

MAMI'S DREAM

By Marco Uribe

It was 1976, in the scorching-hot border town of Mexicali, Mexico, where (as his joyful mother would often tell him) a little boy with pale yellow skin and large ears was born. As an endearing custom of the culture, the newborn was soon christened *Topogigio* by *Mami's* older brother, after a puppet of a rodent (with huge ears) on a well-known Spanish television program of the times. The *apodo* stuck so well that hardly any of his family members ever came to know his real name. Not even *Tio Elias*. At age one, his mother Antonia made the courageous decision to leave her simple life behind and migrate to the multi-culturalism society of *Los Angeles, Califas; al otro lado* (the other side).

She had grown up in a town so small that cars were rare and streetlights absent, where horses were still workmen's main means of transportation. An old black and white photograph of the town sheriff and his son (twelve-year-old Elias) on horseback was testament. Now, the novel city where Elias and their other sister were already established made her feel anxious, testifying she was nearly struck by frantic cars on several occasions. She knew it would take a lot of getting used to, and sensed assimilation into the dominant culture would not come easy as a single mother, particularly while not speaking English, nor having had replaced her education with manual labor at a very young age. She would rely on her work ethic as a mode of implementing the demanding foreign ideologies. And with the sweet illusion of citizenship, she would seek to obtain acceptance, inclusion, and security.

So began Antonia's journey towards her vision of a better future in the land of opportunity. That fantasy of her and "*mi raton*" (my mouse) to one day become legal residents of The United States of America. She soon got a job, a car, and a small place to call their own. He didn't mind that she could only afford to rent "single" studio apartments throughout their years living together. Even with *Tia Toto* there, and the later addition of two siblings, not once did it feel congested. Despite the struggles, they lived humble, yet

happy lives. She did dream of the day when she might afford to buy her son the minor things he asked for, like that fancy cereal, or thick-sliced ham he always desired at the supermarket. It broke her heart to tell him “*no hay dinero, hijo*”. If they only had a *mica*, she thought, that “green card” that qualified them to receive food stamps, then she would afford him his cravings. She admired the kid for never getting upset, always seemingly understanding of every situation. That was his true nature, young as he was, too humble and mature for his age. A rare and vanishing beauty. Later in life, on more than one occasion, he would be described as an old soul.

Attaining a *mica* seemed far-fetched for Antonia, after all, they were both here illegally after outstaying their visiting visas. “*La policia! Escondete!*” she would say to him as he dove into the car’s backseat, fighting himself not to look out the back window. He complied without understanding why he should hide from police, for he did no wrong. The spark of “us versus them” had ignited within. Calling the police for assistance would never be an option for them, instead he learned to handle problems himself.

Nonetheless, those big dreams of hers persisted throughout the years of rigorous work during long hours at minimum wage jobs in one factory or another, and always under illegal documentation. Immigration officers raiding one of those factories to cuff her up and deport all the illegal workers back to Mexico could not deter her unrelenting determination that her quiet heroism conjured. Somehow, she would make it back to her *Bebe*, her future success, her life.

Little *Gigio* disliked those days for other reasons altogether. He did not know hate, yet with every fiber in his body, dreaded being awakened before dawn on weekdays, only to be separated from his mommy and dumped into some unfamiliar, smelly, hole of a stranger’s home for the day. He stomached feelings of being misplaced, abandoned, lost, and vulnerable. Once resigned, he tolerated being left alone in those rooms to watch cartoons until, together, the sun and children arose. He actually preferred it, knowing that along with those kids ascended mischief. Sure enough, *Gigio* learned things he should be too young to know, disrupting and spoiling his noble manner. With a toxic shame inside him now relentlessly brewing and debilitating his authentic self, *Mami’s* American dream would become altered.

