

Kaleidoscope

By Alexandra Alessandri

Bursting to Be Free

A new day awakens
wide and bright and
bursting with the promise
of change.

It's the first day
of my first job,
and like a seed
that's been buried
for too long, I'm
bursting to be free.

I fly out of Mami's car,
heart spread wide
and smile stretched thin

while worry wiggles
below my breastbone:
 what if I'm buried
 once more?

Mami Worries Too

Before we left the house, Mami paced
rivers on the rug because maybe
she shouldn't have said yes.

It's too soon.

She worries about my readiness and
steadiness after all these years of
slowing down so I could heal.

You're not ready.

She worries about the taxes and tolls
a new job will claim on my body,
and whether it's worth it at all.

Maybe next year.

She worries I haven't healed from
that day, from the accident that
left me shattered and empty.

Remember your fibromyalgia.

As if I could forget. When I
can't stand Mami's pacing
any longer, I whisper,

Chill, Mom. It'll be fine.

What I Don't Say

Is I'm scared to be in that place again,
a shell of a girl drowning in pain and fatigue
and a fog so dense I barely break the surface.

Because I *know* this job could shatter me
even more, but Catalina would've wanted me
to bloom.

I'm scared that strangers will learn my weakness
and shut me out the way my friends did—
or worse scatter pity over my brokenness.
(Because no one knows what to do with a girl
who's been cursed by chronic illness
and grief.)

But I'm even more scared
of not living
my life.

Call Me Sarai

Mami tells me
my name means
princesa
but it's also
a name of resilience
and overcoming.

I've wished so much
for this to be true,
but all I've been able to do
since Catalina died
is survive.

But here,
standing beneath
Farmacia Navarro's
neon-blue signs,

I'm finally
ready
to live.

Catalina

My sister would've been nineteen this month,
growing and glowing like a luciérnaga,
on her way to college.

FSU, pre-pharmacy, top of her class.

Instead, she's in St. Andrews Cemetery.
The same accident that crushed my body
three years ago claimed her life.

She was the same age I am now—

excited and eager behind the wheel
(without Mami for the first time).
Someone ran the red light.

We never saw it coming.

My world hasn't been the same since,
but I made a promise after she died
to hit all the milestones she missed.

This job today
is me keeping my promise to my sister.

Few Things Scream Miami

Like the Cuban-owned pharmacy
and mercado
near my house, filled with
Agua de Violetas,
pastelitos and cafecitos,
and panetones during the holidays.
Spanish rolls through the aisles
in waves,
comforting and soothing.

I'm not Cuban—
I'm Colombian American—
but still, I feel at home here.
It's bold and bright and happy.

If only my heart
would stop galloping,
jittery and afraid
that my attempt
at keeping promises

will fail.

I Meet

My manager Santiago
and Rosita the pharmacist,
wave hello and smile shyly
to the other workers:
Martica and Caleb,
cashiers like me,
and Mauro and Suzi,
roaming the aisles.

Then there's Josue,
whose smile
is like the sun.

My Trainer Josue

Reminds me
of Catalina—
 kind eyes
 easy smile

down to business.
He's her age too,
or how old she would be
if she were still alive.

Our fingers brush as
Josue hands me
a blue shirt and
bright orange name tag
with Sarai González
printed in bold block letters
 (the even got
 the accent right),
and for a moment I wonder
what Catalina would think
if she saw me.

But I chase the thought away.
Instead, I shadow Josue as he
trains me to
 check in
 use the register
 stock shelves
until my nerves
settle into a
familiar rhythm

until I can't help
the thought that unfurls:
He's cute.

It's Complicated

While Josue trains me,
he asks me questions:
How old are you?
Where's school for you?
His gaze is steady,
expression open as he
leans in for my response.
I try to tightrope the line
between truth and TMI.

Truth: *I'm sixteen.*

Truth: *It's complicated.*

TMI: I'm homeschooled because
after the accident, Mami
couldn't bear
 to see me struggle at school
couldn't bear
 to be separated from me
couldn't bear
 to lose another daughter.
So Mami kept me home.
Truth be told, the pain and fatigue
kept me home anyway,
no matter how much I wished to go back.

No one wants to hear that, though—
it's too messy and broken and sad.
I learned that the hard way,
when friends fell away like
sand through my fingertips.

Which is why I don't tell Josue
 any of that.

Customers

Two hours into my shift
customer after customer comes my way
while Josue hovers by my register,
smelling of bubblemint gum.
We make small talk in between,
and I find myself bending toward him
as if he were the sun.

Three hours into my shift
customer after customer brings offerings
and I find my fingers faltering,
my brain slowing
as I will myself
to catch up
to stay focused
on what I'm supposed to do.

