

## **Last Sweet Thing**

*Written by  
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I stood in the parking lot with the empty ice cream cup folded in on itself, like it had given up acknowledging its purpose. The orange soda bottle was still cold in my hand, half-empty and too bright. It looked ridiculous in that place, like summer had wandered into the wrong story and did not know how to leave. I kept thinking about how she said Luci with her hand pressed to her chest, not like she was introducing herself, but like she was checking to see if anyone had saved her name for her.

I wanted to tell her I had.

I wanted to say I kept every version of you I could reach. The girl on the curb. The woman who danced. The grandmother who forgot my name but still knew sweetness when it touched her tongue.

In the car, I did not start the engine. I just sat there and let the care facility glow behind me, all those little windows lit up like boxes people had been placed inside. Somewhere behind one of them, my grandmother was sitting with music on her tray table, maybe tapping her fingers, maybe already somewhere else. I had spent so long being afraid she would not know me that I forgot I was also afraid of knowing myself without her.

That is the part I did not know how to explain to anyone. Dementia makes grief confusing because the person is still here. There is still a body you can visit, a room number you can write down, a nurse who can point you down the hall. There are still visiting hours. There is still a

name on the door. There is still a hand you can hold. And yet, every visit asks you to walk toward a person who may have already left the room in ways no one can measure.

Before I went inside, I sat in my car and practiced.

*Hi, Abuela. It's me.*

No. Too simple. Too much history forced into two words.

*Hi, Abuela. I'm August.*

That one felt worse because it sounded like I was arriving as a stranger and asking her to sign for a package. Here is the new name. Here is the body that came with it. Here is the grandchild you remember in one shape, standing in front of you in another. Please accept delivery while you are losing the map of your own life.

I hated myself for thinking that way. I hated that I could make my own needs sound like an inconvenience. I hated that I still wanted her to know, even when I understood that knowing was no longer something she could always choose.

I kept touching the back of my hair like the haircut might explain myself before I had to speak. I had driven all that way with a plastic bag of sweetness and a speech in my mouth, but once I saw the building, the speech started to fall apart.

Memory care buildings have a way of making you feel like you are late to something that has already happened. The lobby was clean, cool, and too calm. The television hung near the ceiling with the sound low. The flowers at the desk were artificial, but they still seemed expected to cheer people up. A nurse looked at the orange soda in my hand and said it might help.

I wanted to ask, Help what?

Help her eat? Help her remember? Help me become brave?

Instead, I nodded and walked down the hallway to room 189.

I had been avoiding that hallway for longer than I want to admit. I could tell myself there were reasons. Work. Distance. Money. Exhaustion. The strange math of adult life where every obligation feels urgent until love becomes something you mean to get back to. But the truth is smaller and uglier than that. I stopped calling because every time she did not know me, I felt like I was losing her again. I stopped visiting because a person can only rehearse heartbreak so many times before they start pretending it is mercy to stay away.

I told myself she would not notice.

Maybe that was the worst part.

Maybe I needed her illness to excuse me. If she could not remember the missed calls, if she could not count the months, if she could not ask why I had not come, then maybe I could step around the guilt and call it survival. But love keeps records even when memory does not. My body knew. My hands knew. My throat knew. The whole drive there, I carried the weight of all the times I had not gone.

When I opened her door, the television was too loud. A game show audience clapped at nothing that belonged to us. She sat by the window with her hands moving over the blanket. She looked smaller than my memory of her, and that felt impossible because my memory had already made her fragile.

*Abuela*, I said.

She turned and looked at me. Not through me. Not exactly at me either. She looked the way people look when they are trying to place a song they used to know.

I lowered the television and set the orange soda and ice cream on the tray table. The bottle looked bright against the beige room, almost rude with color. I told her I brought her something. I told her she used to tell me about orange soda and vanilla ice cream. I did not know whether that was true in the way facts are true, or true in the way families make stories out of the few things they can carry. Either way, the bottle mattered.

When I opened it, the hiss startled her. Her hand gripped the blanket and I apologized too quickly, like I could apologize for sound itself. I poured the soda into the cup and added the ice cream. Orange foam rose up soft and alive. She watched it, and for one second, something in her face returned to its own doorway.

*Naranja*, she said.

Then, *mantecado*.

