

SOMOS AIRE

A play by Mabelle Reynoso
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PREVIEW COPY

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PRODUCTIONS & READINGS

Written permission from the playwright must be obtained before
producing and/or doing a reading of this play.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JACKIE, 17, Mexican-American, an ambitious high school student; doubles as LA INQUIETA (aka INKY)

CLAUDIA, 10, Jackie's little sister; doubles as HERMANITA

MOM, working single mom to Jackie and Claudia

ESTEBAN, a Komodo dragon; a caretaker

COUNCIL ELDER 1, should only be a voice

THE POWERS THAT BE, a politician, White

DOÑA REMEDIOS, an elder who loves her community

LA GALLINA, a hen, a historian

LA PALETERA, a guerrera, dressed like an Adelita (but she sells paletas)

EL PRIMO, troublemaker or truth-teller--¿quien sabe?)

SETTING

The bordertown of San Ysidro, CA, real and imagined, past, present, and future. We start in Jackie's kitchen and end up at the border.

DEDICATION

For the young people of San Ysidro, past, present, and future.

Morning. A kitchen. A closed door. A box of Corn Flakes is on the table. A painting of a pachuco kicking it next to a lowrider is hanging on the wall. A La Michoacana box is overflowing from the trashcan.

JACKIE enters, wearing a blazer. She pours herself a bowl of cereal. Eats it dry. MOM enters, dressed for work. She notices JACKIE.

MOM

Why are you dressed like that?

JACKIE

The UCLA rep is going to be on campus today. I'm supposed to be their student escort.

MOM

You're not going to school today.

JACKIE

Yes I am.

MOM

Jackie, your sister had an asthma attack last night. Did you not hear me giving her breathing treatment at 3am?

JACKIE

My AP Physics exam was yesterday. I came home and passed out. (beat) Is Claudia okay?

MOM

She's exhausted. I'm exhausted. But she can't go to school and I can't miss work again.

JACKIE

Mom, Ms. Chavez set up a special lunch for us.

MOM

Your little sister is more important than lunch. (checks her watch) I need to leave right now or I'm going to be late.

JACKIE

So that's it?

MOM

Jackie, do not start with me. I do not need this today. There's soups in the cupboard. Just keep an eye on Claudia. She should be okay--just let her sleep. I'll call you on my break. And please take out the trash. I love you. Goodbye.

MOM kisses JACKIE on the cheek and leaves before JACKIE can say, without conviction...

JACKIE

Love you too.

CLAUDIA dressed in pajamas, emerges from the door.

JACKIE

You had to pick last night to have your dumb asthma attack?

CLAUDIA

I didn't pick it. It's not like I wanted to miss school.

JACKIE

Yeah, okay.

CLAUDIA

You can sneak out if you want. I won't tell Mami.

JACKIE

Sneak out to *go to school*? Does anyone else hear how ridiculous that sounds?

CLAUDIA

I know UCLA is a big deal for you.

JACKIE

With all these absences I'm racking up, I'll be lucky just to graduate.

CLAUDIA

I'm sorry, Jackie.

JACKIE

Whatever. Come on, let's get you back to bed.

A moment.

CLAUDIA

Can you take *me* to school? We can still make it on time. It'll take me two seconds to get dressed.

JACKIE

What? No. Get back to bed.

CLAUDIA doesn't move.

CLAUDIA

My class is going to the zoo today.

JACKIE

That's today?

CLAUDIA nods. JACKIE gives her a hug.

JACKIE

Girl, you need to get better at scheduling your asthma attacks.

CLAUDIA pulls away.

CLAUDIA

That's not funny, Jackie.

JACKIE

I know. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say.

CLAUDIA

I missed the last zoo field trip--

JACKIE

--Because of an asthma attack.

CLAUDIA

I'm the only kid in my class that's never seen a real live elephant.

JACKIE

Clearly, the universe does not want you at the zoo.

CLAUDIA

Why?

JACKIE

It knows you're an agent of chaos.

CLAUDIA
 What does that mean?

JACKIE
 Nothing. I'm just messing with you.

CLAUDIA
 Stop making jokes, Jackie!

JACKIE
 Sorry. Seriously Claudia, it's weird.

CLAUDIA
 It's not weird. It sucks. I hate getting sick all the time. I hate being stuck in here.

JACKIE
 (sarcastic) Why? This place is amazing. All the possibilities in this room.

*CLAUDIA hits JACKIE (the way little sisters do
 sometimes--more annoying than deadly)*

CLAUDIA
 I said stop with your jokes. No wonder Mami is always annoyed with you.

JACKIE
 Oh she's annoyed with *me*? Whatever dude. Look, you and I are both stuck here today so we better make the best of it. Go sleep for a little bit and then we'll work on a puzzle later.

CLAUDIA
 A puzzle? What am I? Ninety? I don't want to do a dumb puzzle. I want to go to the zoo and see the Komodo dragons.

JACKIE
 Well that ain't happening. (beat) Komodo dragons? What happened with the elephants?

CLAUDIA
 Elephants are cool but I'm really into Komodo dragons right now. Did you know they taste the air with their tongue?

JACKIE
 Okay. Cool.

CLAUDIA
 They recognize food through airborne molecules.

JACKIE

Sounds delicious.

CLAUDIA coughs.

JACKIE

Go back to bed, Claud. I don't need you having an attack right now.

CLAUDIA starts to tear up.

CLAUDIA

They made fun of me.

JACKIE

Who?

