

Whispers

Triggered by Eduardo Galeano in Bocas del Tiempo

by

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DESCRIPTION

The fight over a family inheritance washes past the great-grandmother and her great-granddaughter.

CHARACTERS

- GISELA, Luiza's great-grandmother
- LUIZA, Gisela's great-grand-daughter

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SOUND: Murmurs of adults indoors at a subdued celebration: voices, plates and glasses, the occasional laughter

Light falls through windows onto a small courtyard where young LUIZA plays by herself. There is a small table with two chairs where one can rest one's weary bones.

She hops around on one leg and chants as she counts the buttons on her dress, one button per word (or even per syllable, depending upon the number of buttons).

LUIZA

Uno, dos, porotos con arroz.

LUIZA stops hopping and thinks, based on the number of buttons she's counted.

LUIZA

A king? A captain? Soldier? Pirate!

LUIZA starts doing some jumping jacks and recites the next part.

She doesn't see, standing in the gloom off to the side, GISELA, dressed in her black clothes of mourning, a cane in her hand—an apparition out of a Lorca play: long black dress, a jacket overlaying a white shirt, both with a high collar, grey hair pulled back tight. The dress has pockets.

LUIZA

Tres, cuatro, porotos en el plato.

LUIZA then turns a couple of somersaults and declares her conclusion in triumph.

LUIZA

Cinco, seis. ¡Me caso con el rey!

GISELA

A king.

This startles LUIZA.

GISELA

Only a king?

LUIZA

I'm sorry.

GISELA

She wants to marry a king.

GISELA takes her time to cross the courtyard to the table, where she slowly lowers herself into one of the chairs. At first LUIZA stands frozen, then, recovering her manners, helps GISELA.

GISELA

Thank you. Do you know why you're here today? Go ahead—you know, don't you.

LUIZA

Yes, bisabuela.

GISELA

Then it's all right—you can say the name of the dead one out here—out here, it's nice. Less crazy.

Quieter. LUIZA

Quieter. GISELA

SOUND: A shift in the activity inside: an angry voice raised, a soothing voice that counters—a space of silence.

GISELA and LUIZA exchange a look which seems to say, “Yes, quieter.”

Go on. GISELA

My great-grandfather, Mario. LUIZA

Good. You knew him well? GISELA

He taught me the poem. LUIZA

He taught you well. GISELA

I guess. LUIZA

Uno, dos— GISELA

Porotos con arroz. TOGETHER

SOUND: Music—a guitar, most likely. Voices go back to their murmurs.

GISELA speaks off into the distance, not really to LUIZA.

And marry a king. GISELA

GI SELA focuses on LUIZA.

GI SELA
But what about the hair?

LUIZA
What?

GI SELA
The hair in your bisabuelo's nose.

In her embarrassment, LUIZA doesn't know what to say, so she doesn't say anything.

GI SELA
Well? He had it, didn't he? You can say yes.

LUIZA
Yes.

GI SELA
And in his ears.

LUIZA
And on his ears.

LUIZA rubs the rims of both ears to demonstrate.

LUIZA
Long.

GI SELA
Never would shave them, trim them—stubborn that way.

LUIZA
Tres, cuatro, porotos en el plato.

GI SELA
All that hair—sprouting. All that life—sprouting.

SOUND: The music cuts out suddenly. Silence.

LUIZA looks at the house.

SOUND: A glass smashes on the floor, followed by an angry male shout, which is also followed by an angry female shout. Silence.

LUIZA looks at GISELA, whispers.

LUIZA

Cinco, seis.

GISELA

And me? What about your bisabuela? Do I have anything like that?

SOUND: Someone starts clapping in rhythm, taken up by others, which prompts the music to start—everything muted.

LUIZA

What are they—you know—

GISELA shrugs.

LUIZA

I don't really—understand.

GISELA

Neither do they.

LUIZA

Mi bisabuelo is dead.

GISELA

Which you have already pointed out. It's about stupid things. Money. Land. A snuff box. A silver comb. A ring—two rings. Cufflinks made from wisdom teeth.

In spite of herself, LUIZA laughs.

LUIZA

No.

GISELA

Yes. That says something about your bisabuelo, doesn't it?

SOUND: Someone begins to add in a soft drumming on something wooden: table top, box.

LUIZA

Really.

GISELA

Mounted on silver. A dull yellow—the teeth.

LUIZA

Did he ever wear them?

GISELA

He did. With pride. Come here.

LUIZA sidles over to her aunt. GISELA grips the cuff of her shirt and pulls it down tight, shows it to LUIZA. LUIZA gasps.

LUIZA

That's really them?

GISELA nods, indicates for LUIZA to touch the cufflink, which LUIZA does, fascinated.

LUIZA

Will I get wisdom teeth?

GISELA

The teeth, yes—everybody has those. Wisdom we'll have to see about.

GISELA lets the jacket sleeve fall over the cuff.

GISELA

You didn't answer my question, nena. Look my face all over. Go on.

SOUND: An ending flourish from the guitar and the drumming. A few cheers. Voices go to murmuring.

LUIZA is reluctant, but GISELA grips LUIZA's arm firmly—she doesn't pull LUIZA forward, but it's also clear that she is not going to let LUIZA go just yet.

LUIZA sits, leans in close to look at GISELA's face.

GISELA

There's no shortage of time yet.

LUIZA

I see powder, in the [lines]—

GISELA

Vanity, betrayed by my shaky hand.

GISELA mocks dabbing powder on her face, which makes LUIZA laugh. GISELA touches her own cheek.

GISELA

And here?

LUIZA

A little rouge.

GISELA

Your mother let you yet?

