

# Zapatos Nuevos

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*Monday*

I twirled on my toes, watching the *folklórico* dress flutter upward like the colorful wings of a scarlet macaw. The vibrant dress stuck out among the neutral tones of the bedroom I shared with my older sister. In fact, it was the one of the only things that had more than two colors and wasn't colored either brown or beige, the other being the Mexican flag I had hung above the bed.

"How does it fit?" Irene asked.

"Is it supposed to be this long?" I responded. I hadn't hit my growth spurt yet, so at twelve I only stood at four foot two inches. The fabric trailed as long as a jaguar's tail, covering my feet. I was sure I would stumble while dancing.

Irene merely laughed. "It used to be mine, so of course it's a little big, but we can have Abuelita hem it for you."

After she unzipped the back, I shrugged the dress off. It pooled at my ankles in a heap of rainbow cloth. I put it back on the hanger and set it on the bed.

"How do your shoes fit?" my sister asked.

"Fine," I answered a bit too quickly. "They're old, but they work."

Irene frowned, but before she could comment on it, our two youngest siblings, Claudia and Fernando, burst into the room. While Irene tried to stop the argument between the two on whose turn it was to play with the train set, I made my escape by slipping out the door.

With the traditional folk dance celebration coming up, my poor *pies* ached more and more each day after twirling on them round and round like a carnival carousel. Our dance academy, *Ensembles Ballet Folklórico de San Francisco*, hosted the upcoming event. My older sister and I spent several hours each day learning the ballet-style dance with the other kids in our class. Our choreography was coming along smoothly for the most part. The little ones stumbled through the moves, but their cuteness would make the *abuelitas* and *tías* fawn and overlook their mistakes. My *abuelita* had always said that Fernando's round cheeks were so adorable that she could take a bite out of them. The viewers would be too focused on how cute the little children looked in their traditional dresses to worry about critiquing them too harshly. The most pressure fell on my big sister, Irene, and me.

The dance itself was quite difficult, with overly exaggerated movements that required perfection. Not only did the dance have crazy footwork, I had to fan my dress around in sync with the other girls. One mistake and I would look like a clumsy llama instead of a graceful ballerina. Through the dance, I was supposed to show how beautiful Mexican culture was. My biggest nightmare was making a fool

out of myself in front of others by making mistakes. It would make me look like a phony Latina who didn't know what she was doing.

I collapsed on the living room couch, glad to finally have my weight off my feet. "*Ay dios mio! Me duelen los pies!*" I complained. My feet were still swollen from practicing. The constant spinning and practice had worn a hole into my thin heels which were already a size too small. The sole had begun to split from the base, and it was only a matter of time before they fell apart completely. But, money was tight right now, so there was no hope to get a new pair. It would be greedy of me to ask.

"Oh, Araceli, *mija*," Mamá's voice came from the kitchen. I threw the couch blanket over my lap, hiding my feet, right as she entered the room. She still had on her work uniform: dirty baby blue scrubs with a permanent stain of what I could only assume is either vomit or coffee. Her name badge was still clipped on her breast pocket.

"Hi Mamá," I said. "How was work today?"

Mamá collapsed on the couch beside me, letting out a tired sigh. Her grays were starting to become more vivid along her hairline. Hints of wrinkles began to crease along her once ageless skin. She had been working a lot of extra overtime lately to pay for Papá's medical bills.

"Well, Señor Martínez wouldn't take his meds, because he thought I was *La Llorona* and Señor Castillo went on another tangent about how his wife left him for a Spanish matador. Let's also not forget that I had to translate for a new patient who didn't understand why her son's medical expenses were so high, since all the white people at my job are incompetent and didn't pass second year high school Spanish."

It was difficult to tell if she was trying to be sarcastic or funny. I bit back my laugh so that I wouldn't aggravate her even more. "So another typical day?" I asked.

"If by typical you mean *loco*, then yes," Mamá said. Her body slumped, the exhaustion finally catching her. She had never looked so worn down before. Between my parents, my mother was the energetic parent who always wore a bright smile. Every weekend, Mamá was the one at Fernando's soccer games, cheering him on despite the numerous times he scored on the wrong goal. Early Sunday mornings, she would style my sisters' and my wild hair, making it look neat and presentable for Jesus Christ. Her excellent cooking drew in people from each corner of the neighborhood. Although she complained about Tía Teresa's ill-mannered children most of the time, she loved having gatherings and was an excellent hostess. Back before work started to take up most of her time, Mamá hosted weekly cookouts, inviting most of the neighborhood, including people whom I never met.

Lately, her smile seemed more and more forced instead of genuine. She sometimes fell asleep on the couch still in her work clothes, forgetting to prepare dinner for her four hungry children and useless husband. The laundry would pile

and pile until I couldn't see the floor. Bacteria would make themselves at home in the unclean bathroom and the overflowing trash in the kitchen would burn my nostrils each time I passed by.

