

## Blue Hour

By August Joaquim Soto

The hallway was cold, the kind of cold that seeped through the soles of Klaus's sneakers and crept up their spine. Orange tiles stretched long and unwelcoming beneath their feet, the dim light from the bare bulb overhead casting their shadow against the walls. It smelled of metal and earth—of the garage's rusted tools and the dirt their mother tracked in from the farm. The hallway always felt too long, as if the steps between the front door and the apartment stretched when they weren't looking.

Klaus rolled their shoulders, adjusting the weight of their backpack. They had walked home from school, earbuds in, hood up, taking the long way past the empty lot where wildflowers had begun to bloom between cracks in the pavement. The air had smelled of spring, of renewal, but here, in this house, the season never changed. It was always the same heavy air, thick with unspoken things.

They knew, even before stepping inside, that she was waiting.

The moment they crossed the threshold, the kitchen swallowed them whole.

Their mother stood by the sink, back to the door, shoulders tight, a dishcloth clenched in her fist. The small kitchen, the heart of their cramped apartment, felt even smaller with her presence. The olive-green countertops were cluttered with remnants of the afternoon—a cutting board slick with tomato juice, a knife resting beside it, eggs stacked in cartons near the back

door, waiting to be sold. The stove hummed with the lingering heat of dinner preparations, though the air smelled more of tension than food.

Klaus set their backpack down by the chair, but before they could even exhale, the words came.

"As tuas notas chegaram."

They felt the pulse of those words before they registered them, a sharp edge slicing through the space between them.

Klaus didn't respond.

Their mother turned, dark eyes piercing, scanning them the way she always did, searching for something she never seemed to find.

"Dois Cs, Klaus?" Her voice was tight, a thread pulled too thin. "Queres matar-me de vergonha?"

Klaus inhaled sharply through their nose. "I passed," they said, voice flat, only understanding the mention of Cs.

Their mother let out a short, sharp breath that could have been a laugh if it weren't so heavy with disappointment.

"Passing isn't enough," she snapped, wiping her hands on the dishcloth before tossing it onto the counter. "You think you can just do the bare minimum? That's what you've learned here, isn't it? To act like these kids who don't care about anything."

Klaus felt their throat tighten, their pulse picking up, but they stayed quiet. They had learned, by now, that silence was the only power they held.

Their mother's voice turned sharp as a knife. "And I hear things, Maria."

"Klaus," they corrected.

Their mother rolled their shoulders back, irritated by this interruption. "The neighbors talk," she finished saying.

Klaus blinked, exhaling through their nose. "Of course they do."

Her jaw clenched. "I heard you were walking with those Puerto Rican kids again."

Klaus's stomach dropped.

"You think I don't notice? That I don't hear what people say? I don't care how friendly they are—"

"You mean you don't care how Puerto Rican they are," Klaus interrupted again in a mocking tone, their voice cutting through the space like a blade.

Their mother's face darkened.

"Não fales assim comigo," she snapped, her voice dipping into Portuguese like a knee-jerk reaction.

Klaus clenched their fists.

"Don't," they said, and their voice wavered despite the fire in their chest. "If you're going to hate me, hate me in a way I can understand."

Silence fell between them like a curtain.

Their mother's lips pressed into a thin line. She shook her head, muttering something under her breath, something Klaus couldn't fully grasp, though they knew the weight of it well enough.

A long, slow breath escaped Klaus's lips. They looked away, toward the glass sliding door where the sky beyond was turning the color of forgetting—blue hour, soft and endless. The argument would end here, as it always did. Not with an apology, not with an understanding, but with exhaustion. With words neither of them knew how to say.

And later, when the house grew quiet, Klaus would slip outside. Away from the walls that pressed in too tightly. Up to the shed roof, where the sky stretched wide. Where the world, if only for a moment, felt like it belonged to them.

Inside, the kitchen was quiet now.

Not peaceful, not calm—just quiet. A silence stretched too thin, stretched across years, stretched across the ocean she had once crossed with nothing but hope in her pockets and a child in her arms.

She stood at the stove, wooden spoon in hand, stirring mindlessly. The pot simmered, steam curling upward, vanishing into the air. The smell of garlic and onions softened the sharp edges of her thoughts, but not enough. Never enough.

Klaus had left their backpack by the chair, just like they always did. The same chair where they used to sit, swinging their little legs, babbling in Portuguese, reaching their small hands for bits of chouriço before dinner. A different time. A different child.

She closed her eyes for just a moment.

It was hard— so hard —to raise a teenager in a world she didn't understand. In a country that had not shaped her , but had shaped them . Canada had been different. Even then, she had felt the shift, but it was softer, like water smoothing the edges of a stone. But America—America was a hammer, and her child had become something she could no longer hold the way she once did.

She had tried. Hadn't she?

Hadn't she worked herself to the bone so Klaus could have a life better than hers? Hadn't she woken before the sun, spent hours in the dirt, selling eggs and vegetables, stretching every dollar until it nearly tore? Hadn't she done everything for them?

And yet—

She thought of their grades. The two C's glaring up at her from the email, taunting her. She had not left Portugal, had not left her mother, her sisters, the life she knew— for this .

She had told Klaus, again and again, that they could not afford to be like the others. That they could not afford to fail, to blend in, to let the world swallow them whole.

Because this world was not kind to people like them.

But Klaus did not see it. Did not understand.

