



## **El Intercambio**

by Sage Vogel

Zoraida Flores Espinosa couldn't stand to be in her house any longer. There were too many visitors inside, and all of them talking and talking.

"I can't believe he's gone."

*"Qué mala suerte nos pasa. Qué tragedia."*

"There's still hope. We have to keep looking."

"Could be a lion got him. We're looking in the river, but he might be up a tree."

"What a horrible thing to say!"

"Damián, please don't say such things in front of my mother."

*"Perdón. Lo siento, suegra."*

“It’s been three days. We’ve looked everywhere. We have to start planning his services.”

“Demetria’s right, we shouldn’t wait too long to have the funeral.”

“A lion? A funeral? Listen to what you’re saying. You’re upsetting mamá.”

“We’re all upset, María Rosabel. But we have to be realistic.”

“Don’t cry, *mamá*. We won’t know for sure until we find him.”

“Don’t give her hope, it isn’t fair..”

No one had asked Zoraida what she thought, despite her being the eldest soul in attendance. In fact, no one had seemed to notice her at all, as usual. Grumbling to herself, she left the house to seek out peace on the porch, but there was none there to be found. The children of the gathered family were all outside in the yard, playing a game and screaming the words that went along with it.

*“¡Gallinita ciega! ¿Qué andas ‘ciendo?”*

*“¡Busco unos cunquitos!”*

*“¿Pa’ quién?”*

*“Pa’ mis pollitos!”*

*“¿Me darás uno?”*

*“¡Que no!”*

*“Pues piérdete!”*

The children, there must have been a dozen of them, began to run around, still screaming. Zoraida sighed and shuffled across the porch. Someone had moved her favorite bench from her preferred spot again and she didn’t have the will to move it back. She had to sit in the sun, which she used to enjoy, but which now seemed a nuisance. She felt too warm almost instantly, so she removed her shawl from her shoulders and placed it across her lap.

The family’s preoccupation with Cornelio’s disappearance seemed trivial and silly to her. No one had ever fussed over her like that. She watched the children and tried to think of their names.

“Let’s see... Ah, there’s Lorenzo, *garrachando como siempre, malito... O sea...* Is that him over there? Now I’m not sure... Ah, but that little *bonita* is Rosabel, surely- *Dios mío*,

what am I saying? Rosabel is grown now, she's inside the house. That must be one of her nieces. *¡Como pasa el tiempo! No hay recuerdos que ello no borre...*"

Zoraida shook her head and shrugged. It didn't matter that she didn't know all of their names, she'd only met a couple of them in person anyway, the oldest, when they were just tiny babies, well over a decade ago.

"They don't know my name either, *entonces, ¿que importa?*" she rationalized.

Zoraida watched as most of the children ran off in a group towards the *acequia*, though a few lingered behind. Two of them, a girl and a boy soon to enter their teens, moved off to the side of the yard to talk in the shade of a cottonwood. Zoraida eyed them suspiciously, planning to give the boy a quick scare if he didn't behave himself.

"*Hola*," a little voice said from just beside her, making Zoraida flinch. She looked down to see the girl that she had mistaken for Rosabel standing near the bench, looking right at her. Zoraida looked back at the child with wide eyes.

"*Buenos días, señorita*," Zoraida said, trying to get a good look at the girl's face.

The little girl moved a step closer. Zoraida didn't move. It was not often anymore that she was approached for conversation. Most of her family seemed to pretend she didn't exist. She was old enough, she supposed, that no one really noticed her anymore, or tried not to anyway. Not that she really wanted to be bothered, especially on days like this when she had her own responsibilities to attend to. Still, it felt nice to be noticed. This encounter was highly unusual, but not unwelcome.

"Who are you?" the girl asked.

"Just call me *abuela, mi amorcita*."

"But... You're not *mi abuela*. She's inside. Her name is... Catarina. *Abuela Catarina*," the girl countered, confused. Zoraida smirked and raised her eyebrows.

"Ah, yes, Catarina, *la consentida*," she said with a tsk. "Why *mi nieto* Cornelio ever married her I will never know. If she's your grandmother that makes me your *tatarabuela*."

"¿*Mi qué?*"

"*Ta-tar-abuela*."

"*Tarantuela?*"

*“Tatarabuela.”*

The girl nodded quickly, pretending to understand.

“Which of the girls is your mother?” Zoraida asked her.

“Uhm... Demetria.”

“Oh yes, their eldest. She takes after her mother, as they do. You have to be her youngest then, no?”

The girl nodded.

“And what is your name?”

“Emilia Zoraida Romero,” the girl recited.

Zoraida sat up straight on the bench and looked at the girl in disbelief.

*“¡No me digas!* Zoraida is my name too. Why didn’t they tell me they named a daughter after me? No one tells me anything anymore, and they never told me very much in the first place... Still, *qué bonito*, it’s lovely of them to do that.”

