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Straw Bag





Tin Box

Cloth Suitcase



Three Immigrant Voices

REYCRAFT BOOKS

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The old straw bag sits by the bedroom door at Nana's house. The room will be Sarah's for this visit, the first time by herself.

"What's in that old bag, Nana?"

Nana takes out a key from a drawer in a bedside table. "This will be a secret between us, bubbelah," she says.

The rusted old tin lunch box is hidden in a trunk in the attic at Baba's house. Grace is looking for her mother's satin ballet shoes when she notices it and brings it downstairs.

"Momma, why do you still have this?
The paint has come off at the corners!"

Momma's face changes to a look that Grace doesn't see very often. "Do you really want to know?" Momma asks?

Racquel remembers: The small, cheap cloth suitcase stands in the closet, a reminder of their escape, of how little they had in El Salvador. Grinding poverty, and the danger of Las Maras Salvatruchas, the gangs.

Raquel had been the youngest of three girls before her brother was born, and then a baby sister. The family hardly talks about that suitcase now.

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Sarah puts the key in the brass lock and turns it carefully.
CLICK! The straw bag falls open into two halves.
In one half is an apron, three scarves, a pair of boots.
In the other, three flowery dresses. The top dress has roses.

"That dress is too small for you, Nana" says Rebecca.

"Not my bag," Nana tells her, laughing.
"It belonged to your Great great grandmother, Manya.
They were old-fashioned before I was old fashioned.
This rose dress was her party dresses–for weddings, bar mitzvahs."





Raquel remembers: "The cloth bag held all they could carry away."
She means away from the once beautiful city of Cojutepeque.
A place where they were so poor, there were weeks wirh almost nothing to eat.

Papa had to leave them to find the family a better future.
He borrowed money, emigrated to the north, to America. What awaited he did not know. He only knew what awaited his wife, his children–hard work, little food. But one less mouth to feed–his.

"What do you think I kept in this box?" Momma asks.

"A sandwich? Water bottle? An apple?" Grace says.

"Yes, I had packed lunches just like you do, but I don't remember exactly what I put into this box every day. It became my suitcase for a special journey."

Grace was surprised. "It's way too small to be a suitcase!"

"People use all kinds of things as suitcases when they must run away," Momma tells her. "Your Baba knew a man who sewed gold coins into the lining of his coat. Another rolled himself up into a carpet to escape."

Grace notices Momma is holding the lunch box the same way she holds Maman Bozorg's wedding tea glass, like she's afraid it might break.



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"Did you have to run away?" Grace asks.

Momma looks sad, remembering. "Not at first. When I was your age, I went to school with my friends, practiced my piano, stuck pink rose petals to my fingernails as nail polish because mother said I was too young for the real thing."

"Can I do that, too? Grace asks.

"We'll get some roses from the flower shop tomorrow," says Momma.

Great-great grandmother Manya's second dress is more ordinary, with deep pockets and dandelions.

"For every day, Nana says. "She wore a white apron over it."

"Baking honey cake?" Sarah asks, hoping they can make some.

Nana laughs. "Could be," she says. "It feels like a honey cake day."





Raquel remembers: That first time, Papa was found by the police. He arrived back six months later, a changed man. During the time he had been gone, the family knew nothing of what was happening.

He came home skinnier and with a beard. Only Mama recognized him. He seemed no more than a beloved stranger.

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