

LYES

by Cubafriminican

Chusma de la Calle had the most beautiful scarves.

Gentle, warm sheaths of silk she kept in a special drawer lined with tissue and rosehip sachets tucked in the corners. She had scarves of every color, but most were shades of her favorite, blue. Sometimes Chusma spread her scarves across her bed, laid across them, and imagined herself beautiful.

She chose a scarf to wear only after considering the forecast, the audience and the task at hand. Once the appropriate choice was made, a short prayer was recited with the scarf draping her folded hands as if it, too, were praying with Chusma. Praying for good favor, patience and understanding.

The scarf was folded into a triangle once, and then folded again into a smaller wedge. Standing in front of her bedroom mirror, Chusma would stand with the base tips of the triangle in each hand and with her head bowed. She raised her head as she raised the scarf against her face, fitting the mask on cue as her eyes met their reflection. The ends were tied with a double knot at the back, just below the crown, and the loose ends tucked underneath the edges of a perfect ballerina's bun.

The scarves loved Chusma's face as much as she loved to feel them across her nose and her mouth, caressing her cocoa porcelain skin as if they were nursing a china doll that had been broken. They sang songs to Chusma only she could hear and constantly whispered sweet, sweet things to remind her how beautiful she was.

She *was* a beautiful girl.

Chusma de la Calle was a beautiful girl.

He self-medicated every four weeks with the appropriate strength for the season.

Super corresponded to late spring and summer. It was the best defense against humidity that choked the atmosphere out of its

breath. Baseball caps sometimes aided him when another round against the barometric pressure would have proven fatal.

Together, they would talk about it for hours. Back home, the summers — the people — weren't the same. Heat stroke... heat advisory...heat index...those things only existed in English, and then only in D.C. in the summertime.

In fall, he switched to regular and offered a phantom daughter whenever wanton glances and knowing smirks required an explanation. Regrettably, he'd explain, the child had taken her mother's texture, not his.

In winter and into early spring, mild was in order. Pictures of smiling children adorned his basic necessity. He tried to find the boxes with the prettiest little girls on them, little girls who looked like they'd never need to use the contents, just as he deemed himself whole, needing nothing cured.

It was summer when they died.

And no trace of lye remained anywhere about them.

Their hair looked good.

He was new, arriving at the intersection of Columbia Road and 18th Street every morning at 8:32, no later than quarter to nine. The first day the crème-dipped statue emerged from the bus, Chusma de la Calle shrunk from the well of her picture window to its left bottom corner; afraid he might glance up and see her. She crawled to the bedroom for her binoculars, ducking behind chairs and floor lamps lest he see her, and then back to the picture window.

He was divine. He had to be six foot four, at least, towering above all others, a skyscraper among ordinary buildings. Skilled sculptors had chiseled his profile, every angle perfectly aligned. When he smiled, dimples swallowed his face. His shoulders walked ahead of him and swept his way clear of the fanfare of women who were lucky to be close. His hands enveloped the briefcase he carried in one and a newspaper in the other. Strong hands, with muscles pushing the veins forward closer to the skin, shouting, *I am a man.*

“Beautiful,” Chusma said to no one, “he’s beautiful.”

His bouffant, though, was suspect. The curtain of blue-black hair had been swept forward then draped back and sat on the very top of his head, a bit off-center, although there was no breeze that late spring day. His hair styling acumen, she concluded, was not on par with the rest of him. And the shine! A shine produced by a religion found only in kits with instructions. An artificial brightness from prayers in gels and aerosol cans.

Chusma abandoned the binoculars and melted in to her ankles as much as she could when his path took him toward her building. She reemerged after she thought he’d passed, only to find him talking to the vendor across the street from her intelligence station. With his back turned to the picture window, she braved the lenses to treat her eyes, again. And then she saw it.

The whisper of a curl her expert eyes recognized had thrown itself away from his scalp and up toward her as if begging her assistance.

Chusma saw the lie the lye tried to tell and so, she knew, could everyone else. Though she also knew if anyone could heal him, she could, just as she’d treated others suffering the same affliction week after week in her apartment salon in the top floor of an old D.C. row house.