The little girl shrugged. The elder Zoraida felt a warmth in her chest that she had not felt in quite some time. She sighed, smiled and looked out across the yard. The grass looked greener than it had a while ago, and she noticed for the first time how many flowers there were in bloom all around.

Emilia interrupted Zoraida’s thoughts, her voice wavering.

“Is Abuelo Cornelio really... dead?”

Zoraida looked back to see Emilia’s lips trembling and her eyes watering. She reached out and caressed the little girl’s cheek, silently thankful that the sun had warmed her usually very cold hands.

“Oh, sweetheart. You need not worry of such things.”

“But, if he is dead that means he has gone to see *Jesús* and he will never come back. Or he is in hell.”

Zoraida burst out laughing, turning Emilia’s worried frown into a tentative smile.

*“Chiquitilla mía*, listen to me, because I know these things. Your *abuelo* is not in hell.”

“Is he in heaven?”

“He’s not in heaven either. He’s...on his way home, he just got a little lost on the way. But, *como te dije*, you don’t need to worry about these things, leave that to me. Why don’t you go and play with your *primos*?”

“They’re being mean. They made me be the *gallinita ciega* over and over, they never let me win. They’re no fun.”

“And talking to a tired, boring old woman is fun?”

Emilia nodded and leaned up against the bench, smiling and tilting her head. Zoraida, still quite perplexed by this sudden attention, shook her head and looked away.

“Lord give me patience,” she prayed, as if she didn’t already have more than enough.

“Does dying hurt?” Emilia blurted out.

Zoraida sighed at the question and looked back at her inquisitive descendant. She thought for a moment before responding.

“What is important is that being dead does not hurt, bueno? It is the living that suffer most from death. The dead do not suffer.”

“¿Por qué?”

“¿Qué por qué?”

“Why not?”

Zoraida stared at the young child, still not quite believing that they were having this conversation. Emilia simply looked up at her, wide-eyed and all ears.

“*Esta niña*... What makes you ask these questions?”

Emilia shrugged again and began playing with the fringe of Zoraida’s shawl. Zoraida watched her, bewildered. She took a few moments to gather her wits and then gave Emilia her best answer:

**“Vivimos la muerte más de una vez.”**

**Death is lived more than once.**

Emilia paused her fidgeting and looked back into Zoraida’s ancient eyes.

“How?”

Zoraida put an arm around her and pointed to a flowering bush growing across the yard with her other hand.

“Do you see those flowers there? Those are my favorite kind. *Girasolitos* is what my mother called them. Will you pick one for me and bring it here? Then I will explain.”

Emilia nodded and ran off. She took her time selecting a flower, circling the bush a couple of times. Zoraida watched her, marveling at the child’s liveliness. Emilia finally picked a flower and came running back, presenting it to Zoraida.

“*Gracias, mi buena niña*. This is a beautiful flower, a very good choice,” Zoraida told her, accepting it.

She held the flower up to the sunlight and they admired it together for a few moments. Then she took a deep breath and turned back to Emilia.

“I lived in this house for many, many years, Emilia *mia*, and these flowers have bloomed here every single year. I watched that bush grow from nothing, and I watched the bushes that came before it grow from nothing and return to nothing. I’ve watched hundreds and hundreds of these *girasolitos* bud, blossom, wither and fall. In my one life I witnessed thousands of their deaths. Do you see?”

Emilia furrowed her brow. “No,” she admitted.

Zoraida patted her head and embellished.

“It was the same with the people in my life. I watched my grandparents and my parents grow old and die. I watched my brothers grow up, grow old, and die. I watched my husband grow into a man, then shrink into an old man and then die. I watched aunts, uncles, cousins and friends all live and then die.

“The worst death that I suffered was the death of my only *hijo*, Gregorio. He died only hours after his birth. I watched his life begin and I watched it end all before dawn that day... In my one life I have had many, many deaths, and I suffered for every single one, except my own. Now do you understand?”

Emilia nodded and looked at the ground. Zoraida continued.

“It is those that live through death that suffer for it, not those who die. Those that live on remember whom they have lost, and it hurts very much. As you get older you will live through death,  *jovencita*, again and again. But you will find ways

"In the end, once you are dead, pues," Zoraida waved her hands in the air, dismissing anything and everything, "that's it, you're dead and you won't think of death the same way. You will see that:

**"La vida es bella porque es fea."  
Life is beautiful because it is hard.**

Emilia's lips quivered. Zoraida pinched her cheek.

"When you're dead, you will understand," she said. "But that will not be for a long time, *mi corazón*."

Emilia's face contorted and she brought her fists up to rub at her eyes. She had begun to cry.