CLAUDIA

The kids in my class. Because I didn't know what a Komodo dragon was.

JACKIE

As if anyone knows what a Komodo dragon is? Is it a dragon? Is it a lizard? Who cares?

CLAUDIA

Anybody who's been to the zoo knows. It's like one of the first things you see at the zoo.

JACKIE

No, you see the flamingos.

CLAUDIA starts to cry. JACKIE is really struggling to be sympathetic because it seems so trivial...we should see this.

Finally, JACKIE takes out her phone.

JACKIE

Thanks to the marvels of modern technology, the zoo can come to you. You wanna see Komodo dragons? I got you.

JACKIE starts googling Komodo dragon videos.

JACKIE

There's a zillion Komodo dragon videos. Look at this one. Komodo dragon eats buffalo... Oh gross. Let's not watch that one.

CLAUDIA

I don't wanna see videos, Jackie!

JACKIE

I know it sucks, Claudia. But look on the bright side. Now we get to spend quality time together. We haven't hung out in a while, right? So that's cool, right? I miss hanging out with you.

CLAUDIA

No you don't.

JACKIE

Yes I do.

CLAUDIA

You can't wait to get out of here. You're gonna go to college next year and we'll probably never see you again.

JACKIE

That is not true at all.

CLAUDIA

That's what happened with Martha's sister.

JACKIE

Martha's sister is a loser. I will be back every chance I get. I promise. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've got the whole day together. You wanna play with my phone?

CLAUDIA

What are you gonna do?

JACKIE

Homework.

CLAUDIA

Where?

JACKIE

I don't know. My room?

CLAUDIA

That's not hanging out with me.

JACKIE is working hard to keep her cool.

JACKIE

Okay, what do you wanna do? We're not leaving the house so don't say "Take me to 7-Eleven."

CLAUDIA

Tell me a story.

JACKIE

What?

CLAUDIA

You always used to tell me stories.

JACKIE

Dude, come on. (beat) I'll find a new movie on Netflix.

CLAUDIA

You know what? Forget it, Jackie. You should just go to LA already.

JACKIE

Don't I wish.

JACKIE's phone rings. She answers.

JACKIE

Hi Ms. Chavez. I'm so sorry but I'm not coming to school today...No, I'm not joking...My little sister...There's no one else. I know...I know...I'm so sorry...Okay, thanks. Bye.

*Does she want to scream? Does she want to cry?
JACKIE doesn't even know.*

CLAUDIA

I ruin everything.

JACKIE

No you don't.

CLAUDIA

Yes, I do. Mami has to miss work. You have to miss school. I mess up everybody's life.

A moment.

JACKIE

Remember that time you wanted that big old squishy bat sea thing?

CLAUDIA

It was a baxolotl.

JACKIE

Yeah that. And finally you saved up enough money and Mom was gonna take you to the go buy it. But we stopped to eat at McDonalds first. And when we left, there was this dude outside and he was asking Mom for some change but she waved him off. But you took out all your money and gave it to him. You had over fifty bucks and you gave him all of it.

CLAUDIA

Mami got mad at me.

JACKIE

It's a lot of money and you'd been saving it for a long time.

CLAUDIA

He wasn't wearing shoes.

JACKIE

Really?

CLAUDIA

How am I gonna buy some dumb toy when there's a guy who doesn't have shoes? His feet were all tore up.

JACKIE

You don't ruin lives, kiddo.

A moment. A shift. JACKIE goes big--channeling the Ultimate Library Lady Storyteller mode.

JACKIE

You sure you're ready for one of my stories?

CLAUDIA

Yes...But don't make it about a princess because that's corny. Tell me a good story. Like something *intense*.

JACKIE

Fool, what do you know about intense stories?

CLAUDIA

I watch Mami's novelas.

JACKIE

Whatever dude. Alright fine, but you gotta get back in bed.

CLAUDIA

Why?

JACKIE

Because this is gonna be the ultimate bedtime story.

*An excited CLAUDIA exits through the door,
leaving it slightly ajar.*

JACKIE

You ready?

CLAUDIA O.S.

I'm ready!

JACKIE

Alrighty. Let's do this. Once upon a time in a land called San Ysidro--

CLAUDIA

You're gonna set the story *here*? Man, come on. Get creative. Think outside the neighborhood.

JACKIE

Dude, who's telling the story, you or me?

CLAUDIA O.S.

Sorry.

JACKIE

Once upon a time in a land called San Ysidro, there was a girl named...La Inquieta. She was restless. She was ambitious.

CLAUDIA O.S.

Her name is La Inquieta?

JACKIE

O pues. Are you gonna keep interrupting?

CLAUDIA O.S.

Can you call her Inky?

JACKIE

Fine. Once upon a time, there was a girl named La Inquieta. Her homegirls called her Inky. She was restless. She was ambitious. So when she got the first chance to leave town, she took off in search of a better life.

CLAUDIA O.S.

That's like you. Are you Inky?

JACKIE

Claudia, I'm gonna stop. I swear to God.

CLAUDIA O.S.

I'm sorry. I won't interrupt anymore. Keep going.

JACKIE

But then she got a message.

A butterfly drops a letter at JACKIE/INKY's feet. She picks up the letter, opens it, and gasps. She runs offstage.

2

SCENE 2 - WHEN THE KOMODO DRAGON CALLS

2

A kitchen. It looks sort of like JACKIE's kitchen but there's something dystopian about it. INKY, dressed in different clothes, maybe with a Mexican steampunk vibe, enters through the door. She has a scarf covering her mouth. She unwraps it to speak.

