly, as if heeding her desire, a gust of air picked up one of the bubbles and blew it toward the open window. Floating smoothly, like smoke from a fire, it soared over Montserrat's head

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and straight into her room. Clapping her hands, she leapt back into the room to chase the bubble. She was just two steps away when the door opened, and there was María Jesús, holding an armful of starched white sheets. “Be a good girl and go into the living room, I have some work to do here,” she said, peering over the stack of linen. Montserrat pointed at the ceiling, where the mischievous bubble was hovering a moment before, but it had already burst, disappearing without a trace. Her arm fell flat by her side; her mouth was still half-open, but the sparks of joy in her eyes had faded to disappointment.

“What are you looking at, dear? If you keep craning your neck like that, your head will fall off.”

“But there was this big colorful ball that the purple dragon made, and he danced, and sniffed flowers, and he played with a mirror and shone sunbeams at me, he was there, just there outside the gates!” Montserrat tugged at her nanny’s sleeve, pulling her toward the window. María Jesús was about to scold the child and tell her to stop talking nonsense and go to the living room at once, because she had a hundred and one jobs to do today, and she’d never manage with someone constantly under her feet, but something in the child’s feverish movements made her set the bedding down. She sighed and slowly made her way over to where the girl was standing at the window. But the street was deserted. She leaned over as much as her ailing hip joints would allow, first one way and then the other. She scanned the courtyard like a sniper, but finding nothing suspicious, she heaved a loud sigh of dejection. Just as she was about to pick up the heavy pile of laundry again, a sudden thought came to her; she bent over Montserrat, this time with concern. Scrutinizing her flushed cheeks, María Jesús put a hand to the child’s forehead.

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“Ah, perfectly normal. Thank goodness! You’re so fidgety, and babbling such nonsense, I thought you were delirious. That’s all we need, for you to come down with something too. Right, off you go, I’ll call you when I’m done here.”

Montserrat had her hand on the doorknob ready to leave when suddenly, a warm, sweet smell tickled her nostrils. She turned toward the window. On the window ledge lay a magenta carnation.