LUIZA

No.

GISELA

It's silly, anyway.

GISELA pulls on an ear, gives LUIZA an inquiring look, which makes LUIZA laugh.

LUIZA

Nothing with the ears.

GISELA

That's good. But now I want you to look harder.

SOUND: The sound of chairs scraping against the floor, the chatter of people moving out of the room—then silence.

No one from inside checks the garden.

GISELA

Not rouge, not powder, not ears.

LUIZA

Eyes.

GISELA

Good—windows to the soul—you ever hear that?

LUIZA shakes her head no.

GISELA

Now you have. It's in there. Eyes?

LUIZA

Blue—no—

GISELA

What?

LUIZA

Grey. Grey-blue.

GISELA

Cloudy.

LUIZA

No.

GISELA

Stone.

LUIZA

No.

GISELA

Then like?

LUIZA

I don't know. Not cloudy. Not stone.

GISELA

Then like cinco, seis, maybe?

They respond together, softly.

TOGETHER
¡Me caso con el rey!

LUIZA
They sparkled!

GISELA
Did they, now?

LUIZA
Yes!

GISELA
That's what he saw, I think—cinco, seis.

LUIZA
Did you see it in him?

GISELA
Never. Stopped. Windows to windows.

The silence settles.

LUIZA
They left us.

GISELA
A blessing.

LUIZA
My parents.

GISELA
They have to come back for you, so they will.

LUIZA
But not—

GISELA
No.

Ever. LUIZA

Ever. GISELA

Sad. LUIZA

GISELA
Sad. Sad. Come here. Look at me again, but look at me straight-
on this time.

LUIZA positions herself to look deep.

GISELA
Don't look so hard. Let the eyes go soft—you let them, I let
them—soft—think bisabuelo, think sad and sad—

SOUND: Night sounds around them.

A sudden jerk takes LUIZA, a recoil, a fright.

GISELA settles into her spine, hands propped on the handle of her cane.

*LUIZA stares at GISELA, unsure, the same sort of unsure the traveler feels when dropped off in
an unfamiliar train station late at night.*

What comes next? GISELA

What? LUIZA

GISELA
The numbers—cinco, seis. Answer me.

LUIZA
Siete. Ocho.

GISELA

They say it is necessary to love God, in grief—to accept that God has taken away and will not give back and that—is—somehow—acceptable. You’ve heard that.

LUIZA

From my parents. The priest.

GISELA

He said that today.

LUIZA

Word by word.

GISELA

So this is what you saw. Touch your buttons.

LUIZA fingers a button.

GISELA

Siete. Go on.

LUIZA fingers another button.

GISELA

Ocho.

LUIZA fingers another button.

GISELA

Yo lo odio. That’s what you saw through these windows. Through mine into yours.

LUIZA

You can’t hate him.

GISELA

I say it because I feel it and I mean it.

SOUND: A gunshot in the distance. A second. A third.

LUIZA jumps, stares at GISELA.

SOUND: A rush of people into the room—crying, screaming, pounding.

GISELA

I hope the wills are made.

LUIZA looks at her in stricken disbelief, then rushes into the room.

SOUND: The crowd of people move away into another room in the house. Courtyard to silence and night sounds.

LUIZA returns.

GISELA

Well?

LUIZA

No one is hurt.

GISELA

Ah, well, it's always good when a funeral party doesn't lead to another funeral. Awkward. Your parents.

LUIZA

They want me to get ready to go.

GISELA

Probably best.

LUIZA plays with her buttons. GISELA waits.

LUIZA

I can hate him for you, if you want me to.

GISELA

Your parents would tell me to tell you no. I would have to agree—you haven't earned it yet. It only feels right, feels good, if you've earned it.

LUIZA

I have to marry the king first.

GISELA

Give yourself the chance to be gutted by God—which is another way of saying, Be alive. He has picked me clean as a winter bone—you are going to have to go through your own messy turn.

LUIZA leans back slightly to reach into a pocket in her dress and pulls out a slim box.

GISELA

Come here.

GISELA puts the box on the table.

LUIZA

I have to go—

GISELA

Let them come and get you when they're ready to come and get you. We've taken a long trip together—keep me company until then.

LUIZA sits. GISELA opens the box—she shakes out a set of dominoes.

GISELA

Know how to play?

LUIZA

Of course.

GISELA

Then mix them up.

LUIZA turns the tiles faces down, shuffles them.

GISELA

This was our traveling set. Wherever we went, in case we were stuck somewhere with nothing to do—like today. We kept scores.

LUIZA

Who won?

GISELA

We both did. How many bones from the boneyard?

LUIZA

Eight.

They each draw eight bones, set them on edge. GISELA shows LUIZA her heaviest; LUIZA does the same. LUIZA starts, and slams the bone down, which makes LUIZA laugh.

GISELA slams down hers. LUIZA has to draw.

GISELA

You better be careful.

LUIZA plays her drawn bone, which makes GISELA draw one. Then two.

LUIZA

Ha!

GISELA plays her second draw.

SOUND: A man saying LUIZA's name.

VOICE

Luiza! Luiza!

GISELA

Voice of God.

LUIZA hesitates, then plays a bone. GISELA plays another. In a rapid succession of moves, as if trying to outrun fate, they move through the game, ad libbing as they want as each play is made.

They finish. They look at each other.

SOUND: Again, the name.

VOICE

Luiza!

LUIZA rises, kisses and hugs GISELA, and runs out.

GISELA puts the dominoes back.

GISELA

Siete. Ocho. Yo lo odio. Siempre.

GISELA sits, at ease in her hatred, listening to whatever sounds fill the night.