INKY

Hermanita! Hermanita ¿dónde estás?

ESTEBAN, a Komodo dragon, enters.

ESTEBAN

You must be La Inquieta.

Who are you?

INKY

I am Esteban.

ESTEBAN

Are you--

INKY

Yes. I am a Komodo dragon. I was the one who sent for you. Your hermanita is not well.

ESTEBAN

Where's my mom?

INKY

Your mamá is working.

ESTEBAN

Of course she is. Where is my sister?

INKY

Your hermanita is asleep.

ESTEBAN

ESTEBAN points to the door. INKY peers in.

INKY

Why is she wearing that thing on her face?

ESTEBAN

She cannot breathe without it.

INKY

It doesn't look comfortable. *She* doesn't look comfortable.

ESTEBAN

There's something in the air.

ESTEBAN

ESTEBAN sticks his tongue out.

INKY

You don't say? I could hardly breathe out there. I told my mother to get out of here ages ago, but no. So now here I am trying to do her job. And of course, the timing couldn't be worse.

ESTEBAN

Yes, it is getting late.

INKY

No, I mean for me. The timing is terrible. I am about to start a new job. Well, I interviewed and it went really well. The lady said, "We'll be in touch." But she said it with such conviction, you know? Like I truly believe she is going to call me. I just know I'm going to get an offer any minute now. It's crazy. All my dreams are coming true.

ESTEBAN

But your hermanita is very sick.

INKY

I can buy medicine.

ESTEBAN

I don't think what she needs is for sale.

INKY

Everything is for sale.

ESTEBAN

There's no medicine for this.

INKY

There's always medicine. And I have plenty of money so just tell me where to go.

ESTEBAN

You are not listening to me.

INKY

My mother never listened to me when I told her that my hermanita couldn't live on ramen and Firecracker Puffs alone. She probably has fourteen ulcers. That's what's hurting her.

(suspicion)

Why are you here?

ESTEBAN

Because your hermanita needs help.

INKY

Yeah but you're not even from this neighborhood. What do you care about my sister?
(beat) Are you planning to devour her like a buffalo?

ESTEBAN

No.

INKY

Then what's your game?

ESTEBAN

Your hermanita showed me kindness when I was lost.

INKY

Yeah, you are a long way from home, aren't you?

ESTEBAN

When others were afraid of me, she understood that I was not going to hurt anyone. I was just a lizard in search of connection.

INKY

So you're not an actual dragon?

ESTEBAN

When you're the largest lizard in the world, people make assumptions. But not your hermanita. She made me realize I was more than just a carnivorous predator. She has weak lungs but a powerful heart.

INKY

She does have a good heart. Always has.

ESTEBAN

Dije powerful. (beat) She could heal me but unfortunately, she cannot heal herself. All I can do is make sure she is comfortable. I have been making her caldo.

INKY

You know how to make caldo?

ESTEBAN

It's not that hard.

INKY

Well thank you. At least there is someone looking out for her. Don't trip. I'll be back shortly with medicine.

ESTEBAN

There is no medicine for what ails your sister. It's not just your hermanita who is suffering. It's devastating the entire community. And it's about to get worse.

INKY

What does that mean?

ESTEBAN

A heat wave is coming.

INKY

So?

ESTEBAN

It's not like before when you lived here. It will be an excruciating heat. It will knock out the power. It will poison the air even more. It will come for the weakest ones...like your hermanita.

INKY

But...someone's doing something...right?

ESTEBAN

The Council of Los Que Saben Todo is meeting right now. They are trying to come up with a plan. But your hermanita is running out of time.

INKY

I'm not going to let that happen.

ESTEBAN

I don't think there is anything you can do.

INKY

Please. I am a Chicana with a degree. I can do anything. I'll go talk to the Council and tell them to hurry up.

ESTEBAN

There's no point. Your time is better spent here, by your hermanita's side. Spend her last moments with her.

INKY

Do you seriously expect me to just sit here and do nothing? That is not who I am. You keep an eye on my hermanita. I'll be back as soon as I've spoken to the council.

INKY exits.

3

SCENE 3 - LOS QUE SABEN TODO Y LOS QUE SABEN NADA

3

A meeting hall. We hear the sounds of people talking, maybe some arguing, but we do not see the faces of the council elders. We do see THE POWERS THAT BE.

COUNCIL ELDER 1

We demand answers now.

COUNCIL ELDER 2

We were told there would be solutions.

COUNCIL ELDER 3

We were told to trust you.

THE POWERS THAT BE

I understand you are frustrated but you gotta comprende that this is not a simple problema to fix. We're talking issues of national security here. Public safety.

COUNCIL ELDER 1

What about the safety of our children?

INKY enters. Again her mouth is covered by her scarf. The chatter stops.

COUNCIL ELDER 1

This is a closed session of the Council of Los Que Saben Todo. You must leave.

INKY removes her scarf.

INKY

I demand to know the plan.

THE POWERS THAT BE

What plan? What is she talking about? Have you all been scheming behind the back of the powers that be of this great nation?

ALL COUNCIL ELDERS

No.

INKY

There's no plan?

COUNCIL ELDER 1

We are waiting for the powers that be to tell us the plan.

INKY

You're waiting for the powers that be? Is that like the government? My sister is dying!