She studied him for weeks, each day following him until she could not see him anymore. She catalogued his routine by the second and would sometimes emcee his stops out loud.

Chusma ran to the picture window between press and curls, color touch-ups and wet sets, in time for his lunch break, coffee breaks and his walks back down Columbia Road at the end of the day. On Tuesdays, he dipped in to the grocery store next to her building, emerging with a single bag filled, she presumed, with the highest quality cheeses, crackers and fruits, a breakfast she supposed he catered for his assistants once a week.

Next Tuesday, close to the last weeks of spring, Chusma plotted she’d save him before summer required stronger lyes.

With her favorite scarf, she went to the grocery store on Tuesday morning. She waited at the display of flowers by the door so she could ambush him when he entered. Her nervousness welcomed distractions from neighbors and clients as she browsed fuchsia and cyan spray-painted daisies and foil balloons.

"Chusma, y tú" echoed voices she knew, without having to look up. Etiquette dictated she keep her head down, with the scarf close to her face and never to respond. It was a language of curt greetings, a code of nods and hand signals to acknowledge their redeemer, but never to demonstrate they knew her well and needed her.

"Hi, Chusma," continued the parade. She was waiting for a pause, waiting for him to enter. Silence would signal his arrival.

"Chusma, cómo estas."

Then silence.

"Chusma!"

She jerked her head up to match the unfamiliar bass with the face that knew her name.

Chusma parted the heart-shaped and cartoon character balloons, it was him.

Closer, he was more beautiful. His eyes were kaleidoscopes of hot sienna browns and cool greens and, reflected in them, the silver and gold foil of the balloons. Invisible angels traveled with him at all times and constantly polished his creamy blonde skin. And she saw up close she'd been correct...he needed her.

"Coño," he said, and then continued in English, "everyone else knows your name. I should, too." He let his head fall to the side and laughed enough so his dimples came to life, inviting her to dive in. He nodded without speaking, that dismissal disguised as courtesy and good training, and turned his shoulders to continue his day, away from her.

Chusma grabbed him by the elbow, her hand slid away, barely able to grasp enough for him to notice. She pulled at the chocolate brown silk suit and when he turned, she offered herself out loud, in

Spanish, "Yo te lo arreglo bien." Her eyes dashed back and forth from his hairline to his bewildered eyes.

"I can do it better," she whispered to him, "*No one* will know."

His eyebrows met each other, confused by her. With the scarf, she appeared to be from some other place where they didn't speak Spanish. Her hair offered no clues, pulled tightly into a bun with no hints as to its texture, whether it was tight or loose, whether the soft brown waif was Black or not as Black. He'd gathered the simple, cursory greetings from others were rendered by virtue of default in a neighborhood where fluency in English was never assumed and Spanish was expected. Everyone understands 'Hello' in Spanish, he thought, but surely she wasn't Latina.

He was frozen, staring in to her eyes. She slipped a piece of paper in to his hand; on it was her address, phone number and the names of a few of her clients, listed by process, for him to survey her wizardry when he rejoined the crowds on Columbia Road. And, according to the note, she'd already booked his appointment for Saturday at 8 am.

When he raised his head to verify the appointment, she was gone. All that remained was the petals of spray painted daisies hanging on to their stems in the gust she'd left in her place.

The ink on the slip of paper began to sweat in the palm of his hand. The names of those exposed were recorded to memory so that outside the wind would not whisper what was written through the streets. He kept his fist tight. He owed his grip to the secrecy of those named on the page. Their lyes were safe with him.

Damaris Olvidada, souvenir vendor: blow dry and set, with color to cover gray.

Marisleysis Díaz, deli counter: regular strength, every six weeks, blown straight with press at the roots, as needed.

Raúl Bienvenidos at the lottery booth: weekly blow dry and press.

He ended shopping that Tuesday morning and left the store, anxious to appraise her work. He tossed what was left of the disintegrated list in the closest wastebasket before standing in line

at Raúl's booth behind day laborers, businessmen and prostitutes.

He could see over the heads of the others in line and snuck glances at Raúl between staged conversations abruptly ended when his turn was next.

