

MARIA VENEGAS

*The Devil's Spine*

You have been sent for and now you must memorize a name. A new name. A borrowed name. Nine thousand feet above sea level, the options are laid out before you: Get the name right and you see your parents again; get the name wrong and you never see them again. It's that simple. The bus you are traveling on snakes through the clouds, around the Devil's Spine, as it makes its way along the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range.

"What is your name?" A face emerges from the clouds and asks you. It's a familiar face, a face that is so much like your mother's face, though her face has faded in your memory, the way plastic flowers tied to a cross and left on the side of the road fade in the sun.

"Maria de Jesus Venegas Robles," you respond. This is the one thing you do know—your name. But it's the wrong answer. The bus jerks to the left and the force slams your body against the window.

"When the men in green uniforms ask what your name is, you have to say Maricela Salazar, or you will never see your parents again. Do you understand?"

But you're only four years old, and you must look so yellow, so pale, for you are handed a grapefruit wedge and instructed to suck on it. You put it in your mouth, and the bittersweet juice runs down your chin and neck as you repeat the name, over and over, like a prayer, like a wish. It's only a name. But it's the one thing that might rescue you from the void into which you slipped the day your parents vanished. The day they dropped you off at your grandmother's house and never returned. After that, you asked anyone who came by her house if they had seen them. If your grandmother took you to the corner store, the plaza, the bakery, the mercado, you asked anyone who greeted her if they had seen them. They all gave you the same tight-lipped smile, or a pat on the head. Some handed you a piece of hard candy, a chicle, or an ice cream cone—anything to get your mind off of them—because everyone knew that your parents had gone to the other side.

"What is your name?" The bus swerves right, and the sun comes at you, a giant ball of fire smacking the window and diffusing.

"Maria de Jesus Venegas Robles," you respond, as ten thousand rays of light flood the bus, blinding you. Once again, the options are laid before you. Time is running out, and if you give the men in uniforms the wrong answer, well...

Focus on the dust particles that are free-falling through the sunlight and settling on your boney knee as you whisper the name like a chant. Mari-cela Sala-zar. Concentrate on the citrus scent that is lingering in the air. Ma-ri-ce-la Sa-la-zar. It's the smell of something green or orange, a respite from the nausea that is already creeping in. An ice cube dissolving on the tongue. *¿Que se pela por la pansa?* It's a riddle, but what is it? It's only a name. A borrowed name. But it's a name you must slip into and wear like a second skin, for on the other side of that name, your parents are alive and waiting.

Though you believed them to be gone for good, ever since the day that your grandmother took you back to your house. When you arrived, you watched as she turned the skeleton key in the heavy wooden door and pushed it open. It hit against the adobe wall with a crashing blow. Everything was in place. La Virgen de Guadalupe still hung on the wall behind the couch. In the kitchen, all the dishes were in the cupboard, the pile of chopped wood sat in the corner, and the scent of the wood-burning oven still lingered in the air. In their bedroom, the bed was made and the shutters were closed. Her floral printed dresses hung in the wardrobe next to his cowboy shirts, but they weren't there. They had seemingly slid through the cracks in the limestone floor and vanished. Never again did you ask about them.

The road curves right and the shadow of the mountain falls upon you as you recite the name. Maricela Salazar. It's been two years since they disappeared. Two years is not such a long time, though it's long enough. The road veers left and again you are swimming in the sunlight, while in the valley below, among the thorns and boulders, are rusted out cars and trucks that plunged into their dusty grave years ago. Inside, their passengers are still strapped in, still waiting to be rescued. But there is no escape from the Devil's Spine. He who plunges into its valley stays there forever and ever. Amen.

The bus emerges from the clouds and you are struggling to memorize the name, even as the memories of everything that came before this journey are evaporating. Try and grab two handfuls of the images that are already fading: the bougainvillea in your grandmother's courtyard, the sweet sting of a honey taco, the scent of the wood-burning oven, running barefoot through the cornfields, the flight of the blackbirds at sunset, the marching sound of an approaching rainstorm, and the scent of wet earth that lingers once the storm has passed. One day you will open your clenched fists to find you have nothing—no memory of the things that came before this passage—not even a bit of red dirt under your fingernails to remind you.

“What is your name?” a man in a green uniform asks when you reach the border.

“Maricela Salazar.”

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