

Limeira

There they sat. Neatly and in rows. I was in the middle, my chin on my knees, pulling at my fingers. They protected me from the mess beyond. Clothes were draped across the dresser, laying anywhere but inside the drawers. Wrappers dotted with crumbs were scattered upon open textbooks. Empty coffee cups were the only consistencies guiding one through the mess. But they were neat, neat and in rows. Two rows and nine piles of color coded note cards. What was on them really didn't matter, the time that ticked by as I sat in the middle really didn't matter. All that mattered was what was on that paper handed out in two weeks. As long as I sat in the middle, the two rows and nine piles of colored coded note cards shielded me. I would be okay if I could do this, take this test, secure my future. Without these note cards everything could-

*Avalanche. It's an avalanche, everything smashing together, tumbling quickly down to the bottom. No, nothing connects with pins and bows. Everything- past, present, future, no not future only college. Focus straight ahead, one goal, one path. Lucky they say, opportunities pop up around you like the money that grows off of trees. Leaves? I don't remember. The holiday card framed with little christmas trees. What a beautiful family. A dad, a mom- you'll be a mom. What if you mess up being a- Mom. Where is she? She is with Grandpa. This puzzle is too hard we need her. Dad is mad, why? Is everything leaning to the left? The house feels so tilted I need to leave. There is only three here, it can't be even. It's dark and it's tainted all around me, suffocating my lungs with each breath but I can't stop taking in the heavy air. Where is mom? She is with Grandpa. He isn't well. His limbs are rotting tree branches, too*

tired, too old- it's ticking, focus. My backpack is too heavy- I can't take anything out. He'll be better, right? Remember it's ticking, don't get distracted, put it away: that's much lighter. He'll be-

Better. That's what they are. I'm too far below I can't see up there: why was I born with the balance tipped? We sit like the note cards- are we anything more? Shhh, you can't talk it's not the time, not in the room, she's talking. More, more, more, is that what she's saying? I'm a rubber band from her desk, stop stretching so hard, am I meant to be stretched- they are so calm, the calm of the waves before they swallow you under. This our factory and we are machines: reciting the facts. Name, where, day born, day died- is grandpa better, no, no time. It screams and time is up, up, get up to the next class- we are out the door: sardines. They're so many, people (peers?) all of them better, machines with more precision no mistakes: it's up to my chin, I'm drowning in their eased expressions. Too fast, still ticking can everyone just stand-

Still. I can't. My fingers tap rapidly at my side. I smile the smile I learned from the barbies hidden in my closet- my cheeks aren't plastic they hurt with the lie. The flash goes off in my face: here we will be still, the ticking frozen in this photo- but these are for rocking chairs and wrinkles. Will I remember these as memories or will I remember the truth- memories are for later, now is for tomorrow. I'm leaving I don't wave good bye- no time, it's ticking: name, where, why, the battle where then died: no mistakes, machines don't make mistakes. The dishes aren't done, angry (why?), dad doesn't understand- that doesn't matter, this matters, this is life- things are different now it's not like the-

*Past. Can't afford to look past anything- remember what she said better, better, better- the construction across the street, making things better, I am better but I can't help tap my pencil, tap my foot, tap, tap, tap, like I am a broken machine- don't think too much don't think too little-is he better yet, where is mom, he is shaking his head no, what is Dad saying, death, he'll be better, better, better:*

Death?

“What?” My thoughts faded into blank nothingness, like a candle blown out by the darkness.

“Your grandpa died this morning,” His face was right, prepackaged but not real.

*Stop.*

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Grandpa always used to tell this story. It would be after dinner, when we lingered at the table lazily waving away the heat. I would always be the one asking him to retell it. He made sure to start by reminding everyone what a troublemaker he was, *levado* he would say.

“Whenever I walked down the street parents would whisper to their children, ‘Milton is coming, hurry back inside!’” He never believed he was more than the clothes on his back and the heart pumping in his chest.

“We lived on a ranch, which of course was not a surprise as everyone in Limeira lived on ranch back then. It was so peaceful: chickens ran around the wobbly legs of goats whose heads bobbed up and down in surprise. We had these beautiful orange trees, the *limeras*, that lined our house with strong, sturdy branches that helped lift you into the

sky. One day your great grandma and I had this big fight, I had gotten into some trouble like I always did. I ran barefoot to the orange trees, wanting to climb into another world. As I got lifted higher and higher into the sky, the shade cast away my anger like it cast away the sun. I settled into my favorite nook and picked an orange right by my head. As I leaned back, my eyes squinted at the sun that shone like diamonds through the cracks in the blanket of leaves. Suddenly I felt it all, as if the life of the tree, from the very tip of the roots, through the strong sturdy branches all the way to the smooth orange that I held in my hand, surged through me. I felt Mother Nature herself. I sat up aware of every drop of water that rolled from the delicate leaves onto my skin, every bug that crawled on the maze of branches, every whistle of the birds that floated through the vast blue sky, every soft pat of a chicken's foot hitting the soil, and every snorting goat. It washed over me: a feeling so overwhelming it surpassed anything I had felt before. I began to cry, cry at the beauty of life itself. The tears of happiness trickled silently down my cheeks as gratitude blossomed in my chest. This was life. And I was a part of it.”

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There everything sat. Nothing neat and in rows. Pages and pages of little notes and his research. He was not here anymore but his handwriting was: scribbled on the scattered pages, everything in his office untouched since he died. My cousin's drawings were in the midst of his documents, just unorganized scribbles by a child's rushed hand, given meaning only by his soft, nodding praise and slow, warm smile. To him there was no mess. Nothing to be protected from. He lived in the same peace he had described on the ranch.

I hadn't gone to his funeral. I stayed to take the tests. The test that I depended on to know my intelligence, my future, my place in the world: who I was. The weight of the guilt felt like stones in my stomach.

The door creaked open and my mom walked in. She leaned against the wall, looking slowly around the room with her melancholic gaze before settling on to me. Her brown eyes were the definition of home, passed on through more than genes by her father.

"He was so happy," My voice cracked.

She walked over to me and tucked my hair behind my ear in the way that only mothers know how.

"He was, wasn't he?" She looked away so I wouldn't have to see her wipe away a tear.

"He was just so grateful for everything. He was grateful for you, *minha filha*." She caressed my cheek, letting the warmth of her hand press into my face, and then she left knowing that was all that needed to be said.

I leaned back onto his chair, pulling hard at my fingers. I bit my lip in defiance, but tears leaked out, determined to be seen: to be felt. And once again I thought about myself, repeating the customs of my generation, the generation of excess, the generation of want. I thought about everything I needed to be as fulfilled and as happy as my grandpa felt in that orange tree. Why did I need so much to feel so little? This is the new era, a time where we reject our humanity, for higher numbers, more intelligence, more precision: living, breathing machines. I am a part of the mass of people, packed together in this world like sardines, that believe happiness is only to be earned not to be felt. This

was the future. The future where happiness could never be simply sitting in an orange tree. And I was a part of it.