Four hours into my shift
customer after customer
smiles politely
taps impatiently
checks their watch and waits
for me to ring their merchandise
correctly, while Josue
catches my mistakes,
never breaking his stride.

Me, though,
I find myself
losing my rhythm,
wishing I could speed
to the end of my shift
(two more hours)
so I can go home and reset.

But at least
I'm not flaring
(yet).

FLARING

\ 'fler-ij \

Adjective:

In autoimmune diseases,
or chronic illnesses
like mine,
when symptoms
increase,
flare up,
get worse.

And it feels
like that time
when I was little
swimming
in South Beach,
angry waves
knocking me down,
tumbling me over, and I

couldn't
seem to catch
my breath
between breaks.

Before / After

Before the accident,
I played soccer
competitively,
and the promise
of high school
bloomed bright
like Mami's girasoles.

After the accident,
days bled into nights

in wave

after wave

of pain

fatigue

fog

and I lay unable to break
the surface and breathe.

Now I inhabit
some space
between
healing
and hell.

Fibromyalgia

Can creep up on you suddenly
after a cataclysmic event—
like the crash that nearly killed you

or the grief of losing your sister,

your best friend,
the brightest star in the universe

or both things at once.

And it won't ever go away.

What They Don't Tell You

Is that when you get sick
you'll spend
days
weeks
months
years
measuring your worth
with
good days
and bad days
or that you'll learn
every creak
snap
pop
ache of
your body,
always
anticipating
another flare-up.

Like now,
I watch the clock
tick toward the end
of my shift,
feel a burn in my limbs,
and wonder
if this is just
new-work tired
or a crash
waiting
to happen.

Doña Adelita

Fifteen minutes

before I finish,
a woman walks in—
silver hair,
joyful laugh,
and a lightness about her
that draws me in.
If Josue is the sun,
then she is a brilliant star.

Hola, Doña Adelita,
Josue calls out.
Doña Adelita waves,
catches my eye, and winks.
She floats over to us,
says, *You're new.*

I am.
Is it that obvious?

How wonderful,
Doña Adelita trills.
*I'll be sure to check out
with you.*

As Promised

Doña Adelita
ambles into my aisle,
places ice packs and
lipstick and
merenguitos
on the counter.

While I scan,
she fiddles
with her wallet,
her curled fingers slipping
on the clasp
until finally
it opens with a click.

She glances at my name tag
as she hands me the cash.

Sarai.

*Beautiful name
for a beautiful girl.*

I smile and thank her,
though truth be told
it's hard to feel beautiful
when you can't
see yourself clearly
through the shattered glass,
when scars remind you
of all you're not.

She begins chatting
with Josue

about college
 freshman year
 studying biomedical engineering

about family
 sister graduating
 Mom away on business

about me
 Seems just your type.
 Don't you think?

Josue's face flushes,
my eyes widen, and
Doña Adelita's laugh trails behind her
as she leaves—

and I can't help but wonder
if he agrees.

What It Feels Like to Be Free

When my six-hour shift ends,
I find Mami waiting for me
in the car, her face lined with
expectation and worry,
a contrast to my own
smiling, glowing face.
How'd it go? she asks.

Fine.

Better than fine.

Sure, exhaustion blankets me
now as we drive home,
and sure, my body aches
with the exertion of the day,
but I'm giddy with the thought that

I didn't fail.

And I feel my heart
flowering from the splinters
that still lie scattered and broken.

I'd forgotten what it feels like
to be like everyone else,

what it feels like to be free.

My Routine

Includes
meds,
rest,
yoga,
light exercise
to keep
my body
moving, loose,
so when the flare
becomes a hurricane,
my body
can withstand it.

It's not a perfect system,
but I've learned
to go with the sway
of the waves,
even while I dream
of calmer waters.

So tonight, I take my
meds, do some yoga to

s t r e t c h
my sore muscles, and tuck
into bed to rest, hoping
to keep the good times

rolling.

But I don't sleep
all that well.

Doña Adelita Visits

Farmacia Navarro every day.
She only buys a few things at a time—
pantyhose,
shampoo,
merenguitos
 (always
 merenguitos).

She flutters through the aisles
like a colibrí searching
for flowers,
her trilling laughter
always trailing
behind her,
and when she's done,
she always checks out
with me.

And while I scan her items,
she starts chatting

about life

 it's just me
 and Mami (now)

about school

 I'll finish
 ahead of schedule

about me

*Why do you look like the weight
 of the world is on your shoulders?*

It's hard to stay quiet around Doña Adelita
because the gleam in her gaze

tells me she *knows*.

But I do

because Josue lingers nearby,
and some truths are just too much

to share with a boy
you think is
cute.