I had not expected the Spanish to undo me. I had heard Spanish around her my whole life in fragments, in food, in phone calls, in scolding, in endearments, in words I understood by feeling before definition. But those two words came from somewhere illness had not reached yet. They came from a girl I had never met and a country I knew mostly through other people's longing. I helped her drink. Orange stayed on her lip, and I wiped it with a napkin. The gesture was so small that it almost hurt more than anything else. A whole life can shrink to this: a cup, a hand, a napkin, the careful wiping of sweetness from someone who once wiped your face before you knew you had one.

*She said, Con mi hermana.*

With my sister.

Her twin. The story lived there, even if the rest of the room did not. I pictured them young in Aguadilla, sitting on a curb with a bottle of soda between them, barefoot from the heat, laughing over melting vanilla ice cream. I pictured music coming from an open window. I pictured them dancing in the street as if the day belonged to them, as if no one they loved would ever forget the sound of their own name.

Maybe that is what memory is at its kindest. Not a record. Not a perfect archive. Maybe memory is a place where the body keeps returning because it feels alive there.

Then she asked who I was.

I knew it would happen. I had been preparing for that question since before I parked the car. Still, the words found me unready.

*I am your grandchild,* I said.

Then I said the old name.

It felt like placing a photograph on the table between us. Here is someone you may know. Here is proof I belonged to you once. I said it because I wanted to be gentle. I said it because I wanted to give her a bridge. I said it because some part of me still believed recognition had to begin with what she remembered, even if what she remembered was not the whole truth.

*But I go by August now,* I told her. *August. That's my name.*

She did not answer. She looked down at her hands. Then she pressed one hand to her chest and said, *Luci*.

At first, I thought she was answering me. Then I saw her face. She was not offering a name. She was looking for one. She was trying to hold onto herself with her own palm.

*Luci*, she said again, frightened now.

Yes, I told her. *You're Luci. You're Lucila.*

I had come there terrified that she would not remember me. I had not prepared for the moment when I would have to help her remember herself.

There is a particular helplessness in that. You can bring sweetness. You can bring music. You can bring your carefully chosen name and your need to be seen. But then someone you love looks at you with fear in their eyes and asks for a mother who is no longer alive, asks for a home that no longer exists, asks for the self that keeps slipping from her hands, and suddenly your own need steps back. Not because it disappears, but because grief has many rooms and hers is burning brighter.

I told her her mother was home, resting. I do not know if that was the right thing to say. With dementia, truth becomes complicated. People tell you not to correct too harshly. They tell you to enter the world the person is in. They tell you kindness matters more than accuracy. I understand that. I also know how strange it feels to become responsible for a softer version of reality.

So I gave her the gentlest lie I could carry.

Then I gave her music.

I scrolled through my phone like a bad grandson searching for proof of culture. Salsa, reggaeton, Spanish pop, songs I knew, songs I should have known better, songs that had played in kitchens and cars and family parties where the adults talked too loud and the kids fell asleep wherever they landed. I chose one because choosing nothing felt worse.

The horns came through the speaker. Percussion filled the small room.

Her foot moved under the blanket.

*There you are*, I said.

I stood up even though I did not know what I was doing. I told her I did not dance like her. That was true. I had inherited many things, but not ease. My body has often felt like a question I was still learning how to ask without shame. Dancing in front of her, in that care facility room, felt awkward and sacred at the same time. The bed rail was there. The tray table was there. The muted television was there. The too-bright soda was there. And I was there, moving badly, trying to give her back a rhythm she had given me before I understood it.

At some point, I began speaking.

I told her this was me. I told her I knew she knew the old name. I told her she had held that child, fed that child, kissed that child's face. I told her I had been ready to say goodbye to that name, but I had not been ready for her to say goodbye before she ever said hello to me.

*I am August*, I said. *Your grandchild. Your grandson.*

The room did not change. No light split open. No music swelled in the way stories sometimes ask music to swell. She did not suddenly remember every Christmas, every birthday, every phone call, every version of me. She did not become well. She did not become the grandmother I wanted back.

But she lifted her hand.

I went to her.

She studied my face and said, *Que bonito nino*.

Beautiful boy.

I have replayed that moment so many times that I no longer know what belongs to memory and what belongs to prayer. Maybe she meant me. Maybe she meant someone else.

Maybe she saw a boy from long ago. Maybe she saw no one clearly and only reached for tenderness because tenderness was still available to her.

I used to think being seen had to be exact. I thought it had to be clean, correct, fully aware. I thought the person had to know the whole road to me and say my name from a place of certainty.