Standing face-to-face with Raúl, a thin glass veneer with international pre-paid calling cards trapped beneath was the only thing separating them. He fumbled for the dollar to buy the lottery tickets he'd ordered, all the while examining Raúl's hairline, especially at the temple and sideburns, to see if she'd paid attention to detail. He placed four quarters on the veneer and, accidentally, slid them to the edge closest to Raúl and off the glass. Behind him, would-be millionaires cursed delayed morning routines and promises to patron saints who'd sent number combinations in dreams the night before.

Raúl turned around to pick up the quarters. The edge of his hairline at the back, where usually the most onerous natives lived was flawless. Raúl's crown was even and downy, swirls emanated from the center where a hurricane had been tamed by heat.

As Raúl stood up and turned around, he leaned in to the booth, "Chusma?" he asked, not expecting an answer. Instead, the burnt russet man began to pale, nodding in affirmation.

Convinced, he apologized to Raúl for the trouble and continued his trip up the block.

On Saturday morning, Chusma sat in a chair in her living room, stared at the intercom by her front door and waited for it to speak.

8:00 a.m., he wasn't there.

She paced from the intercom to the picture window overlooking the corner bus stop.

8:06 a.m., dejected, she walked back to the chair and collapsed in it.

At 8:09 a.m., the intercom buzzed. She waited twelve seconds before answering.

"Quién?"

"Nena, yo," he responded, surprised she was asking.

"Ooooooh," she offered with a heavy sigh as if he were bothering her, "okaaaaay."

She counted his footsteps as they echoed in the cavernous stairwell of her building. She timed opening the door perfectly, interrupting the second round of short, rhythmic raps on the door. She did not want to appear too anxious, this she learned from watching the mating dance all the other girls enjoyed. As a spectator, she was best able to analyze strategy and observe which worked. Indifference, Chusma concluded, with sprinklings of attention was key.

With the door open, facing her, he was unable to move from the threshold.

The cleft made her top lip cup beneath her nose, folded in pleats to reveal her teeth and gums. She could not completely close her mouth. Her gums were panels of canyons, peaking then falling, making uneven crevices where s's and c's would fall to their deaths.

It's not too late, he thought to himself, *it's not too late to run*.

"Cómo tú 'ta, mami" he managed instead.

"Bien gracias."

She scurried around her apartment, scarfless. It seemed to him she was unaware she'd forgotten her dressings. She gave instructions to come in, sit down, take off his jacket, but he saw only her mouth move and heard no sounds. He wanted to grab her and remind her something was wrong, at the same time realizing she must have known and, in her home, it was he who was on the outside, still standing on the outside, the only abnormality in the room.

She was used to reactions along spectrums of emotions she could identify and some she guessed had been manufactured, exaggerated for effect. His rigor mortis was nothing new. She grabbed him by the hand and ushered him in to the apartment and to the main salon area, a fold out table and padded chairs stationed in the kitchen.

Removing his baseball cap, she gave him a step-by-step overview of what would be his new process. She unveiled her homemade shampoos, conditioners and pressing lotions and lined them up on

the kitchen table, explaining the ingredients in each one as if she were a chemistry professor lecturing freshmen.

She would first cut it lower to dismiss everything remaining of lyes layered on month after month. She would use the pressing comb instead and, at times, a curling iron — a small iron she assured him — to architect bumps feigning waves.

He had become so used to the lye that he objected passionately at first, in spite of reassurances that his hair would stay good longer and that there would be a return to the lye once the root was restored to health. He watched her mouth as she spoke, his attention disrupted by intervals of disgust and pity. But word after word, and as the sentences continued to empty; he found himself unable to imagine her without the cleft. He finally yielded and leaned back at the shampoo bowl, one of the padded chairs pulled up to the kitchen sink.

Every time Chusma touched him she had to steel her knees to keep from falling. She moved around him with deliberation, the temper of her restraint in every bend, reach and sway. The appointment continued only because she'd done it thousands, millions of times before she'd ever seen and then offered to save him.

A special formula of juniper and aloe was prepared for him. She let her fingers navigate every part of his scalp, lifting his head as if she were handling a newborn baby, to reach the back. With her eyes closed, she imagined his hair a golden lake, and she the miner whose hands would never turn up empty or filled with pebbles and things discarded.

