

In The Fort

by

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FADE IN

EXT. - BACKYARD - DAY

October, sky grey, but the air not yet chilled. A house in a settle neighborhood.

Towards the rear of the backyard, a tall tree -- old, thick, reliable.

In the tree, a platform: PABLO's "fort." A rope ladder leads up to the fort. At the top of the ladder, a set of handrails, like in a swimming pool, to help the climber get onto the platform.

In the fort: Pablo, a second-grader, wearing a blue jacket. He holds a plastic sword, a lá a light saber from Star Wars. In front of him, half open, lies a bag of cookies.

The wind sifts through the branches, showering down the last of the leaves.

INT. - LIVING ROOM - DAY

LUZ ELENA, Pablo's mother, looks through a set of sliding glass doors at Pablo while she talks on the phone.

LUZ

Querido, I do not know what got into him. No, he won't say. Pobre niño is sitting out there, in his fort -- you're right, with the cookies and the sword. Just came home from school, grabbed his supplies, and booked. Not a word. Okay -- I know you have to run -- kill 'em with the presentation. Hablamos.

Luz clicks off the phone, stares out at Pablo, this small blue figure against the dull tree and sky.

EXT. - FORT

Pablo, shoulders hunched, sits cross-legged, stabs half-heartedly at the leaves with his sword.

INT. - LIVING ROOM

Luz puts the phone back, then grabs a jacket off the rack and slides open the doors.

EXT. - FORT

Pablo, hearing the doors, looks up, sees Luz, then looks back down at the leaves, tries to spear a few but only manages to nudge them around.

He looks up again to see Luz cross the yard to the tree.

EXT. - BOTTOM OF ROPE LADDER

Luz looks up the ladder into the grey sky. She can't see Pablo, but she can hear him.

LUZ

Hola.

No response.

LUZ

Como estás?

No oral response. But she hears him whack the sword against the wood.

LUZ

May I come up, pequeñito?

No response.

She puts a foot and her hands on the rope ladder and climbs, slowly and carefully. It's been a long time since she'd climbed a tree.

EXT. - FORT

Pablo watches the head of his mother appear over the edge.

LUZ

Hola.

PABLO

(softly)

Hola.

LUZ
Can I come aboard?

PABLO
No.

LUZ
Okay.

Luz continues to climb, grabbing the handrails, until her torso comes into view.

LUZ
This okay?

Pablo looks over to check.

PABLO
'kay.

Luz surveys the world around them.

LUZ
Nice up here!

Luz takes another step up, then twists to sit on the platform itself.

LUZ
Okay?

In response, Pablo chomps on a cookie.

LUZ
I can understand why you like to be up here. It's nice! I never had a fort when I was growing up. *Mi padre* didn't think children should have one --
(mock-tough voice)
"Ay, Mami! Mira! They should work in the house and not be fooling around outside, los chanchitos!"

Luz makes an OINKING noise. Pablo smiles -- but only just a little. Luz notices the half-smile.

LUZ

Silly, huh? Isn't it much better to be
a fool outside, eh?

She edges on board another inch or two.

LUZ

This okay?

Pablo nods yes, finishes his cookie.

LUZ

(inhaling deeply)

Nice.

They both sit. The wind SOUGHS through the branches. Far
off they can hear neighborhood SOUNDS: leaf blower, voices
yelling, a truck passing.

LUZ

Everything go okay in school today?

For an answer, Pablo whacks the floor with his sword and
then eats another cookie. Luz swings her feet around.

LUZ

Was that hitting, like, somebody with
your sword or was that just a general
whack, you know, like a fun whack? It
was a pretty hard whack.

Pablo hits the platform again with the sword.

LUZ

Ooh, a double whack. Something must
have pissed you off.

PABLO

That's a bad word. Daddy said so.

LUZ

You're right -- I forgot. When you get
angry, easy to forget your manners.
You that kind of, you know, like mad?

Pablo throws a cookie up and hits it with the sword. It
sails into the yard.

EXT. - YARD

From out of nowhere a squirrel darts to the cookie, picks it up, and nibbles on it, sitting on its haunches. The squirrel watches the two humans while it chows down.

EXT. - FORT

LUZ

Can I have a cookie?

