

Aluminum Bridge

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Setting: Small town in South Texas, along the border. 2008. Also, temporarily, present day.

Characters:

MAMI - A mother. Immigrant. Joyful. Exhausted. Late 30s.

MIJA - A daughter. American. Curious. Lonely. 8.

*“Mamá abráceme
con todo su cariño,
yo no debí crecer,
debí ser siempre un niño.”*

- Madre Solo Hay Uña ; Juan Gabriel

There is a child laying on a couch in the middle of the stage. There is a spot on her illuminating the area around her. Her costuming is strange, like she couldn't decide on the weather, with slightly ill fitting clothes. Not exaggerated, just outworn. She has a remote in her hand, idly fiddling with it, listening intently. You hear the sounds of Mexican television commercials, funny and loud and she giggles. MAMI walks into the room and shakes MIJA lightly, so that she faces away from the television.

MAMI:

Ven. We go for a walk.

MIJA:

Okay. Bags?

MAMI:

Yes. Make sure they are empty, bring enough.

MIJA:

How much is enough?

MAMI:

We have been doing this for a long time. You should know what enough is.

MIJA:

How will I know what is enough if you never point it out to me and say "See here, these bags are enough" ?

MAMI:

Just bring them all.

MIJA:

All? Okay.

MIJA exits the stage quickly and MAMI waits for her, turning off the television while she is gone. MIJA comes back with six plastic reusable bags, all from different stores and with different wear on them. When she returns the lights expand to reveal sidewalk paths going all over the stage and cans all over the floor. They are of varying brands, sizes, etc but they are all real cans. Some are beer cans. MAMI and MIJA begin their walk.

MAMI:

What did you do in school this week?

MIJA:

Boring stuff. A girl in my class brought an Avon book to look at.

MAMI:

Why did she have an Avon book?

MIJA:

Her Mami sells Avon, I think. Lipsticks and perfumes. I saw a pretty hair clip I would like to get you if I had a job.

MAMI:

Estas muy chiquita. You go to school and you worry about that.

MIJA:

Okay.

They see cans on the ground, uncrushed. MAMI grabs the cans one by one and pours them out to make sure the liquid is gone. She sets each one on the ground separated from each other.

MAMI:

Andale, ya. Crush them.

MIJA steps on each can, rough and hard, like she is jumping in puddles. They become flat. MAMI smoothes out the cans softly with her foot, and they pick them up together and put them in a bag. They continue their walk.

MIJA:

When's my Tia coming to visit?

MAMI:

I don't know. You know how it is with the *puentes*. Why?

MIJA:

I want her to bring me an *elote*. I miss the taste.

MAMI:

Mmm, me too. With the *chile* and everything.

MIJA:

No I don't want the spicy, just the mayo and cheese.

MAMI:

You say that now, soon you'll want it.

MIJA:

No never ever ever. I hate spicy.

MAMI laughs and then stops them. There are more cans. They do the same ritual as before.

MIJA:

How many cans did we do last time?

MAMI:

Last weekend I took six bags to the plant. I don't know how many cans are in each bag.

MIJA:

Did you get lots of money?

MAMI:

I got what it was worth.

MIJA:

Did the recycling men at the plant say thank you?

MAMI (*smiling*):

Yes they did.

MIJA:

Good. We are saving the planet. Because littering is bad. That's what they said at school, my teachers.

MAMI:

And they are right.

MIJA:

We are doing a *bailable* for Christmas soon.

MAMI:

Ah si? Are you trying out?

MIJA:

No se, I wanted to ask you first. We have to wear a skirt and black boots, the skirt has to be like this red that is dark. I don't remember the color. It's on a piece of paper in my backpack at home.

MAMI:

If you want to do it we can, I will find the skirt and boots.

MIJA:

Okay! Thank you Mami. You will come see it right?

MAMI:

Claro, mamita.

MAMI turns to the audience. The lights shift, like she is in confessional, with patterns of color from a glass window in a church. The rest of the world is frozen in place. She speaks.

MAMI:

I grew up in Mexico. My daughter is only a year younger than my time here. I love english. The language, it is very hard but very fun. Like a puzzle. The sentences have a funny shape. Mija, she was born here. American father, Latino but from here. She doesn't know the concept of being an immigrant yet. Everyone in our town, they all came from not here, or their families did, in such a close time that they don't have to go to Nueva York and see a signature in a book. They just pick up the phone and call whoever took the leap and got here first.

My child is in elementary school, which we call *Primaria*. Primary school. I find it astonishing how bright her mind is. My parents didn't get that far.

I wanted to do *bailable's* in primary. Never had the shoes I needed. But I had the steps.

The moment ends.

MIJA:

Mami?

MAMI:

Yes?

MIJA:

Why are we collecting these cans?

MAMI:

They are building a bridge.

MIJA:

Who is?

MAMI:

The city officials. They want to make it out of recycled cans, for the planet.

MIJA:

Is it a bridge to my Tia's? Like the other ones?

MAMI laughs, genuinely surprised at the thought.

MAMI:

No no, it is because of the train. It blocks traffic, so they are building a bridge for the cars to go over the train.

MIJA:

That's so cool! They are making it out of cans?

MAMI:

That's what they say.

MIJA turns to the audience. A moment all her own, with telenovela projections and bright hopeful lighting. The world is frozen, with MAMI bending down to pick up a beer can.