No. His hair was good. He had good hair.

Chusma blow-dried his hair into a curtain of straight panes, and prepared for the next step. The stove was a small tin box that looked turned inside out and welded closed at the top. The combs were metal rakes browned from the fire and all of the lyes that had touched them.

He'd seen the devices before, but never so close. They looked like something a gladiator might carry to battle. An antiquated weapons

system hurled from horseback against enemy lines over the turrets of castles.

Chusma lit a burner, placed the stand on the fire and positioned the stove on top. She put the comb inside the stove's hollowed middle, opened the picture window and lit eucalyptus and peppermint candles to, she said, chase away the smell.

Vacant exchanges were silenced as he readied himself for the heat, petrified she might be the gladiator ready to conquer and then brand him a prisoner of war. She would raise her right hand then bring it down in slow-motion, ironing tiny sections until his hair was feathery wisps flying around at the hint of movement. He sat immobile, even his eyes were motionless.

Two hours later he was ready. She finished his hair with a custom pomade that would keep it straight, she said, the luster down to a natural shine. She poured the concoction in to single-use bottles and stacked them in a gift box.

His hair had never been so straight, so good.

He kissed her on the cheek before he left, slipping the twenty-dollar fee, plus a five-dollar tip in to her hand, "Grathiath," he teased, as if the cleft now belonged to him, too.

They both laughed out loud.

And so began his march, searching for anyone who might look and marvel at his hair. How good it looked. How smooth it was. How straight it grew.

He cruised Columbia Road teasing vendors with interest while striking poses calibrated to capture the best ultra-violet ray spotlighting his hair. He *was* a beautiful man; of this he was certain. He fed on whispers, snacked on stares, private conversations celebrating everything about him. He *was* an *exceptional* thing. He cherished wanting glances among clusters of girlfriends and murmurs about whether or not he had on a wedding ring. He rolled around in made-up rhapsodies like a pig in a fine mud smoothie ph-balanced with the right amount of shit.

Chusma watched him from her picture window, proud of her work, in love with him.

After a few months, his hair looked as if he'd been born with it.

The compliments now came from people who were also her clients as if they could not spot her handiwork.

His appointments began to stretch into hours of conversation long after she was finished. Still, she treated his arrival as if it were a surprise. Even after he'd stayed for hours, Chusma dreamt he'd swept in and out of the apartment, leaving her at the window, watching, waiting to see him again.

It was a Saturday in summer.

He was ready for a lye.

He was only one appointment away.

He was in mid-stride, stalking the sidewalk for his gallery.

He'd almost made it to the 18th Street bodega for a soda and where the awning would have protected him, when the rain showed no reverence.

He ran furiously towards shelter but droves of women and children had already gathered under every inch of refuge.

Other men walked leisurely, unafraid.

He was accustomed to running for his life, withdrawing the miniature umbrella he carried with him at all times and heading straight for the nearest restroom. He would regroup, dry off and apply handfuls of the super-hold gel he always carried with him. But in the midst of his metamorphosis, all of the pomades, instructions and appointments, the gel had long ago been abandoned and the umbrella today, of all days, had been left at Chusma's.

Changó continued the unexpected assault and with each thunderbolt the god sent, buckets of raindrops conspired above him and then collapsed, launching offenses for which he had no answer.

He ran in to the street, thinking he would be able to see what rescue was available.

He ran madly from one side of the street to the other, only to arrive too late to be saved.

He shouted toward the heavens, "Por qué!"

He swung at raindrops, incensed they had the nerve to fall, enraged they'd made him an attraction.

He heard Gabriel's sirens glare through the thunder, then a bullhorn carried the voice of God through the storm, telling him to surrender.

"Calm down, everything is alright. You are going to be okay. No one is going to hurt you. Put your hands over your head and drop to your knees."

He opened his eyes and looked for God but saw only police officers, paramedics and children pointing from behind the shelter of their mothers. Celebrations of his beauty had now become vicious salvos. Jeering. Laughing. "Míralo! Look at it now! Pelo planchao! Negro!"

He answered with rebuttals, trying to win his case before the jury, pleading for leniency.