THE POWERS THAT BE

A lot of things are dying. That, unfortunately, is the cost of progress. But the wheels are in motion to start making some changes. We've got think tanks. Strategic planning meetings. Colloquiums. A lot of really smart people are on it!

A realization.

INKY

You're just gonna let her die. You're just gonna let them all die. Our lives don't mean anything to you.

THE POWERS THAT BE

Now hold it right there, Missy. I see your big city clothes and the bravado with which you speak. I can tell you're not from around here--

INKY

I was born here.

COUNCIL ELDER 1

She *was* from here. But then she left. She's not from here anymore.

INKY

Once from San Ysidro, always from San Ysidro.

COUNCIL ELDER 1

Yeah, whatever. You're an outsider now.

INKY

You do see that The Powers That Be are not from around here, right? Like legit outsider--

THE POWERS THAT BE

Outsider? I beg your pardon. These are my gente.

INKY

Do you even know the names of anyone here?

THE POWERS THAT BE

Of course I do. That's...Miguel.

Francisco.

COUNCIL ELDER 1

THE POWERS THAT BE
That's what I meant. Francisco. And that's Guadalupe.

COUNCIL ELDER 2
Guadalupe didn't come today. She's sick. I'm Remedios.

COUNCIL ELDER 1
Enough. We're wasting time. Go home, La Inquieta. This is the Council of Los Que Saben Todo. Y tu no sabes nada.

We hear laughter and jeers.

INKY
Ustedes tampoco saben.

COUNCIL ELDER 1
Man get that mocosa out of here.

THE POWERS THAT BE
I swear, the youth today, am I right?

INKY
It's fine. I'm leaving. I'll come up with my own plan.

More laughs and jeers.

COUNCIL ELDER 1
Sí claro.

INKY exits.

4 SCENE 4 - TAL VEZ REMEDIOS

4

Outside. INKY wraps her face. It's hard to breathe and visibility is bad. It's starting to get hot.

INKY
Think, Inky. Think. What can you do? What can you do?

DOÑA REMEDIOS enters.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

Mija, you can't just be standing out here.

INKY

It's public property. You can't kick me off the sidewalk.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

No, mija. The air. You can't just be standing around outside. You'll get sick.

INKY

Oh. (beat) How did it get like this?

DOÑA REMEDIOS

Quien sabe.

INKY

No offense, Doña Remedios, but you've been living in San Ysidro for a really long time. You must know how it happened.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

We got so busy with daily life that I guess we weren't paying attention.

INKY

But how can you not pay attention? You can barely see across the street. Didn't anyone notice it was getting worse and worse?

DOÑA REMEDIOS

La Inquieta, let me ask you a question. Why did you leave San Ysidro?

INKY

Because I got a scholarship to a great school. It was a no-brainer.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

Were you excited to leave?

INKY

Of course.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

Why?

INKY

Because a world of opportunities was waiting for me.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

¿Y aquí no?

INKY

(Scoffs) No.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

Well some of us weren't offered a ticket out of here, and some of us, like me, really love this place. It's our home. Pero a veces, living feels more like surviving. That's just the way it is. It's easier to pay attention to an empty refrigerator than the invisible air.

INKY swipes her finger on a fruit from the fruit tree.

INKY

But it's not invisible anymore.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

You're right, not anymore. (looooooong beat) Tengo un primo. He's not welcome at the Council. But he might have answers. He's a truthteller. ¿Sí me entiendes? Not everyone likes a truthteller.

INKY

Does he have medicine? My sister needs medicine. I have money. I can pay.

INKY shows DOÑA REMEDIOS her stash of money.

DOÑA REMEDIOS

Put that away! Don't be taking out your money like that.

INKY

Where can I find him?

DOÑA REMEDIOS

I don't know. I haven't seen him in a while. But this is San Ysidro. There are some characters around here who probably know where he's at. (beat) Pero no le digas a nadie que te dije de mi primo. I would get kicked off the Council.

COUNCIL ELDER 1 O.S.

¡Remedios, te estamos esperando!

DOÑA REMEDIOS

I gotta get back in there. Suerte, mija. Go save your sister. And give your mami a break. She's doing the best she can.

Eye roll from INKY.

DOÑA REMEDIOS exits.

INKY

What now?

We hear the faint sound of a chicken clucking.

INKY

Guess I'll go that way.

5

SCENE 5 - THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

5

Once a chicken farm, now it is a vacant field. The ground is littered with paper cranes. During this scene, paper cranes intermittently fall out of the sky. LA GALLINA, a hen, paces back and forth.

LA GALLINA

Mis hijos. ¿Dónde están mis hijos? Mis hijos. ¿Dónde están mis hijos? Mis HIJOS.
¿DÓNDE ESTÁN MIS HIJOS?

INKY enters and watches LA GALLINA cautiously.

LA GALLINA sees INKY and perks up--totally different vibe.

LA GALLINA

Buenas.

INKY

Buenas. (beat) Should I be...afraid?

LA GALLINA

Why?

INKY

Are you...Um. I thought you'd be...I just didn't think you'd look like a gallina.

LA GALLINA

Who am I supposed to look like?

INKY

Well I don't know but I've heard you have like long hair and wear white and have like a skeleton face.

LA GALLINA

Girl, you think I'm La Llorona?

INKY

You were wailing. About your hijos.

LA GALLINA

That's just something I do to pass the time. It is pretty poetic though, given where we are.

A bird falls from the sky.

LA GALLINA CONT.

I have a script, you know. I should be reciting that. You see I am the Historical Society. It is my job to tell you what once was.