Irene took it upon herself, as the oldest, to do the household chores. I tried to convince her otherwise. Being the mother was not the job of a fifteen-year-old, but my sister dismissed me, always claiming that as the *hermana*, it was her responsibility to look out for her siblings. She knew enough recipes from Abuelita to make us *arroz* and *frijoles* for every meal. When Mamá did have a chance to make it to the grocery store, Irene would change up the menu and make *tamales* for special occasions, such as my birthday. It did get tiring eating the same meal, but I couldn't be picky. After all, what she cooked tended to be healthier and more filling than the small meals I ate at school. *Arroz* and *frijoles* tasted better than the greasy chicken nuggets and strange mashed potatoes with gravy my middle school usually served. It was almost a relief to come home to an authentic meal after long hours at school and an even longer dance practice.

Unfortunately, if Irene didn't run the house, no one would. Papá had suffered a stroke the year prior, so he had lost feeling in his left side, which happened to be his dominant. He went to physical therapy until insurance stopped paying for it. The little strength he regained wasn't enough to perform the laborious tasks of entry-level jobs for someone with no college degree required. He bounced from work to work, bringing in barely anything in each paycheck. What little change he made was spent on cigarettes and painkillers. I didn't hate him for having a stroke, but I did hate how he'd given up on trying to have a normal life. He was content letting his fifteen-year-old daughter play mom and letting his burnt-out wife pay the bills.

By now, Mamá'd fallen asleep on the couch. She was rigid when she slept, shoulders tense, body on edge. I took my blanket and carefully sprawled it across her. Mamá finally relaxed. I went to the kitchen where I saw Irene making dinner. Again, rice was in one of the pots, but a new scent filled my nose.

"Is that chicken?" I asked.

"No." A smile spread across Irene's face. I get a closer look at the skillet. "It's beef."

"Since when can we afford it?"

"Tío Miguel brought some by," Irene explained. I just nodded. Tío Miguel was Mamá's older brother. She was the youngest out of her three siblings, Tía Teresa being the middle child. Despite Mamá being the youngest, she was the most mature. Tío Miguel drank too much and Tía Teresa was the queen of gossip. Tío Miguel was my favorite, because he was a funny drunk who liked to bring up old drama that made his sister so mad that her veins began to pop. It was how Tía Teresa earned the nickname *yautía* for the way her veins looked like roots.

“He and Tía Rosa plan to come to the *baile* on Friday,” Irene said. My eyebrow poked up at the sudden information. Tío Miguel hated performances, always complaining about how they’re too long. At the same time, when fútbol season started, he and his buddies watched every three hour long game.

“Will Papá come too, or is he too busy bouncing from job to job that day?” I asked, not bothering to hide my dislike for my father. Irene frowned, disapprovingly.

She knew how I felt about our father. My relationship with him was already estranged before his stroke, but we only continued to drift further apart during his recovery. We had little in common, and there was no point in forcing awkward conversations. The last time I recalled having a full conversation with him was when I was ten and he asked me to get him a beer from the cooler. When I told him we were out, in a fit of rage, he threw coins at me and told me to run down to the market. He hadn’t realized that not only did he throw pesos at me, but I wasn’t legally allowed to buy alcohol.

Since then, I avoided contact with him whenever possible, unless it was to get his pain killers from the bathroom or a new lighter. I don’t know why Mamá married a bum like him. Even before his stroke, Mamá was the breadwinner. Papá stayed at home for most days, lounging around while watching sappy *telenovelas*. He was forced to get a job when Mamá could no longer cover his medical expenses herself.

“He plans to come, so please behave and drop the attitude,” Irene said, scolding me.

I managed a silent nod, not sure how to respond to my sister. It didn’t affect me one way or another by who showed up to watch me dance. All of Mexico could come and I would still need to dance *perfectly* so that I was not an embarrassment to my heritage. I had memorized the choreography, so that I could dance in my sleep. My dress was big, but still captured the beauty of my culture. Once it was hemmed, I would be unstoppable. The only thing that could potentially ruin this performance were my shoes. They just needed to last for a few more days, and I could only pray to God that they did.

### *Saturday*

Friday came sooner than I’d liked it to. The last few days of practice were brutal on my feet. The largest blister on the sole of my right foot finally tore, leaving an open sore that ached with excruciating pain each time I put pressure on it. It brought tears to my eyes when I tried to clumsily wrap it by myself in the bathroom.

“*Nieta*, are you dressed yet?” Abuelita called from the other side of the closed bathroom door. “I already did Irene’s hair. You’re next.”

“*Un momento porfa!*” I threw the bandages in the trash and washed my hands. Hopping on one foot, I managed to shimmy into my *folklórico* only to get tangled in the fabric and fall. I hissed as my elbow collided with the edge of the bathtub. The friction between the dress and my foot made it sear with pain.