Chusma followed his voice to find him and yelled to him from the sidewalk, "Ven! Papi, ven! It's okay." Her face was naked. Neighbors and clients ran toward Chusma with handkerchiefs, plastic bags and their babies' blankets, racing to comfort her, and themselves.

He screamed and ran up the street to Ontario Road, arriving as the bus was arriving too.

The brakes' screech drowned the whispers and laughter until he could no longer hear either. His hair had become shiny seashells coiled all over his head. Soft, pristine, midnight black helixes who resurrected themselves in the final moments of his life, as if they'd come back from the dead to avenge their murders.

The tire resting on his body sank lower in to him.

Chusma ran to him. Cradling his head in her lap, she began using an invisible comb and iron.

"Yo te lo arreglo bien," she told him. "*No one* will know."

Chusma did not sleep. The alarm was set only to remind her she was alive. She ironed her suit every night although she was never certain when she would need it. Now, her desperation to be done

with it all accelerated pomp and circumstance. She supposed the sooner she was ready, the sooner the pain would pass.

She hung the suit on the corner of her bedroom door where she could see it from every angle of her apartment. At night, the shadow it cast extended from the door to her headboard as if it were anxious to dress her.

She saw him there, emerging from the shadows, and would reach to pull him out of the darkness, but she retrieved air every time. Chusma would withdraw the suit from its perch and iron it again and again and again, until it was morning and there were no more shadows.

The costume lived there on the corner of her door swinging gently from the occasional breeze fleeing the grip of summer's humidity. The kind of moisture you could grab in handfuls and stow in an old purse.

Entranced, she walked past the suit and toward her kitchen where she loved him every week.

She used to step out of bed at the very moment she thought he was doing the same. She would reach for her toothbrush at the exact angle she imagined he did and then left-handed, just like him. Sometimes Chusma paced two steps forward only to shuffle three steps back and freeze, contemplating if he were at the same point in his routine. She would stand and listen, waiting for the cosmos to telepath the answer, but the choreography was no longer necessary. There was only one thing left to iron.

Reaching her tiny kitchen, Chusma made a full breakfast of his favorites and ate, slowly. When she was finished, she went to the special cabinet, the one with "Original Dominican Salon" on the door he stenciled one Saturday as a gift. She started tracing the letters with her left index finger and pictured him painting the bubble letters, instead. Quivering, she opened the cabinet and picked up the stove and its stand. Her long caramel arms moved fully extended, holding her instruments far from her face, so her likeness would not be captured in their chrome bodies. Chusma lit a burner, placed the stand and the stove on the fire and reached back in to the

cabinet to retrieve the comb and the three-eighths inch iron, his favorite, producing waves looking as though they'd been bestowed by genetics, not heat.

Chusma pressed her hair, making long, smooth, straight sheets of redemption.

She retrieved her suit. She dressed as if she were dressing herself for the first time, speaking to every thread, every button, every stitch, recounting stories dancing adventures through the apartment. Times when they turned up the music so loudly the foundation shook and the skylight cracked. Nights when they went to the roof and had café con leche at midnight, overlooking the universe on Columbia Road, all of the flavors and accents and countries pushing forward together in a new world on a new street.

At 8:09 a.m., she went to the picture window, opened it and sat in its well with a bowl of mangú in one hand and the three-eighths inch iron in the other.

There, waiting in the window, Chusma let herself fall.

Moving through the air, she closed her eyes and smelled juniper and aloe.

In the pregnant summer air, her hair began to fray, coil and convert itself back to the way she'd found it, just as his curls had revived themselves to stand witness.

She felt as though she could stay suspended forever and then no pain when she landed.

She saw his face.

He looked as he did in her dreams. And he looked just as she'd envisioned him emerging from the bus, her savior, finally, on Columbia Road to rescue her from an empty, lonely apartment.

He sat at her table with her. Ate with her. Spoke to her. Looked past her cleft.

And she gave him life. Every day at her window. One daydream at a time.

She struggled to stand and run to him but her legs would not respond.

Chusma closed her eyes, and listened for his voice.

Lying there, she heard him say, "Grathiath."
They both laughed out loud.