Another bird falls from the sky.

INKY

Why is that happening?

LA GALLINA

I said my job is to tell you what once was. Not what is. Once there was earth. Then there were people. Then there were farms. Then there were chickens. Then there was flooding. Then there were problems--

INKY

This is all really fascinating but I'm in a hurry. My sister is very ill and I need to find someone. A truth teller.

LA GALLINA

Oh. They don't like truth tellers around here.

INKY

I know.

LA GALLINA

What do you know? You don't know anything about anything around here.

INKY

I was born here.

LA GALLINA

So what? What do you know about this place? You know how it got its name?

INKY

San Ysidro?

LA GALLINA

Used to be Tijuana City.

INKY

I guess that makes sense. I heard Tijuana got its name from some lady named Tía Juana.

LA GALLINA

Tihuan is a Kumeyaay word. Means “by the sea.”

INKY

Really? Is that the origin of the name?

LA GALLINA

You never really thought to wonder about where you came from, huh? Says a lot about you.

INKY

Like what?

LA GALLINA

Like you don't consider roots. Sometimes, the answers are in the roots.

INKY

You mean the roots of this place? This destruction. This decay.

Another bird falls from the sky.

INKY

Of course life is falling out of the sky here.

LA GALLINA

Why do you say that?

INKY

This is the stuff nightmares are made of. This place just swallows up life.

LA GALLINA

Hmph.

INKY

What?

LA GALLINA

What you just said--that says a lot about you too. Qué lástima. Because then you don't see when life rises up.

Some birds rise up and fly away.

INKY

How did you do that?

LA GALLINA

Yo no hice nada.

INKY

Of course you didn't. (beat) So do you know where I might find the truthteller?

LA GALLINA

I don't know. Maybe go check the parque or something.

INKY

Which park?

(no answer)

Okay, never mind. I'll figure it out myself.

LA GALLINA

San Ysidro is complicated, but you have to find the jewels of the story. ¿Sí me entiendes?

INKY

Not even remotely.

LA GALLINA

Sabías que San Ysidro is the patron saint of farmers? The people that gave this place its current name wanted to farm this land, but the joke was on them. Turns out, floods are terrible for soil. Many people left. They couldn't hack it. But life grew here. As it has done before. And for every bit of darkness, there was light. Because the people here know how to find the jewels. (beat) Sabes, he made miracles happen.

INKY

Who?

LA GALLINA

San Ysidro.

INKY

Looks like I'm gonna need a miracle to save my sister.

LA GALLINA

Well believe it or not, miracles do happen here.

LA GALLINA wanders off.

INKY

Wonderful. Really helpful. (beat) Guess I'll go look for a park.

INKY's phone rings. She answers it.

INKY

Hi Jane!...Can you hear me?...Jane...Jane...I have terrible reception. Let me call you back.

(Hangs up phone)

Of course the reception here sucks. Maybe if I find higher ground I can get better signal.

INKY exits in the opposite direction.

SCENE 5A - PALETAS

A rooftop. LA PALETERA and her paleta cart are parked next to a white box connected to wires. She rings her bell.

LA PALETERA

Paletas! Paletas! Mango, Tamarindo, Limón, y Tierra. Dos por cinco. Escojan las que quieran.

INKY climbs up onto the rooftop.

LA PALETERA

¿Qué se te ofrece, mija?

INKY

One second.

INKY makes a call.

INKY

Hi, Jane. Sorry about that...It was wonderful meeting you too...I feel like it's a great opportunity for me as well...Oh my gosh, that's incredible. Thank you so much.

I'm so excited, I don't even know what to say...You need me there tomorrow? No problem. I can definitely be there tomorrow...Thank you, thank, thank you.

INKY screams with excitement. Maybe does a dance.

INKY

I just got a job! Aghhhhh! It's a good one! Man. Check me out.

LA PALETERA

Since you got a job now, you wanna buy a paleta?

INKY

No gracias. Is this the best place to be selling paletas? You get a lot of foot traffic? It's like a lot of work to get up here.

LA PALETERA

You got up here.

(suspicious)

Who sent you? Are you with el gobierno?

INKY

No, it's just me.

LA PALETERA

Show me some ID.

INKY

I don't have any.

LA PALETERA

I'm not gonna let you take it. You're going to have to fight me. I make look like a helpless paletera, but I got skills. I am a descendant of mujeres who fought alongside Adela Velarde Pérez. Preparate porque I won't go down easy.

LA PALETERA gets into fighting stance.

INKY

I'm not going to fight you.

LA PALETERA

And I'm not going to let you take El Monitor.

INKY

Good because I don't want it. (beat) What is El Monitor?

LA PALETERA

Ay, it's this! (points to the air quality monitor).

INKY

Why would I want that weird old box?

LA PALETERA

This is not a weird old box. This is the truth.

INKY gasps.

INKY

You're the truth-teller.

LA PALETERA

Uhhhh...I'm la palettera.

INKY

Are you Doña Remedio's cousin?

LA PALETERA

Heck no. I ain't part of that family of locos.

INKY

Oh.

LA PALETERA

Don't act all disappointed. I'm doing important work! I'm *protecting* the truth. This cajita has the truth about everything.

INKY

Regarding...?

LA PALETERA

Particulate matter, of course!

INKY

Particu-what?

LA PALETERA

Man, who are you?

INKY

I'm looking for someone. Do you by any chance know where I can find Doña Remedio's cousin?

LA PALETERA

What do you need that troublemaker for?

