In Abuelita’s ninety-second year, she began seeing things, a little girl in the house. Climbing the furniture, leading an invisible choir in song, running from the front door to the backyard, and returning in circles. She didn’t shout for help from me or my mother refrying beans in the kitchen. Didn’t shoo her away from the rose bushes, branches stiff and empty of blooms, shivering from December’s cold. Instead, she sat and watched her from her large red chair beside the coffee table, the same place where, since her retirement, her back and her mind had been contorting themselves into half-moon shapes, into strange and unknowable turns. At night, she spoke to the crucifix above her bed, carried rosaries and feathers in her pockets like keys. She could barely bathe standing up and didn’t know hot water from cold on her own, would’ve used a wheelchair if it wasn’t for her pride, hushed herself into silence whenever my mother and I spoke English at the table instead of her native Spanish. My mother and I were only aware of what she’d seen when she asked if we too had noticed la pequeña jumping on the couch just before lunch.

My mother and I thought it was the dementia re-rooting itself inside her. We pointed to the door and said things like, Abuelita, that’s just a dog. The neighbor’s kid from next door. There is no little girl.

Or we used reason: Then why can’t we see her, too? Where is she hiding? Why is she afraid of us?
But our desperation only aggravated Abuelita, who stomped her foot as though much younger than her years, burst into loud, uncontrollable cries, longed to be believed. We knew then that we had to play along.

Through Abuelita’s descriptions, we discovered that the little girl was a toddler with ribbons braided into her blonde hair, a dress checkered red and white with matching red rain boots. Abuelita named her la pequeña, the name she’d once christened me in distant childhood. Strange, I thought, considering I remembered I’d always been brunette, just like my mother, just like hers.

She even knew the girl’s habits, her love of hide-and-seek and giggling as she ran from one side of Abuelita’s large red chair to the other. Neither of us reminded her that no one plays hide-and-seek that way.

At night, Abuelita worried about where the little girl would sleep.

On the couch? she demanded to know, Spanish spilling messily out of her mouth. Or all squished into my chair? even though it was large enough for two.

She suggested clearing out the kitchen cabinet where we kept the pots and pans for beans until my mother interrupted, agreeing to house the girl in her room. After all, she reminded me, children couldn’t be kept in such tight spaces and abuelitas had to keep calm to sleep through the night.
For kicks, I asked what else the girl did, the little one who came into the house and made a mess of things. From the kitchen, my mother shot me a warning look and Abuelita’s face, too, was crinkled into a frown but for a different reason, trying to remember.

Sometimes she sings.

Who?

¡La pequeña! The way my papá used to do on my birthday right below my window before church, she said, her voice nostalgic, aching with invention.

What songs?

She began singing to herself, Amor, amor, amor eterno…

Eternal love, lasting love, I knew but couldn’t pin it to a song. But if I closed my eyes and pretended, my ears also heard the children singing along.

Otherwise, Abuelita added, they keep their distance, too shy to say hello.

It’s by Juan Gabriel, my mother later confided in me to solve the mystery.

I glanced up from my plate, the dinner upon it half-eaten, and Abuelita long since disappeared to bed.

The song she was singing earlier, my mother said. Amor Eterno.

When I didn’t say anything, she continued, Except, you know, it’s not really about love.

But about losing someone.

Okay.

Juan Gabriel wrote it for his mother. To say goodbye.

Why? I asked.
la pequeña

My mother brushed a strand of her long long hair behind her ear, the gesture so uncharacteristically embarrassed in its execution. It was strange to see her as anything but who she was to me, that she could ever feel as sorry as she now looked, unsure of why she’d brought it up.

Because she was dying, she said.

