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Condors in a Cage

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Abstract

Annie was carried away by a 13,000-lb. elephant during a Circo Hermanos Salamanca performance in Mexico City. Anabella La Bella was a Namibian-born orphaned elephant who had been auctioned off, transported from Southern Africa to the Mexican Valley as special, oversized cargo, and forced to perform among the dirt and the lights and the ¡Órale! of Mexico City. During the Circo Hermanos Salamanca performance, Annie and her sister tried, with exceeding effort, to seem calm as the trapeze artists swung themselves in the air, floating above them with no apparent sense of mortality. Annie remembered the scene in *Batman Forever* when Robin's parents were doomed to fall to their deaths at the Gotham City circus. Doña Teresa tried to focus her granddaughter's attention, squealing: '¡Annie, mira!' Anabella, well-trained Namibian-imported-quasi-Euro-Mexican elephant that she was, automatically turned when she heard the squeal, processing where she thought she had heard the command: ¡Aní mira! To her trainer, Anabella was simply 'Aní' when she performed a trick warranting a prize of a cantaloupe covered in syrup. Anabella would eat through the fruit's rind until she reached the melon-flesh that she savored patiently.

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Assuming Annie was some sort of trick that she was supposed to focus on, Anabella walked past her trainer, into the gasping crowd, and grabbed Annie. The elephant gently curled her trunk around Annie's waist, lifted her from her seat, and brought the child to the center stage as Teresa shrieked. Doña Teresa would relish in re-telling the story. 'I have no memory of this,' adult Annie told her laughing family. 'You just screamed "EPA! CHAMA" when she grabbed you!' her grandmother said. 'It was the funniest sound.' Baptized as 'Anna-Maria Suarez' in a Houston, Texas hospital, Anna-Maria became Annie almost immediately. Her parents would observe well-meaning, assured gringos shorten Anna-Maria's name, remove the hyphen, and add unnecessary vowels to form a playful, simple sound that the Suarez parents had never intended: Annie. Prior to the Circo Hermanos Salamanca performance, Annie attended one other circus – Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey: The Greatest Show on Earth! during a field trip with her kindergarten class. Annie's single memory from the event was the realization that she couldn't have cotton candy unless she paid for the cotton candy. Annie spent the show in silence, staring at her classmates whose parents had the forethought to give them cash. Annie

wanted her own cotton candy. She wanted to hold the treat proudly. She wanted to tear at the pastel strands, to suck on the pink sugar and to feel the sweetness dissolve in her mouth.

*

The Suarez parents would send their daughters abroad with the sole purpose of instilling into them some sense of Latina-ness. Annie and Adriana Suarez had lost their ability to roll their R's. They would stare blankly at El Chavo del Ocho and anglicize words like 'jalapeño'. From a young age, Annie's belief system seemed grounded in senses: the goosebumps as she heard the instrumental introduction to Lou Reed's Sweet Jane, the way her body felt when she walked into a room with pastel walls: soft, fuzzy peach, seafoam green, a hint of berry; the day the guy she liked told her she had *Robert Plant hair, in a good way, I mean*. The first time she felt a cat purr on her wrist. A group of laughing boys from St. Regis shooting BB gun pellets into the belly of a cornered mother possum; the limp hawk on the highway, too broken to move but alive enough to stare into Annie's brown eyes.

By middle school, Annie had a uniform of teal-painted fingernails and too much mascara. Annie wanted someone to hold her small chin with a complicated tenderness like Buffy and Angel. Annie's Bolivian family that was hosting her and her sister for the summer was at a loss for how to deal with Annie. Her aunts refused to let Annie shave her legs – they threw away the pink Gillette razor Annie dutifully packed and forced her to wax, exposing every prickly vulnerability as they ripped away Annie's carefully crafted self-esteem.

Annie didn't know how she was supposed to behave around her extended relatives. The older generation would wake up in the morning and announce themselves by ringing their bedside bell. Their servants would cater to the whims of Annie's 76-year-old great-aunts who loved to call Annie fat, loved to slap her ass and pinch her thighs like they were pieces of ham: ¡Esas piernas como jamón serrano! They came from white-Latin America, from the generation that required the indigenous maids to bathe in powdered acid to ensure they wouldn't bring lice into the main house.