INKY

My sister is really sick. They might have medicine to save her.

LA PALETERA

Man that fool doesn't have anything but drama. Nothing you need. Bring your sister a paleta de jamaica. Good for fever reduction.

INKY

It's not that kind of sickness.

LA PALETERA

Never is around here. (beat) Look, no one has figured it out yet.

INKY

Figured what out?

LA PALETERA

The cure. Your sister's not the only one. (beat) I used to be the busiest paletera in town. I couldn't keep up with the demand. But I haven't sold a paleta in...pues ya ni se. But it's been a long time. I keep coming up here everyday hoping someone will show up and buy something pero nada.

INKY

I mean...you're on a rooftop so...best place to sell paletas?

LA PALETERA

A ja ja, sí muy lista. I'll have you know more people come up here to check out El Monitor than hang out in el parque. Parques are empty now.

INKY

It's that bad?

LA PALETERA

Safer indoors. It's all dust and dirt out here. Nobody wants to breathe that in. Not that anybody cares enough to do anything about it.

INKY

Is that true? Are you sure?

LA PALETERA

The only thing I'm sure of is the data from this cajita. *That* is truth.

INKY

What exactly is the data?

LA PALETERA

This cajita measures the neglect and failure of society upon our comunidad.

INKY

That seems like a big responsibility for such a little box.

LA PALETERA

That is a flaw in your thinking. Little things can have tremendous power. Think about it. That's why they want to take it away from us.

INKY

Who?

LA PALETERA

The Powers That Be.

INKY

Ah yes. I met them earlier.

LA PALETERA

Did they follow you here?

INKY

No.

LA PALETERA

They don't want us to know the truth. Because if we don't know the truth, then we won't get upset or stir things up. They fear a revolución. Pero no saben con quien se meten.

INKY

For what it's worth, I wouldn't mess with you.

LA PALETERA

Good. You're not as dumb as you look.

INKY

Thanks.

LA PALETERA

Head towards La Frontera. Doña Remedio's crazy primo is probably starting some sort of escándalo over there. But I warn you. He's nothing but trouble.

INKY

What's the fastest way to get to La Frontera?

LA PALETERA

Look for the long lines of cars going south.

INKY takes money out of her pocket.

INKY

I'll take a tamarindo.

LA PALETERA

¡Éso!

LA PALETERA hands her a paleta.

INKY

Gracias.

INKY starts to leave, eating her paleta, but stops.

INKY

Hey, what are part...parti...

LA PALETERA

Particulate matter. Air pollution made up of solid and liquid particles small and light enough to remain airborne for days to weeks. (beat) It's what's making your sister sick.

INKY

No. My sister's sick cuz she eats ramen and Firecracker Puffs for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

LA PALETERA

She's having digestive issues?

INKY

No. Respiratory.

LA PALETERA

I take it back. You are as dumb as you look. It's the air pollution, tonta. That's what's poisoning your sister.

INKY

I don't believe you.

LA PALETERA

Otra. You sound like everybody else around here. If it's not a nuclear fallout, it couldn't possibly be something in the air.

INKY

I'm sure air can make you get a cough or something but my sister is really sick.

LA PALETERA

Uh huh.

INKY

Whatever. I'm out of here.

INKY starts to climb down.

LA PALETERA

Did you see the dirt on the buildings?

INKY

Yeah?

LA PALETERA

That's what we breathe. If the buildings look like that, what do our lungs look like? Piensaló. (beat) No. ¿Sabes qué? Es mejor que no. Because then you might actually be forced to start thinking what to do about it.

INKY exits.

6 SCENE 6 - LA FRONTERA

6

INKY walks. She notices she is being followed. She clutches her sack. She walks and walks and walks and we don't see her anymore. But we hear violence.

7 SCENE 7 - LEAVING LA FRONTERA

7

INKY walks away from a sign pointing to the International Border.

She is hurting--struggling to breathe and emotionally drained. Her sack is gone. Straight up defeated. She walks past a car.

Standing by the trunk is EL PRIMO, dressed in a zoot suit. A customer comes up to him. Money is exchanged and he hands over a paper bag.

EL PRIMO notices INKY.

EL PRIMO

What happened to you?

INKY

I failed.

EL PRIMO

(laughs) Welcome to the club.

INKY

It's not funny. My sister's gonna die.

EL PRIMO

Ay no te hagas.

INKY

I'm serious.

EL PRIMO

Why? What's up?

INKY

I came back to save her. She's sick. I can't find medicine anywhere. Not that it matters. I lost my money.

EL PRIMO

What kind of medicine you looking for?

INKY

I don't know. The pink stuff?

Like Pepto Bismol?

EL PRIMO

Yeah.

INKY

I ain't no doctor but if it's Pepto Bismol that will save, it ain't that serious.

EL PRIMO

She can't breathe without this weird mask.

INKY

I gather you ain't a doctor either.

EL PRIMO

No, but I know my sister. She's been on a diet of ramen and Firecracker Puffs since she was five.

INKY

I love Firecracker Puffs. It ain't the Firecracker Puffs that are the problem.

EL PRIMO

Then what is?

INKY

Your sister cannot breathe cuz the air is trash.

EL PRIMO

Wait, really?

INKY

It's not rocket science.

EL PRIMO

Is it the particulate matter?

INKY

Ahhh, sí sabes. Not as dumb as you look.

EL PRIMO

People keep saying that. (beat) What's the deal with the particulate matter? Is it that bad?

