

Our Love

from Cartucho, My Mother's Hands
by Nellie Campobello

Her children's hands stretched out to ask her for food.

There was war, there was hunger, and all the usual small-town stuff. We only had Mama. *She* only had our hungry mouths, with no understanding, no heart. Our reality was a round flour tortilla, a full cup of coffee.

She was alone; her companion lived in her memory. The strength of her love sustained her slender woman's body. There were tears in the bread she gave us.

She would get up early, go out: she walked a lot. What might *She* have been saying to herself, as she listened to her footsteps? What was there in her heart for him, who traveled with the rifle brigade? Dreams and hopes imprisoned her spirit! Tears fell daily from her golden eyes and dried in the wind. A long route; some bare streets, others slightly better; unwelcoming sidewalks, a stretch of open ground, an upward slope, and then that house of my aunt where papa left us and where we lived waiting only for Her return. We peered out from an entryway of slick blue flagstones, searching for the little black speck that, at a distance, formed her body. We would burst with bliss when we spotted her approaching: Mama was coming back, she was here, we came back to life. She did not cuddle us, didn't kiss us: with her hands she gathered us close to her heart.

She would come inside the house, let down her hair, sing, walk to and fro; almost without noticing, she would put us to one side. She moved things about here and there. She would light a cigarette and sometimes sit in the doorway looking at the patio and the old doors of that house on the outskirts of town, sad, so sad. She would look around her and become pensive; sometimes she twisted a ring she wore, puffed fiercely, fiercely, and almost closed her eyes. We wouldn't make a sound, then.

As it grew dark, she would seat us all around her and give us what her hands had cooked for us. She did not speak to us; she was simply there, quiet as a wounded dove, pure and gentle. She seemed like our prisoner-I know now that she was our captive. She would pick up her book and pray. She didn't tell us to pray. Later, from our bed, we could see the glow of her last cigarette: a star in her hands, it drew our eyes like a flour tortilla on hungry days.

She did not tell us fairy tales nor ghost stories; she told us about real happenings: Papa Grande, Saint Michael of Bocas, our land, the men of the Revolution, things about the war that she had seen with her own eyes. Those were her chats with her children. We were happy: we knew nothing about bogeymen. That was the way *She* wanted it.

Soldiers. Rifles. Bread. Sun. Moon. Her hands. Her eyes. The glow of her cigarette might be a tortilla between her fingers, but like our life, it was the light that clung to her fingers to absorb her own light, as we did, too.

The red hands of healthy children always seek contact with the earth.

The earth was our companion; we played with it in the sunlight. That earth-red like the palms of our hands and the heels of our feet-opened its arms to us and protected us until Mama returned.

With smooth pebbles and colored berries, we built little corrals of cows and bulls. They were our livestock, or so our inner world told us. Our minds could already live on the unreal. We had our treasures from childhood. We have them still, in jumbled cardboard boxes or in mirrored wardrobes. It doesn't matter where, they're our treasures.

The tribe playing with red earth, making mud pies little corrals, houses, digging out the shiny berrystones. "This skinny speckled stone is a little heifer; these are bulls; we'll shut the cows in here; these are calves." Just like real life, and we shall not deceive ourselves; we will go on living in the unreal. When we close our eyes we can reach everything there. That's why we close our eyes.

Sequins and ears of corn are different. If rain falls from the sky onto sequins, they disintegrate. Grains of corn swell up and offer themselves to empty stomachs.

Everything comes to an end: tables, chairs, lace flounces, cakes, the color of healthy children's heels, tablecloths, cups of tea, rings, gold and silver coins, sacks of corn. When we are born we do not bring any of these lies with us. So, why suffer to obtain things that are lies? Why not just close our eyes and hold out our hands? Mama taught us that.

We know that *She* will laugh to see us still playing with the red earth: the heifers here, the bulls there; the cows in this corner, the mares running over there...

People who live off lies will say, "But those seeds are beans! We eat them in soup!" But since they don't exist in our world, we do not hear them. On the other hand, we see *Her* smile, telling us, "Yes, children; play; that's why you have your mother (that's how she'd speak to us, back then); and if you want to break the cups, go ahead and break them."

For *Her* a smile was worth more than any cup, an ear of corn more than a sequin.

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