

The Lost Child

A Three-Part Story

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Pre-Collegiate Category

*In honor of the thousands of children displaced from their true families under the
Francoist Spanish society.*

I.

October, 1937; Irún, Spain:

The blackening, midnight sky overcast the translucent windows of Room 86 on a brisk October morning. A young mother, no older than twenty-five, lay trembling on a hospital stretcher, her arms reaching for the wailing child beckoning for its mother's touch. At the moment of their first embrace, the mother's tremors were stilled and the infant's bawls silenced. The mother gazed fondly at the child's almond eyes, their color depicting that of an olive fruit. A silent tenderness was shared between the mother and daughter as both were comforted by the other's gentle caress. Within mere moments of the mother and child's first encounter, a middle-aged nun draped in a white cloth apron approached the pair. Her face was less than appealing, with distorted features and foggy eyes colored yellow. The nun insisted that the child must leave the room for mandatory testing, putting the mother and child's first introductions to an abrupt conclusion. The nun's grisly hands extended towards the newborn, cradling it against her chest. The infant erupted in a series of shrieks and ear-splitting whines before the nun swiftly exited Room 86, leaving the young mother's arms empty.

The tormenting tick of Room 86's clock plagued the mother as she remained still, anticipating a reconnection with her beloved daughter. But those vexing ticks of the clock over time grew from tens to thousands of repetitive ticks—every tick another second without her child. The mother's eyes flicked across the room in panic, never settling on an object except for an occasional glance at the clock in the upper corner of the room. Her panic was interrupted by the rapid unlatching of the door. Half an hour had passed before a youthful nun, distinctly different from the previous, entered the room, her visage stern, and her hands grasped tightly

together as if she was grasping onto a secret too dangerous to let escape. The mother leaned up from her resting place, noticing the evident absence of her child.

“Where is my daughter?” the mother restlessly probed, seeking immediate answers to the uneasiness of the situation.

The nun’s skin turned pale as her fingers began to writhe under the mother’s intensity.

“*En verdad lo siento, Señora*, but your daughter passed away during testing. Her heart was impaired. The defective heart prevented her from receiving the necessary blood flow essential to her survival. Her date of death was 12:37 A.M.”

An intense shadow of grief descended upon the mother whose time spent in her maternal position lasted less than an hour. She collapsed despairingly back into the cradle of her stretcher bursting into an uncontrollable sob.

“Let me see her!” she wept, hiding her tear-stained eyes behind the quivering palms of her hands, “Let me hold my daughter!”

“*Eso no es posible*. I’m afraid we cannot allow it. She will be buried later this morning. We will allow you to attend the burial once you are in proper apparel.” The nun unfolded her hands and exited, having had her say, leaving the mother fractured in pieces in the middle of Room 86.

The youthful nun raced to an office at the far end of the hospital’s corridors where inside resided the yellow-eyed nun, attempting to quiet the olive-eyed baby in her arms.

“Did you tell her?” the yellow-eyed nun questioned, continuing to shake the baby, hoping to eventually calm her tantrum.

“Yes, I did, *Monja*. She was truly devastated, her being such a young mother. I feel that it was cruel to tell her such falsities and allow her to suffer so.”

“The woman stands for the republic. It is better for this child to be raised and nourished under a family that will support this government and country than to be raised by a rebel.” She gently shushed the baby as she nodded toward the coffin on a tile counter.

The youthful nun grabbed the empty hardwood coffin prepared in size for the corpse of a stillborn infant and paced out of the room remorsefully.

The sky had yet to hit morning as the deep gloom of the night shadowed the sorrow of a mother as she watched what she believed to be her child lowered into the depths of the peat dirt ground. The empty casket lay buried underneath the shade of the hospital in the near distance. A marker in the shape of a cross was hammered into the soil, indicating the death of yet another newborn.

The deep gloom of the night covered the flight of the yellow-eyed nurse who held the daughter in her arms. She raced through the streets of Irún before approaching the extravagant manor of two wealthy Catholic beneficiaries whom she had contacted beforehand. In her grasp lay a wailing child, spastic despite the nun’s attempts to quiet the stolen child. As soon as the manor door flung open to reveal both the panicked nun and child, a young couple grasped the child from the nun’s hands, exchanging a small cloth bag, heavy from the weight of silver *pesetas*. Bowing her head, the sister thanked the couple before disappearing back into the night’s covering, ignoring the distant screams of the infant she had sold into another life.

II.

April, 1947; Irún, Spain

A pearl-adorned floral headband embellished the defined curls within Carmen's neatly pinned-up hair. Her mother, Isla, a plump and rosy woman motioned her daughter to stay still as she secured the headband tightly in her hair.

