

## Stare

Disarmed but for her stare, the old woman with skin dark, taut from too many Caribbean years sits frozen, her head turned. Frozen but for eyes that stare. Brown eyes so dark as to be as to shine black at a distance. Unmoving, they bore. No commentary from her body, her voice is silent. No telltale sign betrays her. Just the stare as the wheel chair breezes through the cool and spacious indoor mall that is Buena Vista. Entering midlife, her granddaughter pushes with one hand, her voice loud in the cell phone, ignoring her sour grandmother.

The younger woman throws back her head, strides with energy, and attends to the window dressings willing for the seduction of fashion shops while at the same time providing detailed descriptions to the girl friend listening and strolling in the midst of other crowds. "How would that dress look on me," she asks her absent confidant, "I'm not that fat?" The seduction will consummate when she snaps the credit card on to the glass display when they pass this way again to catch a taxi. The wonder is her ability to attend to the decrepitude below her, the talk in her ear, and the dresses beckoning from the window of Coach.

But grandma attends to one task. Her back is as stiff as if were fused by ancients. But even that does not distract her.

Before 11:00 the mall is still spotless and nearly empty. By lunch it fills. Moms chase little ones. Fathers scowl. Teenagers slink with fashions from Bogota or Cali that originated in London or Paris, or U.S. Who knows from where they originate, China? Girls carry fat purses and flaunt flat exposed bellies. No tattoos initiate their arms, only a few piercings. Their cell phones either remain cemented to their palms or slide into sleek pockets. Either way, though, they are consulted often. One ponders, how many texts or calls could have arrived from the moment they entered the mall to the thirty giggling steps they have taken before they check again. They are no different from their peers around the world.

Exito is the hub in Buena Vista--an if-they-don't-have-it you-don't-need-it kind of place. Groceries, eye glasses, vitamins, medications, groceries, clothing, cosmetics, kitchenware, boogie boards, bicycles, computers, washing machines, liquor, and, of course, motorcycles. Many of these items are gathered in discrete cubicles that line the wall in front of the checkout stands. Their proprietors are kind and quietly helpful.

Grandma ignores Exito. For moments she is riveted a girl of not more three-years. She stands on a two-foot high granite retaining wall that encloses a display of fake flowers, fake ficus trees, and real small toys. He throws them into themselves with infinite repetition. The kid aims, throws, giggles, and turns to her toward her dad with a wry smile before another toss, and another.

Does grandma dimly recall the sailor dress, blue and white? Only that dress would adorn Sunday mornings. She accepted no alternative even when her mother tempted her with a new outfit. Inside the Cathedral, the hard wooden pew squeezed with mama, and her ten siblings, but not papa. He religiously absented himself. His Sunday's were devoted to cosmic contemplation with fellow pilgrims and cerveza. So disciplined was papa's ritual, that even when his mother visited Santa Marta from Cartagena, he continued steadfast in his ritual.

Or does she see the baby, her granddaughter's mother, swaddled in stiff hand-washed diapers asleep in a wooden crate beside a loveless bed. Night after night, with a bamboo fan, she defended her baby from the invasion of mosquitoes. And she suckled her until her milk dried up when Juan Carlos ventured to Peru. He returned the next year, but not really.

But nothing can be discerned from her blank face.

The girl continues in her world of laughing pebbles. People pass unseeing. Grandma sees. The intensity of her stare diminishes not a degree. Maybe she's stuck like a brittle Bing Crosby 78, "... bye-bye, blackbird."

No word greets the girl, not a smile.