

Aberration

By Cyn Bermudez



Vera’s skin tightened under the pressure of fragmented mirror and glue. She attached each piece with meticulous precision until she covered every part of her body, from the crown of her head, to the peak of her big toe: forehead and chin, arms and legs, buttocks and stomach. The shards crackled when she moved, her skin shimmered with a patchwork of reflection. The tang and fetor of rotted cherries—like sweet meat—pierced her nose and tongue, sharper than the slivers of glass that adorned the rim of her mouth. She stared at her likeness in the antique mirror; she splintered like a matryoshka doll; her image fractured into infinite repetitions that swayed at every angle.

When she finally stepped out into the bright mid-day sun, the light rays reflected off her skin into chaotic patterns, wobbling with each step.

“How are you?” Vera said. She greeted from left to right the various townsfolk that littered the street. The last thing Vera wished to do was attract unwanted attention, but that was hard to do when routine was broken. “Nice day.” She kept her voice nonchalant, salutations brief. Heads turned toward her. The awful black dress, her shame, remained inconspicuous behind her mirrors. Vera hoped her eyes wouldn’t reveal the panic she held underneath. She walked

steadily on the five-mile trek to the border, to her escape, to leave the little town of El Mismo before anyone saw her true colour.

The nearby dog park bustled with dogs and their walkers. Emdee Gris was there with his hound, both looking long-nosed toward the merry-go-round.

“Good day, Vera.” Emdee observed Vera with a sideways glance. “Is everything okay? I don’t recall our paths crossing here before.”

Townsfolk of El Mismo walked the same path on the same streets in the same manner.

They turned down the same corridors and alleyways; they made the same dips and twists with their gait. Every day was like the last. Doors and windows opened eight o’clock in the morning and shut at five o’clock in the evening. The husbands watered their lawns when the birds sang, painted the front yard fence a lime a green before lunch, fixed the same broken flap on their mailboxes one hour before the mail lady arrived. In the evening, the wives unbagged their groceries promptly at four-thirty, served dinner at six, applied moisturizer to their faces at nine.

And they all wore the same colours: reds for the ladies, blues for the gentlemen. Vera, too, had her own routine. She curled her hair when the sun rose on the horizon, the pink hues licking the plump white clouds. She toasted her bread to a perfect golden brown before the morning news aired. She fluffed the pillows at noon. But she had never walked past the dog park.

Emdee waited for an answer. Vera’s mind darted from hour to hour of her day, from task to task. She flipped through various scenarios: A warbler’s nest fell from a tree and all the eggs cracked and the baby birds cried for their mother; a squirrel ate through her garden patch and the poor thing fainted after such a large meal and its belly hung to the ground making it impossible for the squirrel to move; an unusually large bee—enormous, the size of an elk—

hovered by her door and the stinger was as large like a sword and it buzzed hungrily, ready to devour.

“I’m out of tomatoes.” Vera spoke rapidly, her eyes darted everywhere but at Emdee.

“Out of tomatoes?” Emdee’s head twisted up in confusion.

“I miscounted.” Miscounting tomatoes. It sounded so preposterous. Vera left, leaving Emdee frozen in her wake. Vera could hear Emdee repeat her news over and over, as if his day had been broken and his mind incapable of proceeding after being interrupted.

“Out of...” Emdee’s voice was fading away from Vera as she walked away from the dog park. She looked back one last time before turning the corner. A small crowd gathered around Emdee, who was repeating „out of tomatoes“ with fervour.

“In here, mija,” said a squash old woman. Desperate to get off the street, Vera ran into the woman’s house. Smoke layered the room, a mixture of tobacco and burnt fish. She greeted an untidy mass of knitted throws and troll dolls. “Make yourself at home.”

“Who are you?” Vera realized that she didn’t recognize the woman.

“You don’t remember? I am Basurto,” the old woman said. The woman paused but Vera made no connection. “The widow. No one pays attention to an old woman, my holes and wrinkles easily hidden. That’s the key, mija. Show the people what they want to see. Which I see you’ve done quite well for yourself.”

“Señora Basurto,” Vera said. “I remember now. El Mismo’s only widow.”

“Formally, El Mismo’s only widow.”

Vera’s life had changed in an instant. One day her husband was painting the front yard fence its usual lime green when the Earth shook. When the ground moved, part of the fence—a

single board—flipped up. Vera’s husband tried to grab it, but he fell to the ground and the board plummeted through him. Had it been an act of nature? Or perhaps God? El Mismo didn’t have earthquakes. Floorboards shifted, walls swayed, plants fell, dishes shattered. A gust of wind and dust raptured loose papers and ink. Black ink had spilled onto Vera’s red chiffon dress. The blot spread radially into an almost perfect circle.

No one had noticed her husband’s absence. Only Vera. She did her tasks first and then her husband’s, careful to keep her unorthodox schedule changes in the privacy of her own home. But eventually, when the Couple’s Ball had arrived, the townsfolk wondered why Vera arrived alone. She had said her husband was sick or tired or not in the mood, and the seedlings of whispers and rumour started.