"Listen to me closely *cariño*, you must be careful in this dress," her mother referred to the elegant lace gown Carmen sported that was almost too big for her petite stature, "Your *Tía* Elena sold away her days and nights to put together this dress just for you."

"And she didn't even get the measurements right," Carmen pouted, emphasizing the bulky sleeves that nearly slipped off of her shoulders every major movement she made.

"Now *niñita*, that is just a minor inconvenience that we can fix very quickly." Isla motioned for the small spool of white thread and a glistening needle on the bathroom counter and turned back to her daughter. "There," she exclaimed, tightening the once baggy sleeve into a now suitable gown sleeve, "Turn around," she ordered, placing her hands over Carmen's excitement-filled olive eyes.

Carmen made a quick swivel towards the gold-trimmed floor-length mirror and raised her mom's hands away from her face to reveal a charming image resembling a lovely bride.

"I love it *Mami*," Carmen fell into a warm embrace with her mother.

"I love it too, Carmen. You look precious," Isla affirmed, in awe of her daughter's princess-like presentation, "You almost look just how I did when I took my first communion."

Carmen doubted it. Her mother shared little resemblance to any of Carmen's distinct features. Isla's eyes were dull, downturned, and brown, whereas Carmen sported almond, hazel eyes that glimmered intensely even in the smallest exposure of light. And, Isla's hair was wiry

and frayed in comparison to Carmen's full and thick curls. It was hard to believe there should be some genetic resemblance between the two.

"Now go eat your breakfast," her mother continued, "but—be *extremely* careful in the dress."

"I will *Mami!*" Carmen skipped down the hall before changing to a slow and cautious walk, apprehensive of the possibility of snagging her *Tía* Elena's gown.

Making her way to the elaborately decorated dining table, her father Joaquín slid the chair from under the table, ushering his daughter to take a seat in front of the decadent display of breakfast items arranged across the table. A perfect circular dish of *tortilla española* awaited the ten-year old's demanding appetite along with platters of *jamón* and collard greens completing the celebratory course.

"*Feliz primera comunión mi cariño,*" Joaquín congratulated Carmen before planting a kiss on her head.

"*Gracias, Papi,*" Carmen began cutting eagerly into the *tortilla española* sitting before her, shoveling the delightful bites of egg and potato into her mouth.

After finishing her meal, she thanked her father before running towards the manor's exterior, nearly tripping along the way. She then changed to a careful gallop as she paced through the garden to her manor's entryway.

Both Joaquín and Isla were quick to follow their enthusiastic daughter who awaited the traditional First Communion celebration to follow her already delectable breakfast. Her parents each grasped her hands, leading her through the manor's entryway as if she were a young bride walking down the aisle to meet her groom. They led her to their polished, white *Pegaso* automotive that stood in the streets adjacent to their estate.

Sitting down in the smooth leather seats, Carmen remained heedful to not snag her gown in the car or under the seat, carefully bunching it in front of her. She avidly watched as the silhouette of her home disappeared further into the distance as her father quickly maneuvered through the crowded streets.

Swiftly pulling into a large cathedral parking lot, clusters of boys and girls, all elegantly dressed, motioned toward the church's entry gates. The excited chatter almost overtook the chiming of the church bells overhead. Boys dressed similarly to the attire of a sailor and girls dressed as brides-to-be were directed through the door leading to the polished nave embellished with velvet carpeting and pillar candles.

Carmen was handed a rye basket filled to its brim with flower petals, transitioning her appearance to that of a flower girl, while the boys were handed lit candles. Some of the boys panicked at the sight of the flame but remained careful to keep the wax from dripping on their newly polished leather dress shoes. The click of small heeled shoes against the porcelain floor resonated throughout the building as a line of eager children marched down the aisle of the congregation.

Carmen's excitement however had transitioned into a state of worry. What if she forgot the answers? What if she tripped? What if she ruined her *Tía's* dress? These concerns vividly plagued her mind as she came closer to approaching the altar.

In her periphery, Carmen spotted her parents along with a couple of extended family members like her *Tía* Elena, *Tío* Manuel, and a crowd of cousins. She smiled as her father's deep russet eyes winked at her, almost as if they were saying: "You got this *Cariño*."

Inhaling sharply, Carmen felt her worries dissipate. The support from her parents was all that she needed to feel comfortable.

Arriving at the aisle's end, Carmen's communion responses rolled eloquently off her tongue as she recited each answer precisely as she had prepared. She was then handed a wafer and a cup of wine which she elatedly took before returning to her family in the pews.