Unceremoniously, my mother began reaching out to our relatives in neighboring states, asking for contributions, help with the “arrangements.” She called funeral homes and flower shops and the church where Abuelita attended mass, discussed the plaque, the service, the burial ground. I hold a mirror under Abuelita’s nose every morning to ensure her breath revealed itself on the glass in a visible fog, as per my mother’s orders. But, I argued, what if Abuelita woke up and saw me standing over her, playing pretend, a doctor, a god? Like we were anxious for her death, even anticipating it?

My mother waved a dismissive hand, claiming it a necessity, already preparing for the worst. Because, she said, the same thing happened to her mother and her mother before that. Both of them seeing children in the weeks before they died.

I stared, wondering why she hadn’t told me this before.

But around the time every radio station was playing Feliz Navidad in unrelenting waves, Abuelita began to regain her strength, contrary to my mother’s foreboding conclusions. The little girl faded from her mind and soon after, ours. The three of us gathered in a tight-knit circle at the kitchen table and soaked corn husks in water, made masa out of corn kernels and salt into the
texture of peanut butter, spread the dough and filled it with everything that made the house smell like home at Christmas time — pork and chicken and melting cheese with chile slices hidden inside like a secret.

As the tamales cooked in the pot, I sat beside Abuelita on the couch, felt the vertebrae of her spine through her four layers of sweaters against my body that was only covered in one. After a few minutes, she fell asleep against my shoulder, and I thought about how we’d been together all my life, how I’d never lived in any other place but this, how whenever I imagined tomorrow or the next day or the one after and approaching fast, Abuelita was as constant as the moon. I may have been almost eighteen but like a child, I assumed she’d be here forever and held tight to thoughts like memories, and so didn’t think about it much when I glanced up at the mantle and saw the picture of me as a toddler, my blonde hair back then becoming peppered with locks of brown.

After the holidays found rest in January, my mother and I returned home from shopping for groceries. We were about to lock the car without a second thought when we found a fresh set of small boot prints in the snow leading a path up to the porch. We glanced at each other. The only people who visited us was the mailman and he never walked in the door; so why were there no footprints walking away?

Immediately, we hurried in from the cold and found Abuelita still sitting in her large red chair where we’d left her. She flinched at the sound of us, her eyes wide and arms protecting her head, and didn’t relax even when she saw who we were.
Mamá, what’s wrong? my mother asked her but before she could say anything else, Abuelita said in quivering Spanish, She came again. She was here. Wasn’t even wearing her coat.

Who? I asked.

Abuelita began to shake.

La pequeña, she said.

We didn’t just notice the little girl’s indentations in the snow, too. We began hearing her singing renditions of the Juan Gabriel song. Saw pairs of shoes we didn’t recognize, that would’ve only fitted a toddler, tossed haphazardly in corners without explanation, the soles wet and melting from the snow. Found bread slices missing, ribbons caught on doorknobs, her tiny body sprinting past us and whipping our clothes as though by a strong wind. She pursued us as though sewn to our shadows. Like reflection, like echoes of sound and repeated returns. Obsessive, anxious, as though she didn’t know how to live unless by us. As though she’d divided herself into multiple children in our house, an invader as greedy as spilling water, leaking out of corners, famished for our fullness even though she looked just like us.

At every hour, Abuelita couldn’t sit in her chair without shrieking. My mother and I had long since stopped cooking or working or sleeping, instead locking the windows and the doors, throwing out the shoes only for everything to reappear and reopen itself the next morning. At night, the three of us inhabited the same bed, holding Abuelita as she screamed, ¡Ayudame, ayudame!, still unaware that her sorrow had now become a shared thing, threaded through from her to my mother to me like string, all of our minds eating themselves alive somewhere between possession and madness.
What would happen, I wondered, if we became undone?

One night in the bathroom, I felt a tug on my sleeve and turned to find her standing there beside me, this little girl who’d stolen and pillaged and forced herself upon us and yet only reached my knees.

Though she seemed calm, everything about her the same, her hair braided with ribbons, her dress the pattern of a tablecloth, her cheeks their usual red, I took several steps back and clutched the doorknob in case her mood shifted, if recent history was anything to be trusted.