"*Tranquila, tranquila, no llores*. Why are you crying?" Zoraida asked her, putting her arm back around Emilia's shoulders.

"I don't want to die," Emilia stuttered through her weeping.

Zoraida patted the child's head again and brought her in for a hug. After a moment she pulled away and reached deep into her dress pocket to pull out an object that she had carried with her for many, many years, from one place to the next, no matter where she went.

"*Ten*, Emilia, take this," she said, holding it out. Emilia wiped her tears and took it from her.

"*¿Qué es eso?*" she asked.

"It is my rosary. I have had it since I was eleven years old. It was very important to me, and I want you to have it, and to keep it with you."

Emilia examined the rosary, running the beads through her fingers and scrutinizing its center medallion and crucifix.

"It's pretty, I love it," she said.

"As do I. Can you read yet?" Zoraida asked her.

"Only a little," Emilia replied.

"Well, look here, at these beads, what do they say?"

"...Zoraida."

"*Eso es...* Emilia Zoraida, *miráme*."

Emilia looked up from the rosary and back at Zoraida.

“Try not fear death, *tocayita*, for this fear will not serve you. However, when you cannot help it, hold our rosary, *recuérdame*, and remember us meeting on this day.”

Emilia nodded, her eyes growing wet again. She took a deep breath and embraced Zoraida.

“*Gracias.*”

“*De nada, Zoraidita.*”

The front door to the house opened then and María Rosabel stepped out onto the porch, fanning her face with her hands, trying to dry her tears. Her elder sister Demetria followed soon after, her face stern and her eyes dry. Zoraida and Emilia watched them silently.

“You’re not a child anymore, Rosabel,” Demetria said. “You need to get ahold of yourself.”

“How?” Rosabel responded, keeping her back to Demetria, her voice breaking. “How are you this way? Don’t you have a heart? How can you be so cold? It’s almost cruel.”

“And it’s cruel of you to say that,” Demetria replied. “None of us wanted this to happen, all of us are in pain. We have to be strong and face this together.”

Emilia, uneasy at the tension she was witnessing between her mother and her favorite aunt, took a few steps in their direction.

“*¿Mamá?*” she said, getting their attention.

Rosabel automatically forced a smile while Demetria walked over and knelt before Emilia.

“You’ve been crying, *mija*,” she said, wiping away her daughter’s tears. “Have the other children been bothering you?”

Emilia shook her head.

“What is this?” Demetria asked her, noticing the rosary that Emilia still held in her hands.

“My rosary, it has my name.”

“*Dios...* Where did you get this?”

Emilia turned around, looking back towards the bench at Zoraida.



*"Mi tatarabuela gave it to me."*

"Your what?"

Before Emilia could explain Rosabel pointed down the road to a rider on horseback galloping towards the house.

"Someone's coming. Maybe they found him. ¡Mamá!"

"Rosabel. We don't know what they want. Who is it anyway?"

Rosabel strained her eyes, and there was a hint of hope in her voice when she saw who it was.

"It's Esposa."

Catarina came to the door and began to step out of the house. She stopped when she caught sight of Zoraida sitting on the bench outside. After a flash of recognition Catarina quickly looked away, and within moments she was thoroughly distracted by the matter at hand.

Esposa rode into the yard and wheeled her horse around.

"They found him," was all she said, meeting Rosabel's eyes for a moment. Then she looked away, unable to meet the gaze of anyone else in attendance.

Zoraida watched silently as the gathered family departed in a hurry. Emilia Zoraida was carried along into the truck with her mother, father and her Abuela Catarina. Zoraida waved as the truck pulled away, but no one saw her.

After they had gone, Zoraida sat alone, waiting. She spent a long while admiring the little sunflower that Emilia had given her, holding it up to the light of the evening sun and slowly spinning it between her fingers.

Finally, just as the sun began to set, she saw a lone figure walking down the road towards the house. He moved slowly, looking all around, as if searching for something. When he noticed Zoraida sitting on the porch he picked up his pace and was soon standing before her.

*"Buenas tardes, señora. I'm looking for my wife, I've been gone for... for a while, I'm not sure how long, exactly. I was lost... Is she here? I need to speak with her, she's probably very worried."*

Zoraida chuckled and threw her shawl back over her shoulders.

“Don’t you recognize your own grandmother, Cornelio?” she asked him.

It took Cornelio a few moments to understand.

*“¿Abuela Zoraida? Despénsame, it's been so long, I didn't recognize you. Pero... Sí usted está aquí... Entonces yo...”*

Zoraida gave her grandson enough time to accept his fate before she stood up and beckoned him towards the door.



*“Bienvenidos a casa, Cornelio,”* she said, taking his hands once he’d walked up the steps and joined her on the porch. *“Vamos adentro,* let’s go inside, where it’s nice and quiet.”