*

‘7 pesos,’ said the vendor.

‘But what is it?’ Annie asked.

‘For good luck – 5 pesos.’

‘Why is a lamb fetus good luck?’ Annie asked the vendor.

‘5 pesos o nada!’

Annie bought the lamb fetus for good luck. She gave the lamb fetus to a relative who had recently lost his job. She instructed him, as she had been carefully instructed, to bury the lamb fetus in his new home as a blessing to La Pachamama, to the Mother Earth. Annie bought a dried bat carcass, multiple botched parts of a toucan – his yellow-orange bill inside a plastic bag, a laminated piraña, the mud nest home of the rufous hornero – the national bird of Argentina, and pages of flattened, lavender butterflies for a total of seven dollars. “They’re so beautiful,” Annie said. “Did they just fall?”

Doña Teresa was aware of her granddaughter’s naïve eyes: blushing at the Chilean clown who winked at Annie as he juggled plastic bowling pins in the downtown plaza. Annie wanted to leave him money but her grandmother grabbed her hand and led her away. Annie would find herself gaping at the Danish backpacker with his Abbie Hoffman hair, squirming in front of the college dropout discussing his theories on lucid dreaming – so, Doña Theresa decided to distract her granddaughter with a list of age-appropriate adventures: the witch market, the zoo, and the poultry farm. The next activity on the list was a visit to the Parque Zoológico Infantil Oscar Alfaro de Tarija.

Friends and relatives of Annie’s family social circle never went to the zoo in Tarija. It was understood to be a place for the entertainment of the Bolivian lower class. Where public-school kids made out in the shadows of the pigeon stained benches. Where families would pay five pesos for the security to walk around aimlessly, safely and stare at the caged animals: Kimba, the sole lion. Walter, the exotic, North American squirrel. It would occur to the founders of the organization, Los Amigos de Tarija, that they could solve one of the economic problems of maintaining the zoo as well as one consistent aesthetic complaint by simply exterminating the pigeons that waddled around the downtown plaza and feeding them to the

captive animals. Los Amigos succeeded in rallying support to their cause and away from the opposition: *Our children will die from inhaling the bacteria from the excrement left by these winged rats. No one desires this, but it is the best option to guarantee the greater good of public health. Ignore the pseudo-animalist who would rather have vermin infest our city because they believe killing an animal is cruel? Come on now - common sense por favor! By defending the pigeons you deny the healthy future of our children.*

Annie walked around the zoo, hand in hand with her grandmother who was attempting to lovingly convince her granddaughter to get a haircut, when they came across a group of children in front of the condor cage. The children were trying, unsuccessfully, with all their burly elementary school strength, to hit the birds: the national symbol of the Andes, the pride and the soul and the strength of the Altiplano. The condors were perched on a metal bar far enough away from the children's arms. Annie's grandmother looked at her granddaughter impatiently. 'Ya,' she said. 'Vamonos.' The two black condors sat motionless, heads bent down toward the ground, beaks shut, nestled close to each other as the pebbles ricocheted in their cage.

The final stop for age-appropriate entertainment was a tour of the family poultry farm. Annie's sister hadn't been forced to attend these supervised excursions. Adriana Suarez knew better. She would stay home and watch MTV: LATINOAMERICA – where she discovered the aptly titled 1970's hit 'Maldita Primavera' and the No Wave genre that she would never seem to outgrow. Adriana was, comparatively, better at hiding her level of discomfort. Instead of grimacing in raccoon-eyed Rimmel eyeliner like her younger sister or blushing when Antonio used a flute to play a cueca, Adriana went out of her way to smile and to politely kiss every Tio's cheek. They wouldn't hug Adriana the way they hugged Annie, casually letting the palms of their hands rest on her young ass.

Adriana wanted to visit the poultry farm. The sisters had never been invited to visit the POLLITOS PASAJEROS facility and they would never be invited to return.

‘Have you been to a farm before?’