“Araceli?” Abuelita entered the room. Color drained from her face seeing her granddaughter sprawled on the floor with a blistered foot that had begun to bleed. “Aye! *Qué pasó?*” Abuelita moved nimbly for her age, bending down like she didn’t have arthritis in her knees. She examined my foot, before shaking her head. “Clumsy *mono*. How did this happen?”

I couldn’t bring myself to answer, only managing to whimper out, “It hurts, Abuelita.”

Abuelita instructed me to sit on top of the closed toilet seat. She thoroughly washed her hands and gathered a new roll of gauze from the cabinet. Mamá always took supplies from work, so we always had a surplus of medical equipment. Abuelita first used a bit of soap and water to clean away the blood and dirt that got into the sore. She disinfected the blister with rubbing alcohol. It took every bit of energy in me to bite back a scream as the antiseptic stings worse than a hornet. However, her delicate hands that wrapped the bandage around my foot almost eased my pain.

“You can’t dance with feet like these,” Abuelita said.

“I have to.”

“You will only make it worse. You are lucky it wasn’t infected, but aggravating it more may do just that.”

I wanted to cry, because I knew she was right, but Irene and I put in too much hard work each day for me to drop out on the day of. My culture was the most important thing to me. Being born in San Diego instead of La Paz like Irene, I already felt artificial in a way. There was a bit of disconnect since I wasn’t officially “Mexican,” so I did whatever I could to engage in cultural activities to restore that connection. Cooking authentic meals, such as *chilaquiles* and *mole*. Speaking Spanish. Creating colorful *talavera* pottery to represent the artistic history of Mexico. Paying respect to my ancestors on Día de Los Muertos by leaving *ofrendas* of food, candles, and marigolds. It never felt enough though. It couldn’t change the fact that I wasn’t born in Mexico. I was American. I wasn’t a true Latina.

“I must dance, Abuelita,” I said. I wobbly stood to my feet, ignoring the pain. “It’s the only way for me to truly feel like I belong. If I can’t then I’ve let my family and my people down.”

Abuelita said nothing. She stared at me with a poker face. I never knew what she was thinking. Her age far surpassed mine, as did her wisdom. It was truly difficult sometimes to understand her, but that didn’t change the fact that I respected her highly. After all, she gave up everything after her husband died to start fresh

and bring her children, son-in-law, and two-year-old granddaughter to the United States.

“You get your ambition from your *madre*,” Abuelita finally said. She then laughed. “You get that bull-headedness from your lazy *padre*, but your *abuelo* was the same way.” Abuelita stood. She grunted quietly as her brittle joints crack and pop. “Stay here for a moment.”

She then left the bathroom. Fear filled my chest as I worried she was going to get Irene or Mamá. Mamá wasn’t explosive when angry but tended to make a big fuss. She would wail about the smallest mosquito bite and would be sure to flip if she saw my foot. Irene didn’t scare me as much as she would make me feel like crap for hiding my pain. She usually gave a look that said, “I’m not mad, just disappointed.” And being burdensome to my family hurt worse than the open blister on my foot.

Abuelita came back in a few minutes. She held an old brown rectangular box. She gave it to me, which I took with hesitation. Inside were a pair of white leather heels. They appeared as they had never been worn despite being in such a tattered box. I checked the sole for the size; it was a five, what I wore.

“Where did you get the money for these?” I asked in awe. I desperately wanted to try them on, to twirl around them in my folklorico, and to dance for hours. But knowing the price deterred the thought from my mind.

“They used to be mine when I was a little girl,” Abuelita explained. “I wore them the first time I danced the *Baile Folklórico* at my school. Irene couldn’t fit them, and she told me that you didn’t need shoes, so I planned to save them for Claudia.”

I ran my fingers along the smooth leather, collecting a bit of dust. There were no indentations, creases or smudges on the shoe. Abuelita gestured for me to try them on which I did, putting one on my good foot. It was perfect.

I didn’t have to cram my foot in just to get the shoe on. My toes weren’t cramped up against the top and my heels didn’t rub against the back. They were actually a tad big, but not so big that they would fall off.

“Abuelita...” My eyes brimmed with tears. They stung as I tried to fight them back and lost. Abuelita smiled, her eyes crinkling sweetly. Her thumb wiped a stray droplet from my cheek.

“Save the tears for after you finish dancing,” she said. “Now, let Abuelita finish getting you ready. You still aren’t dressed, and your hair needs taming. Time waits for no one.”

I had her zip up my *folklórico* while I put on the other shoe. The bandages made the shoe more snug but not to the point of pain. Abuelita sat me down, broke out a comb, and raked it through my brown locs. Her touch was gentle. As she worked, she hummed a soft Spanish tune. One that reminded me of the Mexican seaside where a young girl danced.