Gigio learned to be combative, he cultured animosity, and began masking his true disposition. He misbehaved, throwing rocks at passing cars or passed-out hobos. He stole Hubba Bubba bubblegum, GI Joe action figures and Hot Wheels, cassette tapes, waiters' tips off restaurants' tables, clothes, and even a ring as a Christmas gift for his dear mommy. In third-grade he was suspended for bringing a switchblade to school, and then again for punching the kid who told on him. He understood "snitches got stitches". He neglected school for three weeks straight in junior high, having "ditching parties" at home, half wrecking it while his poor mother worked. He was familiarized with gang-members, like the one's he idolized in Hollywood flicks, discovering the romanticized mischief was exhilarating undergoing it first-hand. Like rummaging the night for a faultless wall to brand, or a perfect and susceptible car to thief. Mom witnessed his teen in fist fights, and rival gang members pulling a revolver point-blank as he ran for shelter. Her baby's life flashed before her eyes while his girlfriend jumped between him and the cannon. Other stories were kept secret for her sake, like his involvement with cartel members beginning in 1994, in the high sierras of Michoacan, Mexico, where cowboys veiled themselves amongst the fields of marihuana, wearing bulletproof vests, Uzi machine guns, and AK47 rifles. A scene straight from Leonardo DiCaprio's film *The Beach*. He found himself laying on a hilltop on a clear night as they readied for sleep with nothing but the clothes on their backs to guard against the elements, amazed at the trillions of stars at arm's reach, wondering if he belonged there, as beautiful as it was. He was not used to being away from his new family. Who was all this for anyway, him, his baby, or his ambitious girlfriend? They would go back home to Long Beach four months later.

Gigio had paid no mind when *Mami* handed him condoms once learning of this girlfriend. Predictably, they made a baby when he was only sixteen, she fifteen. Babies having babies, *Mami* would say. By then he had been expelled from high school his sophomore year, and dropped out completely the next. Never could learn much, anyway, not without help at home. Lacking positive role models, structure, and discipline, his mother's determinations went unrewarded. Although he got a job and their own place before the newborn, he also saved enough to buy his first lowrider, and gun, both additional products of

the culture he admired, affording mom plenty more expected turmoil. He literally worried her sick. At least that's how he feels about the years of physical melodies she suffered. More guilt added to the toxic shame he internalized.

Mami always wondered why he suddenly rebelled, for she had been a perfect example of a model citizen (without a single infraction to date). Neither of them understood about lingering traumas which haunt when remain unchecked. Memories faded, but the quiet rage running inside darkened. The added sexual abuse he experienced around the age of ten had led to devastating losses of: trust in humanity, faith in god, and hope for the future. No one listened to his silence screaming in their ears, nor saw his soul crying for comforting words he ached to hear. His culture was not helpful, after all, *Los hombres no lloran*. Instead of crying, men are supposed to man-up, suck-it-up, and be *macho*. The kid was left powerless over his traumas, with no choice but to suppress feelings of confusion, resentment, neglect, anger, sadness, and guilt, ultimately becoming the shame he felt. Concealed emotions spawned the need for compensation, and instant gratification afforded him temporary satisfaction. He gravitated towards all that made him feel powerful, in control. Some were innocent longings, such as beautiful women, cars, stylish clothes, and money, but it also meant unlawful and immoral activities or substances. He flirted with danger, adapting a life of distorted beliefs and addictive behaviors, disregarding the many lives he would pain.

Eventually, it led to the loss of freedom and identity as he knew it. His first felony for a weapon charge after a police-helicopter chase had already cost him his green card. Long gone were the dreams *Mami* had for them both. "*Derrumbaste mi Castillo*" she often says to him whenever they engage in intimate conversations, reminding him of her castle of dreams he demolished. She is oblivious to the sleepless nights, and countless times he thought about his sins, his victims, his many why's. Now, as painful as it is to face his reality, he struggles to make sense of it all in order to become his true self again. He now longs for the day he will be deported to his native country, free to chase those splendid memories he made as a child during short visits for summer and Christmas vacations. He may never rid feeling *Ni de aqui, ni de*

aya (neither from here, nor there), but he is ready for a second chance, a newfound life without crime. He has yet to meet his granddaughter, his latest pride and inspiration. As for his *Mami*, it pleases him to know she is living her dream for herself, happily retired, enjoying her grandchildren, free time, and many amenities she receives as a United States citizen.