INKY

Depends on your perspective.

EL PRIMO

Meaning?

INKY

EL PRIMO

If you don't mind inhaling delicious little drops of mold, metal, acid, then it ain't that bad.

INKY

Is that really happening?

EL PRIMO

Nah, birds fall out of the sky cuz they're tired. And everyone thinks their headaches and dizziness are normal. Ain't normal. The air is killing them...us...slowly.

INKY

That's an exaggeration, right? You're exaggerating?

EL PRIMO

No. Asthma. Heart disease. COPD. Cancer. Premature death. All because of the air. Think about it. When the air struggles, we struggle. We have been conditioned to believe we humans are separate from everything else, pero no. Todos somos aire.

INKY

Somos aire.

EL PRIMO

So there's good news and bad news.

INKY

I'll take the bad news first.

EL PRIMO

What's your name?

INKY

The call me La Inquieta. Inky.

EL PRIMO

La Inquieta. That tracks. Okay, so you cannot fix this, Inky.

INKY

I can fix anything. I'm a--

EL PRIMO

Chicana with a degree?

INKY

Yes, actually.

EL PRIMO

Hate to break it to you, but all the degrees in the world ain't gonna fix this.

INKY

It's that kind of mindset that holds people back. There are solutions for everything. You just have to get creative. Think outside the box.

EL PRIMO laughs.

EL PRIMO

Ésta morra. You sound like The Powers That Be. Hablan y hablan pero no dicen nada.

INKY

We need to identify the source of the problem and shut it down there.

EL PRIMO points to the International Border sign.

EL PRIMO

That's the problem. Right there. You ever cross the border, Inky?

INKY

Of course. Used to go there all the time to get medicine for my sister.

EL PRIMO

What's the fastest you ever got across?

INKY

I don't know. Like twenty minutes. But that was like at 3am on a Sunday morning. Normally, we'd wait in la linea for hours and hours.

EL PRIMO

Takes forever, huh?

INKY

Totally.

EL PRIMO

All those cars. All those gas emissions. All that toxicity floats right into the valley of San Ysidro. Cuz guess what, manita? Air pollution don't need no passaporte.

INKY

So it's an international issue. Okay, that's a start.

EL PRIMO

Oh my god, this girl. You cannot stop this problem, Inky. You're talking about the busiest land border crossing in the western hemisphere. The border would have to be shut. Commerce would have to stop. People would have to give up their beloved gas-guzzling ranflas. (beat) Mine's electric, in case you were wondering. And don't get me started on the Tijuana River Valley. That's a conversation for another time. People try to come up with these plans. Pero son, como se dice, aspirational at best. I know, I know. Nobody wants to hear the truth.

INKY

Esperate. Truth....Are you Doña Remedios's primo?

EL PRIMO

You know Remedios? Ay, she owes me twenty bucks. Whatever. She can keep it. Tell my Tía I say what's up. I miss her tamales but you know, nobody likes a truth teller. Especially at Christmas. They say it brings the vibe down.

INKY

El aire. All this time I was blaming my mom for my hermanita.

EL PRIMO

Dang. For real?

INKY

My mom's always working. There's no one to take care of my hermanita. Actually, that's not true. A Komodo dragon is currently watching her.

EL PRIMO

That's tight. You're Alice's kid, huh?

INKY

You know my mom?

EL PRIMO

We used to kick it back in the day. But then she had you. (beat) I'm not your dad.

INKY

(scowl) I know you're not my dad.

EL PRIMO

I see your mom every once in awhile. She's super proud of you.

Could have fooled me.

INKY

Why you say that?

EL PRIMO

She wasn't happy when I left.

INKY

Yeah she was. She wanted you to get out. She was worried about you. Said you didn't like to leave your room and you would just eat canned corn and drink Darjeeling tea.

EL PRIMO

She told you about that?

INKY

EL PRIMO shrugs.

You ever hear anyone talk about how air quality effects mental health?

EL PRIMO

No.

INKY

But it does. (sarcastic) Oh but we're not supposed to talk about depression ¿verdad? It's not real. We're all just bored.

EL PRIMO

A moment.

So we're doomed?

INKY

Man this is San Ysidro. We ain't doomed. We just can't wait for other people to solve our problems cuz that ain't gonna happen. We gotta look out for our own.

EL PRIMO

What do we do?

INKY

First thing's first. A heat wave is coming.

EL PRIMO

That's why I'm scared for my sister.

INKY

EL PRIMO pulls out a portable solar station and a nebulizer.

EL PRIMO

Toma. It's a nebulizer. (beat) And a portable solar station.

INKY

I don't have any money. I can't pay you.

EL PRIMO

Did I ask you for money? I said we gotta look out for our own.

INKY looks in the trunk of EL PRIMO's car.

INKY

Where did you get all this stuff?

EL PRIMO

Don't worry about it. But if you need something, come see me. I got you.

INKY

Why are you being so nice to me? What do you want from me in return?

EL PRIMO

Your mom says you went off to some big shot college. You got out to see the world.

INKY

Yeah but this place sucked me back in.

EL PRIMO

Maybe it called to you.

INKY

Screaming.

EL PRIMO

You think it's the land that's the problem?

INKY

I know it is.

EL PRIMO

It's not the land. This land is sacred. For thousands of years and billions of tears. The land is not the problem. It's The Powers That Be. See, they are trained to only see the treasure in gold and diamonds. Not in el corazón y la fortaleza. (beat) You know what I want from you? I want you to remember.