And worse, the spot on her red dress had grown. She washed it vigorously with soap and water. Scrubbing till her fingers ached, until her cuticles ripped and dangled for their tips. But the spot grew until black ink covered the entire fabric. Vera’s dress no longer draped from her body its beautiful red but had become something dark, something without colour. Vera had mourned under the waterfall of black chiffon. She went about her daily routine avoiding her neighbours. Only small children saw her tears; they pointed at glimpses of Vera seen through opened windows, when Vera shifted past the cracked doors of her home. It had been enough to move Vera into action. She could not risk the townsfolk fully seeing her abnormality, her husbandless status, her black-colour clothing. Her only recourse was to leave El Mismo forever and join the Outside—where people lived dangerous, haphazard lives: They wore a multitude of colours or no colour at all; they ate all hours of the day and cleaned only sometimes; the men moisturized their faces and the women painted the fences. They were only rumours, of course, and the very thought had frightened Vera. She almost changed her mind. Staying wouldn’t be so bad, she had thought.

“The mirrors aren’t enough,” Señora Basurto said. “You’ll need wings if you really want to leave this town.” She rummaged through a large chest, tossing out heavy coats made of wool and cotton. They landed with a thump onto the wooden floorboards, dust billowing under their weight.

“Señora Basurto,” Vera hesitated. “How did you become a widow?”

“A Flood. A peculiar one, since we don’t have floods here in El Mismo. See how I sewed the first wing, *mija*, with a pink needle and a bronze stitch? Makes it nice and sturdy.”

“But you’re here. You’ve stayed for so long without anybody noticing.”

“My dress is old and worn, but it is still red. Don’t change the status quo and invisibility is quite simple. Here, you must hide the wings under this cloak.” She threw a large bundle at Vera.

“How can I possibly do that? The cloak is green!” The cloak’s scratchy wool snagged on Vera’s hanging cuticles.

“And your dress is black.” Señora Basurto shrugged. “Both are neither here nor there.”

“What if people notice?”

“Of course they’ll notice, *mija*. Your colouring is all wrong. People are too involved with their own lives to notice right away, but give them time. Soon your black dress will be too obvious, even under your mirrors. That you do know. The colour of the dress and the cloak are one thing. Easy to ignore in the short term, and the mirrors certainly help. Genius idea, by the way. But wings, on the other hand, are something else entirely. People will notice the wings.”

Vera knew the old woman was right. “Have you ever used a cloak?” She had worried her question was too forward. The old woman’s dress was red after all.

“No. I am content here.” Señora Basurto showed Vera around her little home where she lived alone, no kin, no animals. Only pictures of cats embellished the walls. Newspapers stacked in large columns filled open spaces. Empty birdcages in every corner. “I think this will do.” She gave Vera a hand held mirror.

Vera had understood Señora Basurto’s wisdom. She finished the cloak with pieces of mirrors glued to every inch of fabric. She finished the other wing and attached both with a harness on to her back. She turned to the woman with watery eyes.

“Thank you, Señora Basurto, for you all your help.”

“De nada, hija. Go out into the world. Find your freedom on the Outside.”

Vera left with renewed courage, moving fast along the hills and valleys and leaving the track homes of El Mismo behind. The sun sat low in the sky; its red arms stretched far along the horizon. The boundary was fast approaching, and the hunger she neglected tugged at her.

At the very edge of town was Diego’s pie shop: El Lobo Sangrado. Its blue neon sign blinked on in the nightfall. Vera salivated, her stomach grumbled. Just one piece, she told herself.

“Lemon Drop Custard and Cheese, lay the graham crumbs on extra thick.” She tapped her fingers on the tiled counter top. The bright florescent lights ricocheted off Vera’s mirrors.

“This is an unusual day for you, Vera.” Diego’s large quizzical eyes contorted.

“Nothing unusual about today.”

“Well, it’s not Sunday. And you always eat pie after your Sunday grocery shopping.”

There were no more excuses. Maybe it was meeting Señora Basurto, the defiance of an old woman. Maybe it was Vera’s own defiance. She told the truth.

“There was an earthquake and black ink spilled onto my dress and I tried to clean it but the ink grew and now my whole dress is black and I knew I had to leave before anyone else noticed so that’s why I’m here. I just wanted one last piece of pie before I left for good. Oh and my husband died. Stray fence board.”

There was a long pause.

“You don’t have to lie, Vera.” He served Vera her pie. The tangy sweet of lemon curled Vera’s tongue. She shoved large bits of pie into her mouth, swallowing spoonfuls without chewing. “Slow down. Where is your husband?”

The six other patrons, two families of three, turned to her in curiosity: Pablo and Poncho and Piadora, Patricia and Prudencia and Pedro. She put her fork down and backed away from the plate slowly.

“Thanks for the pie,” Vera said. Chatter and whispers bounced off the walls. Diego’s eyes sparked with revelation.

“Your dress—it’s black!”

Her mirrors shattered, the shards fell from her body. The cloak parted down the centre, revealing her black dress. Everyone gasped. Stunned, she stammered but no words comforted her. She could hear the women recoil in horror. She could see the men twist with disgust. She trembled. Her dry throat ached. Her body began to sweat: eyes dilated, heart pounded, knees wobbled. Cameras snapped and calls made. Vera remained motionless. Soon all of El Mismo surrounded Diego’s pie shop. Angry, disapproving eyes surrounded Vera. She wanted to run back to the comfort of her home, to hide behind her own walls.

Vera ran out the door. She threw off her cloak. Her wings unfolded, spanning the length of El Mismo itself. The air lifted her up, forcing Vera to take flight; gravity pulled her down. The

levers slipped from her fingers. She was unsure of how to work the wings that trimmed her back.

The townsfolk closed in behind her. Finally, she pulled a short string and a chorus of chirps and pops flooded the air around her. Under the full moon, Vera took flight.

She crossed the boundary to the Outside.