What do you want? Why are you so close to me? Why don’t you leave us alone? I demanded to know in quick succession but she only stared. I thought this meant she didn’t understand English, that because she belonged to Abuelita, she was akin to only one language.

But when I translated my questions into Spanish, she frowned as though frustrated and confused, as though a hand reaching out to touch but never coming close enough, and for some reason, I remembered that despite living with Abuelita, my mother had refused to teach me our family’s native tongue until I took it up in high school. That up until then, I’d walked through the world as though a ghost, only understanding half of myself, my body ungrounded in the earth, lost in two cultures where I wasn’t wanted in either, ashamed despite gaining fluency every time my accent made itself known even to the least experienced ear.

I frowned back, sinking to my knees to meet her where she was, and for the first time, saw her face up close. Her thin nose like mine, her lips I shared and once compared to those on fish, her creamy skin, everything so familiar and the same.
la pequeña

Everything except the hair, I murmured.

But then last Christmas and tamales and the mantle, my old picture, my blonde hair in infancy yet to darken over time, all of it came to mind. My eyes widened.

Where did you come from, Pequeña?

The little girl smiled, raising an arm and a hand to point a finger at me.

In desperation, I forwent sleep and consulted Abuelita’s religion. Read of the God-given visions and demonic holds of old. The burning bush. The temptations in the desert. The angels and their premonitions. The parting of the Red Sea that no one longer believed. But holiness said nothing of past selves, of imagined things made real, and sin also silent in its judgment. She, I, had never touched our skin. Had never wished ill. What if she had also never meant us harm? What if she wasn’t a threat but a warning sign?

We’d forgotten what my mother said, children as strange predecessors to Death.

What do you think is up there, Abuelita? I remember asking her once. In heaven?

She smiled at me sitting on her lap, my small form, and my English that must’ve buzzed against her ears with hard-clipped sounds, which must’ve hurt and made her mourn for all we couldn’t share without the same words. And still, she looked at me like a tender thing, the two of us scrunched together in her large red chair, and even though I was young, even though I was becoming victim to my own feeling of inadequacy, I understood that in asking my question, I answered it, too.
Now from the kitchen, I watched la pequeña crouched at Abuelita’s feet, the red of her dress almost blending in with the chair as she reached, outstretched, for Abuelita’s hand.

Here I was, had always been, bringing her home.

It could’ve happened any number of ways, the end of her. A hard fall, a car crash, a criminal. A loud death, the kind that ends up beneath large-font headlines in newspapers, not cramped in a column between other obituaries, other names that mean nothing except to the ones by whom they’ve been lost.

But she and her house became quiet. Doors closed only when we determined so, windows stayed locked, food disappeared only when we ate. She took on a new name, not Abuelita but Abuelita’s body. Left with a small smile on her face the way my mother said she hadn’t seen in years.

Not since you were born, she told me, and held me as I hurt and understood, because she was someone’s daughter, too.

We were women who knew how to keep ourselves alive. And yet, for all I felt, I could’ve bought rope or filled my pockets with stones. Could’ve sought a river deep enough that I couldn’t stand on the bottom with my toes and succumb to the current without fear. Because what would I do now without her? Who would I look after, take care of more than myself?

But my mother adopted patience, putting a hand on my bouncing knee and urged me to stay sitting with her on the front porch.
Someday, when it’s our own time, we’ll see her again, she said and didn’t answer when I asked which she, which girl or woman she meant.

Dropping my curiosity, I gazed out onto the street and heard a car pass by the house, all its windows down and its radio full blast with a Juan Gabriel song, sounding more familiar than a friend.

Funny, my mother said.

What?

She shook her head.

They always play that at funerals, memorials. It’s our way, you know, of honoring the dead.

I leaned against her then, grabbed her hand, and, even as our street stripped itself free of its music, began to sing along.