

Strange

By Gisela Sequeira Lemus

Strange weather creeps in on the 15th night of August in Baker County, Florida. No weather channel reports of its arrival — so much for our plans. It doesn't matter how much we anticipate the day and what will be of it. Sometimes, quite simply, things change beyond our wishes.

Before the storm clouds begin to sweep the sky, the geese escape the shores and head for high ground while armies of frogs that sense heavy precipitation, below their croaks of grave mood in volumes never-before heard. Then, the sheep huddle together leaving not a gap between their warm bodies. And as for us girls, my older sister and I take to the mango tree for a final harvest before the storm has its chance to shake off their branches, what we most love: our fruit snacks.

Before taking off, Father reminds us, "get back before the shower". (His belief was that getting wet in the rain could bring illness. And what's more, we were sickly children). Jessi and I hurried down the woody path to the pond; a dark and peaceful location surrounded in shady trees. One special tree though, full of the fruit we'd come after, stood the tallest and it leaned over the water. As soon as we got to our destination, Jessi gave me her endearing smile and a shoulder shrug signaling at her knee. She needed not to even say "do I need to say anything at all?". I would be the one to climb the old wood stock — Jessi had a bad leg.

As I ascended into the branches of the tree's canopy, I started to pull mangos at once. I could feel the wind pick-up which meant I needed to hurry. The geese could be heard making their getaway across the sky above us now. I gathered the ripest mangos into the wide mouth of the satchel that hung across my chest and rested on my lap. I secured my legs around the tree and stretched my

body to reach the sweetest looking mangos at the top, to my liking.

Jessi had been awfully quiet. I hadn't noticed it until I had my satchel filled to the brim: Not a word from her since I had gotten up there. I leaned over to my left looking past the branch that I sat upon, to look at Jessi. She was standing there, at the foot of the tree, motionless.

"The bag is full — and heavy. Hurry up and help me get it down." I shouted.

Jessi's hands were to her side. I could see only the top of her head. The wind pulled at the strands of her hair, violently. I could tell that she was looking out intensely at something or someone, but we were all alone — no one there to be seen. A drop of water hit my wrist.

Then, a feeling came over my body when Jessi eerily turned her head stiffly and slowly to me with a look that I'd never seen before. Her eyes were empty and strange. Why did I feel like she was a stranger? Her deep, piercing pupils were two-times wider, yet emotionless. Did she not recognize me?

My stomach sank when Jessi, with her incapable leg, began to scale the tree, but...not like a person would. She gripped at the sides of the smooth bark, overly pronouncing every motion of her arms and legs as if she'd never had limbs before. As if she were nothing but a strung puppet, empty inside, wanting to be human. Knowing not how to blink, not taking her sight of my person.

Whatever was approaching me was not my sister. I froze. I couldn't say a thing. It had her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her teeth; but I could not call it Jessi — this was not Jessi. I scooted backwards on the branch, to the very edge of its extremity. She was nearly upon me: so close to me I could begin to feel the sway of our branch weighed by her heavy breath. Her black pupils floated in the vast white of her eyes. Her black hair framed her face with darkness.

"Stop! Stop!" I yelled hoping my sister would return to her eyes.

Then a mango fell to the ground from the tree, and I, inspired, grabbed a mango from my bag to throw at her face. This solid mass hit upon her hard enough to slap her head back. But when she regained her focus onto me, she made a hideous, open-mouth smile that didn't reach her eyes. Every wrinkle was evoked around the corners of her mouth, yet the top half of her face had not shifted.

Then, the wood snapped between us. I plunged into the pond. Panic set into me as I thrashed my arms and legs in every direction. The heavy satchel sank me deeper, then deeper into the darkness of the water. I reached for the surface, but the darkness swept my sight.

I came to, in the muddied dirt. The first thing I saw was its eyes — what *used* to be my sister's eyes— above me. And a soulless expression wanting to be that of concern — something between a sad face and a grin — replaced my sister's adoring smile. I crawled backwards to get away. Then I felt the mango tree hit my back.

“It's me: Jessi”, it said. And the sky began to pour.