

PROLOGUE: TRIANGLES

The first time I wore a bikini I was 14 years old. For thirteen summers my mother considered it best to keep me in a one piece. But it was time. We go to the store. The bikini tops are categorized into two sections: string bikinis that slide (risky) and stationary triangles (safe). Mom and I agree it's best we go stationary.

My little sister isn't feeling well so I go down to the beach with my father. He had me at 22, so at my 14, he's a young 36. I'm wearing my mother's Ray Ban sunglasses because my heart shaped plastic ones broke during the drive. My dad and I play a game. He names a country and I reply with its capital. Our goal is to start at Canada and make it confidently to Chile, no pauses, no hesitations. Around the time we get to Suriname, we see a sun burnt figure calling out my father's name. The balding man wears a European style speedo. His leathery skin shines like the 1970s. He apparently knows my dad from some work thing. As the men talk business, I try to be invisible but polite. I look out at the ocean. Little girls make sandcastles and teenage boys punch each other. Makes me wonder when I'll get my first boyfriend and whether he'll be the kind that punches other people. My father says something apparently very funny because Leather Man laughs brashly. His mouth curls unevenly, exposing his also asymmetrical front teeth. Their sepia tint reminds me of Perla Amarillo, my biology teacher whose name exceptionally fits her dentition condition. I wonder if she'll be my teacher next year. Despite her above average dedication and perfectly adequate sense of humor, I wouldn't mind a change because her classroom always stinks of cigarettes, even when we have her for first period which begins promptly at 7:35 AM. Last year Miss Amarillo divided the class in groups and assigned one of the twelve human body systems to each. I had hoped my group would get cardiovascular, but we got reproductive instead, which was not the worst. I was very proud of our work, especially the visual aids I carefully colored in using my sister's expensive Caran D'ache pencils (without permission). My group presented on the ovaries, uterus, and mammary glands flawlessly, but as soon as we landed on the final poster board (testes), the back row regulars had started heckling. The sly comments began under breath but escalated quickly. I decided to pull out a historical aside, believing a random curiosity might help regroup my audience's focus and regain my command as orator.

Did you know men in the Middle Ages who wished to have a male heir would remove their left testicle because they believed it produced 'girl sperm'? My futile attempt went unnoticed. The classroom had been thrown into a gender segregated anarchy. A frazzled Miss Amarillo went out the door and into the hallway: she had struck up a cough attack so forceful that Mr. Callogero, who teaches History and Classics next door, came to check up on her. Mr. Callogero is typically very serious, some might even say intimidating, but I know he is a good man. I can tell because he offered Perla a ginger lemon candy to ease her throaty cacophony. The gentle way he touched her shoulder made me wonder if after twenty years sharing a wall and the woes of teaching teenagers, the two had ever had sex. Mr. Callogero reprimanded the boys and asked the girls to get the classroom back in order until Miss Amarillo's return from the ladies' room.

Guau. Te felicito Daniel. I see you rid of the old model and upgraded. Good for you.

Time stops. Leather Man's crooked smile now hid his own yellow pearls. His diagonal lips press tightly against each other and his tired, green eyes rest steadily on me even as he continues speaking to my dad. But from that moment on, I can't hear anything other than waves that crash thunderously, through a radical silence. This paradoxical vacuum of distorted sound reminds me of movies where the protagonist does drugs he'll regret in the following scene. I'm confused, but in my teenage bones I know something is very wrong. I look up at my father. He's uneasy, pale like a Scotsman, even though he's mostly middle eastern blood and was called Osama Bin Laden by an angry white guy at the Disney World parking lot last summer. I close my eyes, breath in sea salt and feel the cool South American beach breeze on my cheeks. Chills roll down my spine and reach my coccyx when, suddenly, I get it. Even though my mother is just a couple of blocks away cleaning up my sister's vomit, I have been made to occupy a place that belonged to her (will she hate me if she finds out?) and only her. And because of me, mea culpa, Leather Man (perhaps even worse, the world at large) assumes my father abandoned his wife to fuck a 14-year-old body that is half his own.

I've become Electra. And this bikini is the fucking culprit.

My breath shallows. I want to disappear into the sand. I don't know how to, so I stand up tall, tight, invisible. I constrict my breath, like when I was seven and believed monsters under my bed would kill me if I made even the faintest sound. But budding

underneath this emotional armor, a wild ocean of shame. Shame for wearing grown-up sunglasses. Shame for choosing such a provocative color (fuchsia). But above all, shame for my body. A mere one hundred pounds with no breasts to fill in two very flat triangles. Stationary triangles supposed to be the safe choice that have instead conjured an unwelcome incestuous Greek triangle. My eyes well up, but I know crying is not an option right now. My father recently told me he can't stand me crying in front of him and I need to be more like my sister that never cries. In order to keep the water back and inside my eye sockets, I tilt my head back a bit, lifting my chin, like rich ladies do when they get annoyed at their maids. Luckily my mom's Ray Bans shield the view, so even if a little water manages to come out, it will remain mostly hidden behind the brown glass. Once I get the tears under control, I carefully shift my eyes to horizons level and then down to the sand. I wiggle my toes and enjoy the rough but unexpectedly comforting sensation on the soles of my feet.

As my eyes remain fixated into the ground, I take a deep breath in (it really helps to do so when my dad gets upset because I'm crying) but on the breath out, I catch a glimpse of my low belly, expanding like a balloon and this depresses me. Last time my parents and I visited my grandmother, she pulled me aside and explained my stomach would flatten out once I got my first period. Ever since, I regularly search for red: I sit on the toilet, pull down my underwear, fold over and squint, hopefully examining the fabric with microscopic attention. Nothing yet: unfortunately, my twelve-year-old belly has signed a two-year lease. If only fat tissue could pack its bags and travel north, a merciful peregrination towards my breasts. If only I could look like teen girls in swimsuit billboards that pop up every spring at our local mall in Palermo, or like ageless women in those Victoria Secret storefronts my mom and I admire every winter recess when we visit Aventura Mall.

No te lo puedo creer, Tatiana. It's you! My eyesight is not what it used to be. Pero, niña, you're all grown up.

Leather Man finally breaks the awkward silence. His skin blushes pink, despite what is clearly a lifetime of carrot juice and Australian Gold. My father remains frozen and silent as his cheeks turn to a shade of red not dissimilar to the one that will land onto my New Year's Eve luck charm underwear arrive in just a few months. It will happen a few days before my quinceañera. My mom will find me on the toilet in a panic, staring at a crimson red and dark burgundy Jackson Pollock bridging two strips of baby pink cotton.

El tiempo pasa, nos vamos poniendo viejos.

As it becomes evident there is nothing left to do or say, Leather Man abruptly begins singing the chorus of a popular song, a musical but failed attempt to ease the increasing tension, and waddles away scot-free like the cowboy at the end of the western. His bony legs and tiny butt sketch a frail curvature, an almost perfect parenthesis. Once he gets about twenty meters away, he dives into the ocean like a Patagonian toothfish expertly evading European tourists with their hooks and poles and Nikon cameras. Leather Man is gone, disappeared into the murky, brown, chilly water typical of Argentine beaches. Beaches a four-hour drive outside Buenos Aires where the professional middle class summers with pride, while the wealthy fly off to the clear, turquoise, warm waters of Palm Beach where uniformed maids and prized racehorses await. An absolute, painfully atypical silence confirms something has changed forever. My dad and I both know this. We continue walking on cold sand. But we never make it to Santiago de Chile.

And now, it's 20 years later.