The lengthy cherry hardwood dining table was almost unrecognizable under the salvers of a specially made family dinner to honor Carmen's newest step in the church family. Excited relatives babbled about the ceremony, the beautifully decorated cathedral, and of course *Tía Elena's* hand-sewn dress.

Carmen sat at the furthest end of the table, subject to numerous congratulations and embraces from her visiting relatives. An aroma of fresh *gazpacho*, spicy *gambas al ajillo*, and a nuttiness from the cross-crested *Tarta de Santiago* wafted throughout the dining space, pleasing the crowd gathering for dinner. Relative after relative gave Carmen a congratulatory *beso* for completing such an invaluable rite of passage.

Carmen's anticipation could not wait; the aromatic scents of the table were almost too compelling. Isla pulled the final dish from its rack in the oven, suddenly beckoning Carmen to come to the kitchen.

Discarding the tray of baked *paella* to the kitchen counter, Isla requested, "*Niñita*, would you head downstairs and grab the accent candles for the centerpiece?"

Carmen nodded her head before rushing down a set of stairs leading to the basement living room. Carmen scanned across the room before her eyes caught on two gold-plated candles, gorgeously engraved with intricate patterns. Conscientiously avoiding stepping on her gown's floor-length lace surrounding her feet, Carmen made her way to the set of maple wood shelves with the candle display. Carmen reached for the two resplendent candles, her arm brushing

against a set of Manila folders labeled *Para la Comunión de Carmen*. Documents spilled across the floor, scattering in the slight air-conditioned breeze. Carmen desperately grasped for the papers that found themselves flying through the vast expanse of the living room. She rushed until every last sheet was stacked just as precisely as it had been before she knocked the folder over.

As she reached for the Manila folder sprawled out on the carpet, Carmen's eyes flitted back to the pile of papers occupying her arms. The top document read *Acta de Nacimiento* in a large cursive font. In Carmen's arms was her official birth certificate. She couldn't help but read through the certificate, thoroughly examining the details of the paper. At the top she saw her full name: *Carmen Lucia Torres*; and her date of birth: *17 de Octubre de 1937*. Below that was even the hospital location and the room number: 86. Further down she took notice of her parents' names *Isla* and *Joaquín Torres*, but her eyes continued to linger on their names. The penmanship of those names held a slight difference from the previous details of her report: the musical cursive of the information she had examined before reaching this section of the document seemed disconnected when she read her parents' names. The letters seemed to possess a disjunction in comparison to the fluid smoothness of Carmen's written name at the top of the paper.

Her finger trembled as she brushed her hand over the surface of her parent's names. Carmen's index was raised ever so slightly as she grazed a section of the document that elevated moderately. It was at that moment that Carmen began to question what she was even doing standing in this house. A house that wasn't even her real home, filled with family that wasn't truly related to her, all celebrating an event that never really happened because the life she was currently living was never supposed to exist this way.

Carmen paid no attention to the way the sappy snot and heavy tears dripped from her cheeks and ruined her *Tía* Elena's hand-sewn gown, a dress made by someone who wasn't even her aunt.

"Carmen, *carñino*, were you able to find the candles?" Isla called out.

She heard her mother's voice, except it was no longer her mother's—it was the voice of a complete stranger.

III.

November, 1958; Irún, Spain

The deafening silence of Irún's tucked-away neighborhood was only occasionally interrupted by the sounds of the occasional vehicles that utilized these hidden streets as a shortcut to the city. The rays of the sun illuminated the tranquility of a neighborhood that seemed to be crying for any source of aid. Houses laid in shambles, barbed fences tangled and torn, and barely a single source of vegetation was present enough to add color to the profusely dull community.

However, today, a visitor roamed the streets. Visitors never came to this district.

A young woman knocked on the door of a house that one would barely describe as a house, but rather a shed built suitably sized for only a dog to live in. However, inside the rickety shelter sat a woman, no older than forty-six, who for the past twenty-one years had waited for someone to knock on her door.

Her head perked up immediately at the sound, setting down her glass of black tea to investigate the perpetrator of the noise. The knock came again as the woman, startled, jumped up from her tattered loveseat, slipped on a pair of rope sandals, and pounded towards the door.

The woman's withered hand reached for the knob of the door, allowing rays of sunlight to escape into the domain of the house for the first time in twenty-one years. Adjusting her eyes to the beams protruding into her doorway, an overexposed figure became more clearly visible through the entryway.

Hazel eyes met hazel eyes and a lost child was now found.

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