As an answer, Pablo balances a cookie on the end of his sword and reaches it out to Luz, who takes and eats it. Pablo eats one as well.

LUZ

Gracias, querido.

PABLO

De nada.

Luz points to the squirrel, Pablo notices, and for a moment the three creatures eat and watch each other, Pablo absently tapping the sword against the platform.

PABLO

Mami?

LUZ

Yes?

Pablo hesitates.

LUZ

Go ahead.

PABLO

Do you like Papi?

LUZ

Of course! He's the cream in my café!

Pablo takes this in.

PABLO

Somebody at school called him -- something.

LUZ

Something.

PABLO

Yeah. At recess.

LUZ

Can you tell me what the something was? Do you want to say it?

PABLO

You like Papi, right?

LUZ

I love Papi, just like you do. You want to say it?

Shakes his head no, at first, then yes, but he doesn't say anything. Luz makes the sound of spitting.

LUZ

Escúpelo fuera, like that time I fed you the lima beans. Remember? You kept spitting them out, one by one? Bing! Off the ceiling. Bing! Out the window.

PABLO

Yeah!

LUZ

Just like that.

Luz makes a series of rapid spittings.

LUZ

C'mon, can you spit for me?

Pablo dry-spits, and Luz joins him.

EXT. - YARD

The squirrel, half a cookie in its mouth, bounces out of sight.

EXT. - FORT

They finish "spitting."

LUZ

Good. Now, spit it out.

PABLO

Wetback.

The word, unexpected, takes Luz by surprise, which she tries not to show.

LUZ

Do you know what the word means?

Pablo nods.

LUZ

Tell me what you think it means.

PABLO

Big voice?

LUZ

Use the big voice only if you want to use it.

A hesitation, then Pablo indicates with his sword for Luz to move closer. She does. He whispers in her ear. She can barely repress a smile.

LUZ

Are you sure?

PABLO

Yeah!

LUZ

Just checking.

PABLO

Well, isn't it?

LUZ

Isn't what?

PABLO

Doesn't Papi have one in the basement?

LUZ

The WetVac.

PABLO

He uses it when he cuts wood, to clean up. And when the hot water tank busted.

LUZ

Sí, he does. He does, manzanita. So you think someone called Daddy a vacuum cleaner?

PABLO

Wetback.

LUZ

And that's what made you mad?

Pablo nods.

LUZ

Fighting mad.

PABLO

No.

LUZ

How did you feel?

Pablo shrugs.

LUZ

Teeny-tiny?

Pablo nods yes.

LUZ

Can I have another cookie? And can I have a hug to go with that cookie?

Pablo gets up and Luz, on her knees, hugs him. He pets her hair.

LUZ

Your dad will be very proud of you.

Pablo pulls away: enough hug.

PABLO

Yeah?

LUZ

I know I am.

PABLO

Yeah? Why?

LUZ

Because you showed a lot of heart --
you showed me tu corazón. That's
really good.

PABLO

I wanted to slap her.

LUZ

She's just a lima bean in your mouth.
Ready?

Together, they mock-spit.

LUZ

What d'ya say we get some milk to go
with those cookies and get the lima
beans outta our mouths?

PABLO

Okay.

LUZ

Go on -- start pouring for both of us.

PABLO

Chocolate for me?

LUZ
(indicating both)
Para ambos.

PABLO
Yeah!

Pablo starts to scamper down the rope ladder.

LUZ
Hey! The cookies!

PABLO
Oh, yeah.

Pablo comes back and stuffs the cookies in his jacket, and as he leaves, he gives Luz another quick hug, which she returns.

EXT. - YARD

Pablo shimmies down the ladder.

EXT. - FORT

Luz watches Pablo tear across the yard, slam open the glass doors, and, leaving them open, disappear into the house.

Luz sees the sword, picks it up. She stands.

LUZ
Can't protect you anymore, mihito. Not anymore. But you don't have to know that, at least for a while. We'll pretend -- Mami and Papi will keep the sword -- you keep the cookies. We'll pretend at least for a little while, for a little while longer.

Luz slides the sword into her belt, like a mock knight. She stares up into the branches and beyond that into the empty grey sky.

FADE OUT.