Instead, they pulled away, slipping further and further from her reach, changing their name, their hair, their clothes. It wasn't just the grades. It wasn't just the company they kept. It was everything. It was their voice, deeper now, but still sharp when they fought back. It was the way they flinched when she called them Maria, as if the name burned. It was the way they spoke to her in English, the language fitting them more easily now than the one she had first given them.

And worst of all, it was the way they looked at her.

Like she was something to be endured.

She pressed the wooden spoon harder against the pot, as if she could stir these thoughts away.

She wanted to tell them how afraid she was. That every time she saw them walk through the door, she felt relief—because they had come home, because she hadn't lost them yet.

She wanted to tell them that when she heard the neighbors whisper, her anger wasn't just anger—it was fear. Because she knew how the world saw children like hers, and she knew what it could do to them.

She wanted to tell them that she loved them. That she had always loved them.

But love, in her hands, had never been soft.

She didn't know how to say it in a way that wouldn't sound like a command. A plea. A warning.

So she stayed silent.

And in the quiet, the blue hour settled over the house, draping everything in its soft, ghostly light.

She turned off the stove.

Outside, through the glass door, she caught a glimpse of movement—the faintest shift in the distance.

Klaus.

Lying on the roof of the shed, wrapped in a thin blanket, staring up at the sky as if the answers were written somewhere in the clouds.

Her chest tightened.

For a moment, she just watched. Just stood there, hands gripping the counter, watching the child she no longer understood, the child she loved so fiercely it ached.

She wanted to call out to them.

But she didn't.

She just stood in the kitchen, swallowed by the quiet, letting the weight of love and loss press heavy against her ribs.

And outside, under the fading light, Klaus stayed where they were—drifting further, further, further away.

Outside, the air smelled of damp earth and green things. The scent of tomatoes still clinging to the vine, of warm chicken feathers and soil freshly turned. A soft breeze rustled through the leaves, carrying the last traces of daylight, stirring the scent of dinner from the open kitchen window.

The mother stepped into the backyard, the sparkling glass screen door creaking softly behind her.

The backyard was small, cramped with the weight of a life they had built with their own hands. The vegetable garden overgrowing on the fence, neat rows of onions, peppers, and herbs swaying gently. The chicken coop sat nestled against the far corner, quiet now except for the occasional rustle of feathers. The shed, weather-worn and sturdy, stood beneath the sky's deepening blue, its metal roof glinting faintly in the fading light.

And there—on top of it—Klaus.

Not lying down anymore, not lost in the clouds, but sitting up, hunched over a book, their phone's flashlight casting a small circle of gold against the page. Their face was bathed in it, brows slightly furrowed, lips parted just enough to show they were mouthing the words as they read.

The mother's chest ached at the sight.

So much of them was still the child she had raised. The one who used to fall asleep in her lap, the one who once followed her through the garden, their tiny hands plucking weeds with careful concentration. She saw it now in the way they sat, legs curled up to their chest, in the way their fingers turned the page with a quiet reverence.

But there was distance, too. A gap she didn't know how to close.

She stood there for a moment, watching, not wanting to break the quiet.

The air was cool, the world slipping deeper into blue. The shed's shadow stretched long across the yard, the warm light from their home barely reaching its edges.

She took a breath.

“Ma-Klaus,” she called gently.

They startled, their head snapping up, eyes wide in the dim glow of their phone. For a second, she saw something flicker across their face—something unguarded, something soft—before they masked it, closing the book slightly.

She hesitated.

Then, with as much gentleness as she could gather, she said, “Dinner is nearly ready.”

A pause.

Klaus studied her, searching for something in her face. Maybe waiting for an argument. A reprimand.

But she had none to give.

She only had this. A simple offering. A quiet bridge between them.

Klaus nodded once, slow. “Okay.”

And then, just as they turned back to their book, they added, barely above a whisper—

“I’ll be inside soon.”

The mother swallowed.

The breeze rustled the leaves. The chickens stirred in their coop. The blue hour settled deeper over the world.

The mother lingered for a moment longer, letting the quiet settle between them. She wanted to say something else, something that could pull them closer, but the words tangled in her throat. So instead, she just stood there, listening to the wind stir the trees, to the faint shuffle of Klaus turning another page.

She took a breath.

"Don't stay out too long," she said softly. "It's getting cold."

Klaus didn't look up this time, but there was something in the way their shoulders relaxed, in the way their fingers stilled over the spine of the book.

And then, just as she turned to go, their voice—small, hesitant, but certain—cut through the night.

"I know, Mãe. But just a little longer. The sky still has some blue left in it."

The mother closed her eyes.

A lump swelled in her throat, thick and aching, because she understood. Because she had spent a lifetime chasing the last traces of light, afraid of the dark that followed.

She had crossed an ocean for a better life, only to find herself drowning in it. The world had moved too fast, reshaping itself in ways she couldn't keep up with, in ways that left her grasping for the pieces of the life she once knew. She had built this home with calloused hands, with aching bones, with the unshakable belief that sacrifice would be enough—that love, in its quiet, unspoken forms, would be understood. But her child was growing in a world she did not recognize, speaking a language that was slipping from her tongue, carrying a name that did not belong to the past she had given them. And yet, here they were, both standing at the edge of something neither of them knew how to cross. She wanted to reach out, to hold them as she once had, to shield them from the storms she knew were coming. But perhaps she had to learn that love was not in the holding, but in letting go and supporting the heart she grew.

**Translations:**

- “As tuas notas chegaram." *Your grades came in.*
- “Queres matar-me de vergonha?" *Do you want to shame me to death?*
- “Não fales assim comigo." *Don't talk to me like that.*