‘No,’ Annie and Adriana replied to their aunt, Lucia Montoya, the co-owner of LOS POLLITOS PASAJEROS INC. They were the largest supplier of poultry products in southern Bolivia. This made them exceedingly popular with the maternal side of Annie’s family. The Montoya children would end up studying in the United States and each Montoya child would respectively receive their masters in animal science, agricultural economics, and industrial engineering in the great state of Arkansas: groomed to continue to expand the production of commercial poultry in South America under the POLLITOS PASAJEROS label. ‘Well, we have field trips at school,’ Adriana added. ‘We learned to milk a cow once – and then we drank the nata, it was *so* gross.’ Their aunt smiled and led everyone inside.

After reaching the newly hatched chicks, the adults stopped paying attention to the preteens and disappeared into the main office. Annie, Adriana, and their Montoya cousins sat with the sleeping chicks under the yellow, heated lamp; petting their newborn feathers as they played truth or dare. DARE: *I dare you to snort pepper.* TRUTH: *Have you ever made out under water?* Annie and Adriana were too cool for this. Instead, they explored the POLLITOS PASAJEROS facility. It was bigger than what they imagined, more metallic and industrial. Many of the doors were locked and warned of legal penalties: **VIOLACION DE LA LEY NO. XXX.** There were alarm systems and security cameras and huge plastic bins against the walls. Annie and Adriana went up to one bin and on their tippy toes, they peeked in.

*

Adult Annie sat in her parents’ dining room. She had heard the story before. Anabella La Bella grabbed Annie when she heard ‘¡Annie mira!,’ assuming Annie was her next challenge. Anabella would eventually set the confused child down as her trainer broke into a huge grin forcing an eruption of applause, a standing ovation of Mexican gritos, as the circus staff pretended the act had been intentional. It was unclear what the fate of Anabella had been. Annie wouldn’t visit Mexico City again for a long time, but Adriana would. She would visit with Todd. Todd had a panic attack on their flight. Adriana was scared. Todd’s palm grasped his heart. The only thing she could think of was to force him to play hangman on the back of a

Southwest napkin. Adriana racked her brain for something distracting: ‘S I O U X S I E - A N D - T H E - B A N S H E E S.’ Todd closed his eyes during the landing and reached for Adriana’s hand, holding hers safely in his.

They took pictures in front of the Angel de la Independencia, they watched a Mexican-folkloric ballet performance at El Palacio de Las Bellas Artes, and they walked around aimlessly in El Zocalo, Polanco, and La Zona Rosa. They bought street food: pineapple and mangos covered in Mexican chili powder and Lucas Gusano Chamoy. Todd cautiously slurped the unfamiliar flavor of sweet and spicy. Adriana ate jicama drenched with limejuice and salt. She would call her sister and loudly, but playfully, make fun of Todd: *We had to cross the street at one of the downtown rotundas and he fucking left me! He just went without me!* She heard Todd trying to talk over their sisterly contempt: *You can’t hesitate! When it’s time to cross, you cross the street!* In Chapultepec, Todd and Adriana watched the Chapultepec squirrels leap into tourist’s purses and run away with open bags of potato chips. Adriana would learn that Mexico City banned the use of wild animals in circuses – that the Circo Hermanos Salamanca were no more, but that their main competitor, the Circo Hermanos Vasquez, survived by moving into the U.S. market. She would learn that the ban was preceded by Bolivia’s national ban on the use of all animals in circuses. Followed many years later by the Ringling Bros. final performance in Uniondale, New York. But this seemingly neat, cultural shift was unbelievable as the sisters peeked into the POLLITOS PASAJEROS’s bin.

Annie and Adriana took off their sweaters, placed them on the floor, and reached into the bin to grab the chicks that were still alive. The POLLITOS PASAJEROS bins were filled with newly hatched chicks that had been thrown away because they didn’t serve a purpose to the poultry industry. Annie reached in to grab a chick that was breathing erratically, his newborn eyes searching for an escape from the limp bodies that were piled on top of him. He tried to fly out of Annie’s hand, but his right wing was falling off. She tried to hold him together. The sisters separated the live chicks from the dead ones, placing them inside the safety of Annie’s plaid Talbots sweater and Adriana’s cardigan from the United Colors of Benetton. The sisters

acted quickly, in silence, except for when they cooed to the chicks, to assure them that *everything was going to be okay*, looking up as they saw their relatives walk near them, shaking their heads with patient, reasonable smiles: ‘Ay, las gringitas.’ They heard their cousins, ‘Eww, Ma, why are they playing with the trash?’