

Thank You Time

“Feels like I fail more than I do anything else.”

Their sleeping cubby was quiet for a while after Dio Ray said this. Even the bunker kept its mysterious little crackles and distant humming to itself, waiting things out.

Finally, she leaned up and said “You there?” because Gecko could’ve walked down to the broadcast room without making a sound.

“What?” It asked. It was snuggled against the cement seam where the floor met the wall, right next to her.

“Que? You serious?” Dio Ray laid her head back onto the inside of her forearm.

“Nothing?”

That monstrous silence hung around. It was eating Dio Ray alive, eroding her finger bones with writhing unease. She could fight that all away, battle it back by talking.

“Figured you had more to say,” Gecko said, after enough time passed it was probably worried Dio Ray had died, or maybe gone crazy from the quiet.

“Huh.” Dio Ray said. “Maybe I don’t.”

Another silence, shorter, and this one embroidered with one of the bunker’s distant hums, finally back in on the conversation.

“You’re not sure what tomorrow’s show is going to be about, huh?”

“Yyyyyyyyyep,” Dio Ray said.

##

Later.

“Did the weekend ever matter? Don’t down here, not anymore.” She muted her mic and cussed, sliced one vicious *shit* into the air. Gecko nodded.

“Lo siento. That’s not why you come here, is it? I was—I was about to go on this rant about how up on Umi they got themselves a weekend, then cut myself off and say Well wait, maybe some of them do...a whole big thing. I don’t want no one out there to think I’m faking this shit though.

“‘Cause I ain’t. Not anymore.”

Gecko continued to nod. That motion really did open something up inside of Dio Ray. It was one of those things you could never tell a person because no matter what, couldn’t do it justice.

“F’you want to hear fake listen to,” a big breath gulped in, “the shiningest ray of your whole day,” her best forced jolly ol’ voice, “or the brightest night light in sight, blah blah blah.

“Not here though.”

##

“Okay sit up then, let’s do the game thing,” Gecko said. “We have to, don’t argue—”

“Wasn’t even arguing in my mind,” Dio Ray said.

“Good.”

“What’re we doing? Which game?” Dio Ray straightened her back and it gave two little pops.

“Stare Fight?”

“How’s that going to work? Can’t see each other. Or I can’t see you, anyway,” Dio Ray

said.

“Oh. Good point. Did you bring a lantern?”

“Nope. Not for bedtime.”

##

Later.

“Maybe Gamma Ray ain’t doing—well maybe he’s doing his best, that’s what I’ll say. I give him a lot of shit and...”

She muted the mic again. Gecko shuffled its feet. Dio Ray picked at a piece of the vinyl tabletop, this little gash shaped like a shark’s tooth right next to the console. She un-muted the mic.

“Funny thing is I was—and yeah yeah, swear this is the last little side rant—er, detour, whatever—then I’ll get to the show.

“I was just—like, I was just thinking about all the people who get stacked on top of each other. You know? We had to get up there somehow, and you don’t build something like that, like Umi Hab, without stepping on someone’s hands or-or, shoulders or face.

“We never seemed to figure out how to do it any other way, at least.

“What I mean is, maybe that first person on the ground knows what’s going on, but somewhere, the news ain’t so easy to find. Gets obscured. Maybe not on purpose at first, but then it’s like, Well turns out people do whatever we want ‘em to when they think they’re doing this *other* thing.

“So yeah. My uh, my producer is telling me to move on. But my point is you can’t blame the people getting stepped on.

“Only got to make sure they know how they ended up getting stepped on. How they got there. The real reason.”

##

“We even really need the lantern?” Dio Ray asked.

“Stare Fight,” Gecko said, and nothing else.

“But—”

“Stare Fight.”

So she went and got the lantern. The walk would’ve been a perfect time to contemplate some stray piece of life she could cut up and tell the people out there about. Only, nope. When she got back from the recording booth, lamp in hand, her brain was equally as inert as before.

“Easier if I’m on my stomach,” Dio Ray said. She put the lantern on the ground, then laid down. The lantern was between them. Gecko stayed standing and they stared.