MIJA:

Mami doesn't let me touch the beer cans. I don't know why that is. I touch the soda cans, even though I'm not really allowed to drink that either. She always does the pouring and squishing of the beer cans herself. I wonder if she thinks I'll fall in love with it, the way Papi did, the way men do in telenovelas where they clutch it harder than they hold their lover's hand. We don't talk about the secret beers from when we lived with Papi. But I remember them, and all their hiding spots. I don't know if Mami was good with their game of hide and seek. I've never asked.

I don't care about it. I crush all the soda cans, and cans I can't don't recognize. Plus, I get to walk with Mami and I like walking with her. It feels special.

We walk around this neighborhood every weekend in the morning and look for cans. Then on Monday when I go to school, Mami takes all the cans to the recycling people, and then our fridge is restocked and the shampoo replaced and then we start over again. Always the same. Except when we go to Mexico to see my Tia's. Then the weekends are full of corn on a cob and the park Mami played in when she was little like me. So Mami does lonely walks without me while I'm at school. I wonder if she misses me when I'm there. I wonder if she wishes I was there to hold her hand or crush the cans.

The moment ends. MAMI unfreezes, does the ritual with the beer can away from MIJA's line of sight. They continue their walk.

It is silent for a while. Not unpleasant, not uncomfortable, but nothing else either. It is simply silence.

MIJA:

Why can't Tia come right now?

MAMI:

It is complicated. Lots of rules.

MIJA:

OK, so can we go there? We haven't gone in a long time, too many weekends of picking up cans instead of *nieve* and *elotes*.

MAMI:

We can't.

MIJA is confused and MAMI is getting more frustrated. Bends down to grab many cans, pour them out, and stomps them before MIJA can squish them.

MIJA:

That's my job.

MAMI ignores her. MIJA is now angry.

MIJA:

Mami. Mami I'm supposed to do that.

MAMI continues.

MIJA:

Mami!

MIJA tries to push MAMI off a can she is crushing. MAMI turns to look at her, face red with anger but also brimming with tears.

MAMI:

It is so complicated for you to understand. It is far too complicated for even me to understand, much less be able to explain it to you. There are governments in place that make big rules, about who can go across and when and with what special papers-

MIJA:

Like my passport?

MAMI:

Yes. Like your passport. Tia has a visitor passport, but your primo, he lives here because he is like you, American born. He is trying to bring her over, but they told her she cannot cross until it's approved, which could take weeks to months.

MIJA:

What does "bring her over" mean?

MAMI:

It is making her a resident, so she is still *de alla*, but has a special paper saying she lives in the U.S. and can be here as long as she is good.

MIJA:

My Tia is very good. Why does it take so long if she is good?

MAMI:

That's just the way the government is, *mi niña*.

There is a pause, like MIJA is absorbing all that was told to her. MAMI lays out some cans and gestures for MIJA to crush them. A peace offering. A silent sorry. MIJA crushes them very slowly, while she thinks.

MIJA:

What about you?

MAMI sighs, a long tired sigh, not tired with her daughter, but just with life. She is a very tired woman.

MAMI:

The special residency card expires every once in a while, like how your passport does. It doesn't mean you are no longer a citizen when your passport expires, it just means you need a new one because time has passed. My special residency card expired. But *no tengo el dinero*, it is very expensive to renew, and everytime we cross they ask about it and make it a whole ordeal, so *mejor no*. I don't want to put you through that.

MIJA:

Who brought you over? My primo?

MAMI:

No. Your papi. He is American, and when you are married it is easier than a child to their mother.

MIJA:

That's silly.

MAMI laughs, and it is truly a peace offering this time.

MAMI:

It really is.

MIJA:

When I have a job, I will pay lots of money to make your paper never expire ever.

MAMI:

Shh, stop talking about jobs. Too little. *La escuela*, that's what matters right now.

MIJA:

I hate school, it goes too slow and I can't see the board half the time anyways.

MAMI:

Huh? What? *No ves?*

MIJA:

No, I sit in the back because my letter in my last name is T and we are in alphabet order.

MAMI:

Lentes. You need glasses. We will go tomorrow.

MIJA:

But tomorrow's Sunday. *Las latas*.

MAMI:

We will collect what we see on the way there, don't worry. Anyways we have many right now. Let's go home, we can eat lunch.

MIJA:

Okay mami. I am sorry I pushed you.

MAMI:

I forgive you.

Pause.

MAMI:

Don't do it again.

They walk back the way they came, time passing before them. Right before the end of the walk, time freezes again and both characters speak to the audience. MIJA is still her child self but has the mind of her older self.

MIJA:

My mami is still not a citizen. It took ten years for her to collect the money to renew her residency card, and mostly did the process out of fear of being deported somehow when *he* took office. She has not stayed in the U.S long enough to begin the citizenship process. She has not been to Mexico in over 15 years.

MAMI:

My sister did get her residency. She comes over every other weekend to my apartment, and we drink coffee and eat elotes we buy and make ourselves. It does not taste the same.

MIJA:

I did the bailable. I had the skirt and boots. My mami did come.

There is a lighting shift, towards the back of the stage and you see a shadow of a bridge stretching behind them.

MIJA:

The bridge did get built. When I got my first car, I drove Mami over it so she could see what we helped build. You can't even tell it's made from cans.

Blackout.