

## *Piggies*

My older sister was a sleepwalker. I don't think she ever knew. It didn't happen the way it gets shown in movies, arms outstretched and eyes closed. That might have made it kind of cool. Instead, the first time (that I knew of), I could barely tell; Marta and her elegant glide, always inseparable, made their way across the kitchen and opened the fridge. Rose and I sat on the cool kitchen tiles, unseen. Marta was thirteen, and I was ten. Rose was only eight.

Marta has always been taller than us, and looking at her from where I sat, she had an easiness about her that was never present in her waking hours. I think it was the long hair, loose around her face. Her eyes were open, too, which is why we thought at first that she was awake. No one tells you that sleepwalkers can have their eyes open; maybe it isn't as cinematic. She walked past where Rose and I had been eating the cookies Mama thought she'd hidden. Normally Marta would send us back to bed, or worse, tattle. Instead she turned away and let the blue light of the fridge fall on us.

I remember Rose looked to me questioningly, and I knew she was holding her bite of stolen cookie in her mouth without chewing, as if the crunch might make Marta realize we were there. I had no answers. I still don't. For several minutes our sister simply stood, looking but not seeing, and then reached in. She took a plastic container, retrieved a fork from the drawer just above where Rose and I crouched, then ate what remained of that evening's lasagna. It seemed as though she was looking right at us, but when her long black hair got sauce on it she didn't notice. With a strange fear rising in my chest, I nearly giggled.

That first time, the ounce of morbid entertainment I got from it was like someone showing you a cruel amusement. *Hey, look how this one worm becomes two. Ants fry under a magnifying glass. My sister will sleepwalk and eat from our fridge whenever she skips dinner.* Marta was normally the example set for Rosa and me, so untouchably the best of the three of us, that seeing her engage in something so bizarre was almost an amusement.

But looking at my sister in that moment felt wrong. It was like I had been given a bright piece of a jigsaw puzzle, but the picture itself was so incomplete and otherwise colorless that I had nowhere to put it.

When Marta set the half-finished lasagna on the counter and walked, robotically, back to her room, I went over to the Tupperware, condensation beading on it because it was still cold. I carved away at it until it simply looked like a smaller piece than we had put in the fridge earlier, and Rose and I went back to our room after putting the cookies back in their hiding space.

The sleepwalking started happening a few nights out of the week; I know because Rose and I stayed up every night for a while, waiting. I didn't ask her to come with me, but also knew that I didn't have to. We watched Marta eat a small block of cheese, a bowl of cereal (she poured the milk with near-perfect accuracy), a slice of leftover birthday cake. She wasn't as picky at night as during the day, and only took pieces of a whole, things that wouldn't be missed. She always left her dishes and silverware next to the sink and walked smoothly back to her room.

My younger sister and I, in quiet agreement, would wash her dishes and stow them wherever they belonged.

The following mornings, Marta always skipped breakfast, claiming to be too busy getting ready for school. "See," our mother said to Rose and me once, "your sister knows not to be wasteful." *What are we wasting?* I wanted to ask. We needed to eat. But there was often a half-joking quality to her voice that she could lean on when questioned further. *Don't be so sensitive, mija.*

Mama's definition of "wasteful" often shifted, but Rose and I always drank the remaining milk from our cereal bowls to show her we were anything but. She called us *cerditas*, little piggies, but I could hear the warmth underlying her tone when she said it. Her names didn't bother me.

On the way to the bus stop one morning, I asked my sister, "Did you skip breakfast because you ate so much last night?"

She had frowned. At dinner the night before she'd picked at her plate of food and gone to bed early, but Mama never pointed *that* out as waste. "Is this supposed to be one of your jokes, Lucia?"

Rose opened her mouth, but I reached out and squeezed her hand. "Sorry," I said, and left it at that.

Marta walked on ahead of us. Her hair was tightly pulled back and pinned up, not a strand out of place. It drew attention to how sharp her features were becoming.

She didn't sleepwalk every night. We picked up on her patterns. We stowed away more pieces of the puzzle. Sometimes Mama's words felt careless, tossed from her mouth out of habit and not malice, but I started seeing on Marta's face that they hit her like a slap. She would warmly say *flakita bonita*, praising our sister for a thinness that did not come naturally in our family, and I'd realize we had just been given a crucial corner piece. Whenever our mother praised Marta for eating a light meal or complained about having to buy bigger clothes for her growing girl, we would wait later for her footsteps to ghost past our door, and watch her unknowingly raid the fridge. Mama probably figured Rose and I, her "little piggies", were eating the food, if she noticed at all.

Towards the end, it was no longer fascinating; if there had ever been any fun in it, that was long gone. Rose didn't want to watch our sister reach her thin hand, garish in the harsh light, into the fridge for half a sandwich or a few scoops of ice cream. I always waited, though, for her to finish her snack and go back to bed. Then I'd clean the dishes, scrubbing away any trace that she is less than perfect.

It tapered off gradually. Just before Marta went off to university it only happened twice, maybe three times that year. Maybe knowing that she would leave us soon made Mama's words sting less, or seem farther away. I don't know if the sleepwalking followed her there, but I don't think so. I think any family has at least one child who can't wait to leave. There is always the one who loves better with distance, and Marta needed space from all of us. She needed there to be space between her and Mama's flimsy words.

I think I stayed up longer than Rose did because Mama had just begun telling *me* to eat more greens with my meals and less of the main dish. Now, in the mornings, I look carefully in the mirror when I brush my teeth, checking for crumbs on my pajamas or an odd taste in my mouth. I wonder if Rose will soon find herself waiting to hear my footfalls and see that haunting glow of the fridge. I hope the warmth does not drain from my mother's voice. Maybe it's like the tone of a dog whistle, and someday I will simply stop being able to hear it.