This lantern was boring, it didn’t flicker because it wasn’t fire, not even fake fire. It had a white bulb, same color as a popsicle, those kind that came in skinny bags you had to take home and freeze. Always sold bundled up inside red net bags, like fishnets.

“You ever had a popsicle?” Dio Ray asked.

“Seriously?” Gecko tilted its head. “You lose already, but come on. We can’t do a show tomorrow about popsicles.”

“First thing that came to mind, couldn’t sit here in silence and stare into your mysterious eyes. Game worked.”

“Wrong. Addendum to the rules,” Gecko said. “Or no, I will proclaim right now this rule was always in existence it simply went unstated. It’s what you’d call an ‘implied term,’ let’s say.”

“Unfair, using the knowledge of the universe against me.”

“Shush.”

Gecko cleared its throat, which was the only way for anyone to know you were about to proclaim.

“The first topic of *substance* that comes up will be the topic discussed, whether in the interest of generating conversation for a Stare Fight conducted in awkward social scenarios, or for determining the topic of a forthcoming broadcast of Your Voice Out West. In the event of a name change, the title of the show will henceforth—”

“The popsicles of my youth aren’t substantive?” Dio Ray did her own head tilt, trying to make her eyes as gecko-like as possible.

“Tell me about them.”

Dio Ray glanced at the lantern.

“Shut up.”

##

Later.

“Had a mic in my face since I was a baby, really.

“Used to have pictures of me with one as big as I was. Me all wrapped around it, clinging on. I was a pretty tiny baby I guess.

“Sounds like something made up, don’t it?”

She pushed her voice down into her chest and said, “Well I only ever been doing this one thing. Since I was a baby I had a mic in my hands—that kind of bullshit.

“But you’re thinking about it wrong.

“What that actually means is I never had a goddamn stuffed animal in my life. Not one.”

One last mute of her mic. She looked over at her friend.

Gecko gave a shrug, only one shoulder. It was big enough to nudge her on, despite being such a tiny shoulder.

“But anyway.”

##

They stared.

Both of them blinked freely, gazes locked on the other’s face.

Those stupid popsicles were still on her mind.

A morning started building itself behind her eyes. This morning was long gone. A breakfast morning, not necessarily a Sunday, but something about it had a Sunday feel.

Years of mornings came back. They stacked up and all along the edges shapes started to form, built up into new memories.

##

Later.

“So there’s a chance some of you remember my mom. Timeline would make sense. Only been fifteen some years since she passed. I didn’t know her too well. Funny how that is. Lived with her for twenty-odd-years.

“I’m not gonna talk about her though. This is about mi abuela. Nobody out there knows her. I never did either. Not while she was still up and around, knocking things over.”

Gecko laid flat on its stomach, rested its head on a dusty pencil eraser, one of those long chunks of pink rubber with angled ends.

“Carmen Alberta. That was her name. Changed it enough, so the story goes, no one could find her first name. My mom, dios mio, she’d tell me the same little bits over and over. How Carmen Alberta was the name grandma wanted and there wasn’t any such thing as a *real* name. Closest you could come was whether you accepted the one you been given, or if you didn’t, then you gave yourself one.

“Something like that, anyhow.”

Tonight Dio Ray watched one meter set into the thick gray machine beside her. This meter was behind a cracked lens shaped like the setting sun. A thin black line, skinny as an insect arm, wavered in that tiny window to show her how much signal she had.

“And Carmen didn’t accept much. Wasn’t good at it. Maybe mom said something like that to me once. Probably not though. Doubt mom could’ve—or anyway, never mind.”

Dio Ray popped the Mute on again and told Gecko how stupid this was, how stupid she felt, it was a waste and later on she’d hate herself because people didn’t give a shit.

She tapped her mic back live before Gecko could even blink.

“Mom always said...”

She sighed right into the mic, then pulled a breath in and let it loose as words.

“...said Carmen was the kind of person that wouldn’t ever stop until the thing she wanted was done and not just something she wanted but...”

