
Ghost Heart

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What I love most is the warmth, how it reaches in and spreads out to the tips of my fingers and toes, until it feels like I'm part of the sun, like it's growing inside me. Have you ever seen the ocean turn smooth as a sheet of glass or curl up on the shore with a sigh? If you knew my country then you'd know that the sea can be many things: faithful and blue as the sky one moment, and the next a shimmering turquoise so brilliant you'd swear the sun was shining from beneath the waves.

I often stand at the water's edge, digging my toes into the moist sand, and gaze out at the ghostly grey line of the horizon that separates sea and sky. I close my eyes just a little so I can no longer be sure which is which and I'm floating in a blue-green universe. I'm a fish and then a bird. I'm a golden mermaid with long flowing hair that flies in the wind. With a flick of my tail I could return to the sea and explore the shores of other lands. But how can I leave this place that quietens my soul to a prayer?

Better to stay and lie on the blanket of fine white sand, gazing up at the royal palms for hours as we do. They sway in the ocean breeze and I could almost fall asleep, if not for the constant chatter of my cousin, Alicia. She's hardly a year older than me - in fact for thirteen days of the year we're exactly the same age - but she seems much older and wiser. Perhaps it's because she's so sure of what she likes. She has no doubt that she prefers mango ice cream to coconut and that her favourite number is nine because nine is the age she is and if nine were a person it would be a glamorous lady, a show girl with long legs and swinging hips. I, on the other hand, have a hard time choosing between mango and coconut, and if you throw in papaya I'm completely overwhelmed.

Alicia squints up at the sun with eyes that are sometimes gold, sometimes green, and tells me what she sees. 'Look how the palms move in the wind.'

'I see them,' I respond.

'They're sweeping the clouds away with their big leaves so we can look straight up to heaven and see God.'

'Can you see God?' I ask.

'If I look at it just right I can. And when I do, I ask Him for whatever I want and He'll give it to me.'

I turn away from the swaying palms to study Alicia's face. Sometimes she likes to joke around and doesn't tell me the truth until she's certain she's tricked me. But I

know when she's hiding a smile because her dimples show. They're almost showing now.

'Tell the truth,' I prod.

'I am.' Then she opens her eyes as wide as she can and stares straight up at the sun, then shuts them tight until tears slip past her temples. She turns to face me, eyes sparkling and lips curled in a triumphant smile. 'I just saw Him.'

'What did you ask for?'

'I can't tell you or else He won't give it to me.'

I, too, turn my face towards the sun and try to open my eyes as wide as Alicia's, but I can't keep them open for even half a second and I certainly don't see God or even the wisp of an angel's wing. I conclude that brown eyes are not as receptive to heavenly wonders as her magnificent golden eyes.

Alicia sits up suddenly and looks down at me, blocking the sun. 'What did you ask for?'

'I thought you said we couldn't tell,' I object, not wanting to admit I'd failed to see anything at all.

She settles back down onto the sand and full sun stretches over us once again. Soon we'll have to head back for our afternoon meal. These morning hours at the beach slip away so fast. I was hoping we'd get a chance to go swimming, but we aren't allowed in past our knees without a trusted adult nearby to keep watch. Ever since a little boy drowned at Varadero beach three years ago that's been the rule and there's no use trying to change it.

'I want to go swimming,' I say.

Alicia turns to survey the ocean. We see the waves lapping the white curve of the beach and know the sea is a warm bath. We'd float easily in the calm waters and maybe even learn how to swim more like the grown-ups, moving our arms like steady and reliable windmills. And maybe our grandfather, Abuelo Antonio, undoubtedly the best swimmer in all of Cuba, will come out with us and we'll take turns venturing into deeper water while riding safely on his shoulders.

'Let's go!' Alicia cries and we spring to our feet and run as fast as we can, leaving a wake of powdery white sand floating behind us.

All of the rooms in my grandparents' large house at Varadero overlooked the sea, and the dining room was no exception. Abuela kept the windows open most of the time as she believed fresh air to be the best defence against the many diseases she worried about. The lace curtains fluttered on the incoming ocean breeze as Abuelo said the blessing over our meal. It wasn't until he lifted his head and took up his fork that we were allowed to do the same.

I was lucky to be sitting closest to the fried bananas, my favourite, and to have Alicia right next to me as well. At home, our parents knew better and always separated us so we wouldn't talk and giggle when we should be learning proper table manners. It seemed that Mami was more concerned with what fork I used for the salad than with my school work. Most of the time, Abuelo and Abuela were amused by our antics and laughed at what our parents called 'foolishness'.

'Look at how dark you're getting,' Abuela said as she handed me a large bowl of fluffy yellow rice. 'People will think you're a mulatica and not the full-blooded Spaniard that you are.' Being a full-blooded Spaniard was also a very important thing, even more important than proper manners.

I helped myself to a generous serving of rice. 'Look at Alicia. She's almost as dark as me,' I shot back.

'Alicia's a Spaniard through and through,' Abuela said. 'With those light eyes and hair, there's no mistaking her heritage. She can get as black as a ripened date and she'll still look like a Spaniard.'

At these moments, the only thing that kept me from envying Alicia for her superior colouring was that she always came to my rescue. 'I think Nora looks beautiful, like a tropical princess,' she said.

'That's right, Abuela, I look like a tropical princess.'

Abuelo laughed. Having been born in Spain, he was more Spanish than anyone, but he didn't care as much as Abuela about where people came from or who their parents were. And even though he never bragged, everyone knew he was a real Spaniard because of his accent and eloquent speech, so different from the brusque Cuban style. 'Would the princess mind passing the platanos before she eats them all herself?' he asked with a slight bow of his head.