But in that room, with orange on her tongue and music still hanging around us, she gave me something I had been afraid to want from her. Not perfect recognition. Not a speech. Not an apology for the years neither of us could control. Just a sentence that found me where I stood.

*Gracias*, I said, because thank you was all I had.

A nurse came in with pills. The room returned to itself. Medication time. Water. A paper cup. The ordinary work of keeping a body going after the story inside it has started to lose pages. My grandmother turned away from the pills until I said, *Agua*. Then she took the water. I do not know why my voice helped. Maybe because I sounded like family. Maybe because I sounded like someone else. Maybe because the song had softened the air.

After the nurse left, I gave her another spoonful of the melted float. The ice cream had surrendered into the soda, orange and vanilla becoming one sweet thing neither of us could separate anymore. She closed her eyes when she tasted it. I wondered how much of life is stored in the tongue. I wondered whether the body has secret rooms of memory that stay lit after the mind goes dark.

I thought about all the people we become to survive being loved. Daughter. Sister. Mother. Grandmother. Girl on a curb. Woman in a kitchen. Patient in room 189. I thought about how unfair it is that one person can hold so many lives and still be reduced, by paperwork, to a diagnosis in a folder. Severe dementia. Two words that tell the truth and almost nothing about her.

They do not tell you she danced.

They do not tell you she liked sweetness.

They do not tell you she had a twin sister and a childhood with music in it.

They do not tell you that when she said her own name, she said it like a person knocking from inside a locked house.

Before I left, I told her I loved her.

She said, *Otra vez*.

Again.

So I played another song. I danced again, smaller this time, because grief had settled into my body and made me tired. She watched from the bed. Her fingers tapped the blanket. I tried to memorize the tapping. I tried to make myself believe that if I remembered it carefully, I could keep something from being taken.

When I walked out, the hallway was darker. The nurse asked if I had a good visit.

I said yes.

It was true, but not in the simple way people usually mean it. It was good the way a hard truth can be good after you stop running from it. It was good the way pain can be honest. It was good because I went. It was good because she tasted something sweet. It was good because, for one breath, I let myself be August in front of someone who might not remember but still mattered.

At the front desk, the nurse told me visitors could come any day until eight. I said I knew.

Then I admitted I had not been good about coming.

*A lot of families say that*, she told me.

*Does that make it better?* I asked.

She did not pretend. *No*, she said. *But coming today counts*.

I have been thinking about that sentence ever since. Coming today counts. Not because it erases the days I missed. Not because guilt disappears when you finally do the thing you should have done sooner. But because love is not only proven by perfect attendance. Sometimes love is the return after absence. Sometimes it is the bottle in your hand, the softened ice cream, the song you are not sure is right, the name you speak even if no one can promise it will stay.

In the car, I opened my calendar and made a reminder.

CALL ABUELA.

Repeats weekly. Sunday, 5:00 p.m.

My thumb hovered over save. It should not have felt like a vow, but it did. A small digital promise in a parking lot full of quiet cars. I pressed save, and the phone confirmed it as if I had done something ordinary.

I laughed once. Then I cried.

I cried for the grandmother who was still alive. I cried for the grandmother I had already lost. I cried for the child she knew and the man I was becoming. I cried because she called herself Luci like she was afraid the world had misplaced her. I cried because she called me a beautiful boy, and I wanted to crawl inside that sentence and rest there. I cried because I had waited so long to visit, and she had still offered me sweetness.

When the crying slowed, I turned the music back on. The same salsa song filled the car, softer now through the speakers. I looked at myself in the rearview mirror. My eyes were red.

My hair was short. My face looked tired and familiar and new.

*Hi, I said to my reflection. I'm August.*

This time, I did not say it like an apology.

I lifted one hand. Then the other. I danced in the driver's seat, barely moving, just a small rhythm in my shoulders, a private answer to a song that had followed me out of her room. Behind me, the care facility windows glowed. One of them was hers. Maybe a shadow moved there. Maybe a hand touched the glass. Maybe I only needed to believe that some part of her was still near the music.

I do not know what she remembered after I left. I do not know if the orange soda stayed with her for five minutes, or one, or not at all. I do not know if she remembered my name. I do not know if she remembered her own.

But I know I went.

I know sweetness reached her.

I know music moved her foot under the blanket.

I know she was Luci.

I know I am August.

And I know that somewhere in the space between losing and being found, there was a curb, a cup, a song, and a place beside her waiting for me.