She took another breath in.

“...something she wanted because it was *right*, comprende? If a thing she wanted was right, but all the people making decisions were wrong, man, watch out.

“Carmen Alberta, mi abuela, one time wrote wrote over 600 letters in a year. Wrote her state senator and representative—remember those assholes? Wrote them both, every single day. Hand-wrote. Could’ve emailed them but she had envelopes, little stamps with different kinds of mushrooms on them.

“Some little joke she was making, mom said.”

Dio Ray scooted forward on her chair. She readjusted her mic, nudged at her earphones.

“She found out her state was working on this system with the internet. Free internet! Holy smokes, free internet they said, you believe it?”

“Yeah well, no. I guess—and a lot of this is from mom telling me, ‘cause I definitely wasn’t there. I’ve always had to choose one of the six nets like ya’ll do.

“This new system they talked about was this: You signed up for free internet, a net supplied by the state itself, they paid for it ‘cause of some kind of federal grant I think. Could get on the thing from your phone, tablet, whatever.

“Signed in with your social security number.

“Ahhhhh. So there it is.”

Gecko nodded.

“Right. Mami was fourteen at the time and guess what her social security number was.

“Nada,” Dio Ray said.

“Except it wasn’t *only* as bad as excluding all the *other*, the outsiders, poor suckers from that place scares the shit out of politicians: Somewhere Else.

“They *also* had some code written in where every page you visited, didn’t matter what it

was, that page got itself a little marker saying it was looked at by social security number one-two-three etcetera etcetera.

“Made all kinds of promises and shit, all the politicians. Oh,” she made herself sound like she had a bubble stuck in her throat, “we’re dedicated to uh, to protecting the information stored in our servers—shiiiiit. Ya’ll know how many hacks there are *daily*.”

“Took somebody a few *hours* to hack the list of all registered social security numbers—funny thing being, at that point, it was all just politicians, people in government. ‘Cept remember, government ain’t just politicians. Plenty of people who just need a job.

“Which I’m sure all ya’ll get.

“So abuela Carmen went to town. Wrote letter after letter. A whole year. And guess what?

“It worked. After a year—plus more hacks, ain’t there always—they officially killed the watermarking. But guess what? Killed the free internet too. Said it was too *cost prohibitive*.

“But now, ahhh, now we get to mi abuela’s shining star moment. The letters? Nah, nothing, nada. Little thing.”

Dio Ray stood up. She saw Gecko in the corner of her vision, now propping its head in its hands.

“State senator whoever, probably named something like Reed Daniels or some shit, invited mi abuelita, Carmen Alberta herself, come speak about this important decision. Tell the people how they were being protected, and listened to. See? She was right? Allllll those letters, all that energy. And they listened?

“Heh.

“Carmen went to this rally senator what’s-his-face threw. She waited for the intros, all the clapping and good-jobbing to each other. Then senator-man invited her up on stage.

“She stood behind their mics and said—this part mom told me over and over, same little pause, same grin, you know the kind.

“Mi abuela stood up there and said I’d like to thank—took a pause for that smile...

“...myself.

“Knew she had limited amount of time I guess, because she—way mom told it, she all in one breath said, I refuse to stand up here and thank these men we *hired* because when we voted for them we *hired* them to do a job and it isn’t the kind of job you ever need a thank you to do because public service is not based on thanks, it’s based on needs and humanity.

“Pulled her off the stage pretty quick at that point.”

Dio Ray was still standing. There was a kind of weightless bulb inside her chest, almost like she felt when riding in a car that swooped down a steep hill.

“Rally was over after that,” Dio Ray said. She didn’t know she was about to end the show, and it wasn’t until the first 10 seconds of her outro was playing in her headphones that she realized she’d tapped the button without even noticing.

All the info about downloading the show came and went and the theme song credits rattled by. Instructions on finding passwords to log into the fan server on Estuary Net came and went. The outro dropped away and her mic went live again.

“Pretty proud of mi abuelita. Doubt I’d be that brave. Talk with ya’ later. Adios.”

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