INKY

Remember?

EL PRIMO

You're gonna leave again. You'll go out there and make a name for yourself. But I want you to remember where you came from. Because one day, you're gonna be a big shot. You're gonna have the cheat codes to how things work. You're gonna have access. So I'm gonna save your hermanita's life. But in return, you're gonna come back.

INKY

Wait, I'm supposed to save this whole place?

EL PRIMO

You're gonna be part of the solution. You're gonna promise to not turn your back on this place. You're gonna invest in this community so young people like you aren't the anomalies but the norm. ¿Me entiendes, Mendez?

INKY

Yeah, I get it.

EL PRIMO

Pero aguas con que no cumplas.

INKY

Why? You gonna greenlight me?

EL PRIMO

Greenlight? Don't talk stupid. If you don't keep your word, you'll just be like all the others who kept walking. The ones who turned their backs when The Powers That Be said "okay" to new freeways, more trucks, more trains, more traffic, cuz "those people from San Ysidro don't matter." Cuz our lives are not as important as "the cost of progress." Pero acuerdate. However far you get from this place, however differently you dress, or talk, or act, you will always be *those* people. Cuz once from San Ysidro, always from San Ysidro. You're fooling yourself if you think you're any more special than the rest of us cuz you got out. We all deserve the right to breathe and laugh and be happy... and not blame ourselves for being bad parents cuz we couldn't get our kids out of here. (beat) ¿Entonces qué? Do we have a deal?

INKY

Yeah. We have a deal.

EL PRIMO hands over the nebulizer and solar battery pack.

INKY

Thank you.

EL PRIMO

Just keep your word.

INKY starts to walk away.

EL PRIMO

Hey wait. I got one more thing for you.

EL PRIMO hands INKY a brown paper bag like the one he gave the first customer.

INKY looks inside.

EL PRIMO

You know what to do with that?

INKY

Yeah.

EL PRIMO

Go change our world, homegirl.

INKY nods and exits.

8

SCENE 8 - PLANTING ROOTS

8

INKY's house. The front yard. INKY opens the front door.

INKY

(calling out)

Esteban, here take this thing and give my sister a breathing treatment, por fas. I'll be right in. I got something to do first.

INKY takes out her phone and makes a call.

INKY

Hi Jane, I'm very excited to start working with you but I need to take care of my family. I just need a couple of days, but if you need to hire someone to be there tomorrow, I understand. But I'll say this. You will be hard pressed to find someone more dedicated and passionate-- oh, okay... Yeah, I can absolutely be there next week.

Alright, looking forward to it. Goodbye.

(Hangs up phone)

Cuz that's how a Chicana with a degree handles her business.

INKY opens the brown paper bag and pulls out the bare root of a willow tree. She soaks the roots in a bucket. She digs a hole. She puts the roots in the hole and covers it with dirt. She waters. She goes into the house.

Time passes. The root goes from sapling to tree.

Time passes. More trees have been planted.

Times passes. The front of the house is covered in green (plants, trees, flowers).

INKY enters, dressed in a business suit. She marvels at the beautiful garden.

ESTEBAN, also dressed in a suit, enters.

ESTEBAN

Inky! We were going to pick you up.

INKY

It's all good. I took the trolley. Look at this place. It looks incredible.

ESTEBAN

Thanks to you. You started it when you planted that willow tree.

INKY

You all kept it up. How's everything going?

ESTEBAN

Your hermanita is a rockstar. The polling numbers are looking great.

INKY

Where is she?

ESTEBAN

She's working on a speech she'll be giving later today at the port authority.

HERMANITA comes out. She's also dressed in a power suit.

INKY

There she is. Look at you all grown up. The future congressperson for California's 52nd District.

HERMANITA

You made it! How long are you staying?

INKY

As long as it takes.

They all walk inside.

9

SCENE 9 - COLORÍN COLORADO

9

Back at present day. We see the kitchen table. INKY is now JACKIE again. Her phone rings. She emerges from the bedroom door to answer it.

JACKIE

Hey Mom...She's good. She's sleeping...I'm gonna go to the store later and get stuff to make caldo...I know. It's okay. I already talked to Ms. Chavez...Love you, too. Bye.

CLAUDIA emerges.

CLAUDIA

So then what happened?

JACKIE

What are you talking about?

CLAUDIA

With the hermanita. Did she win the election?

JACKIE

You were listening? I thought you were asleep.

CLAUDIA

Of course I was listening. So what happened? Did she become a congresswoman?

JACKIE

She went on to be president, fool.

CLAUDIA

Oh yeah. That makes sense. And Inky?

JACKIE

Renowned scientist. Climate activist. Obviously an advisor to the president.

CLAUDIA

Obviously.

JACKIE

Responsible for turning San Ysidro into the green city with tree barriers around every school and public space, and got air filters placed in every single residence in the community. And then all these little kids went on to be environmental scientists and activists and the world was like, “Yo, what’s up with San Ysidro? Let’s go study that community so we can replicate it elsewhere!”

CLAUDIA

And they built a zoo there so it became the Ultra World Famous San Ysidro Zoo.

JACKIE

With a hundred Komodo dragons.

CLAUDIA

That’s too many.

JACKIE

Okay, four.

CLAUDIA

Yeah, four’s good. (beat) That’s the best ending ever.

A moment.

JACKIE

You know I’m coming back right?

CLAUDIA

Promise?

JACKIE

Promise. We’re gonna change the world together.

END OF PLAY

Preview
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