

Ito Romo

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Baby Money

Many, many years ago, when I was just thirteen years old, I saw the two-headed baby floating in its jar of formaldehyde at the carnival by the river, on the American side. I threw up. Right there and then, in the middle of the tent, in front of all my friends, as we listened to the man with the microphone barking the baby's sad story in his eerie voice. My friends all thought that I threw up because we had just been on the Tilt-A-Whirl.

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The water crawled over the banks of the Rio Grande into her home so suddenly that she had to hoist her two small children onto her shoulders and wade out of the rising water to higher ground. The children clapped and cheered for the tumultuous, growing river, the rain hitting their faces and soaking their old, torn T-shirts and shorts.

The river was once again at their feet. Tears streamed from her eyes. Anger and jealousy raced through her veins like the waters of the river itself. Bending down, she

filled her cupped hand with river water and raised it to her forehead in the sign of the cross, letting some flow down onto her lips.

She asked the river to be kind to their home. She grabbed the children by the hand, and they began their way to her sister's cardboard house across town in the outskirts of Nuevo Laredo, right past the dreaded La Loma jail. She knew they could wait out the storm safely there.

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I didn't eat well for days, and somehow I knew that I would have that same feeling in the pit of my stomach for the rest of my life--a fear so intense it made me throw up.

The flood was the well-deserved wrath of God, I thought. The tail-end of a tropical storm had swept through from the Gulf across the Rio Grande Valley, and it settled right above the sister cities, dumping fourteen inches of rain in less than six hours. The river swelled, and within minutes of the first heavy downpour, the river had over-run its banks, leaving the carnival in two or three feet of water--ponies, cotton candy, and all. The carnaleros hadn't even had time to save the giant stuffed animals. Bottom-heavy with water, their bright colors ran into each other where they touched. And in the midst of the deluge, the two-headed baby, which had been sitting in a jar of formaldehyde on a wobbly wooden table, floated away, out of the tent, into the Rio Grande.

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After the flood waters had receded, after the carnival people had had a chance to replace the carousel's twinkling light bulbs that had short-circuited and popped, after the giant, surrealistic portrait of the two-headed baby had been taken down, she walked back into her cardboard shanty-town house by the river to dredge the mud out of her two small rooms and see what was left.

She screamed.

The two-headed baby, still in its giant mayonnaise jar, was half buried in the muddy floor. A sadness, dark, heavy, and wet, made her heart feel like the mud under her feet. She stared for a long time at the glass jar, tilted on its side in the mud, a ray of sunlight reflecting off the rounded top.

"Those barbarian Gringos," she said softly in Spanish, knowing about the reward in the Mexican newspaper. She wiped the mud from the heavy glass jar with the hem of her old, black skirt, and cradled the jar awkwardly in her arms.

She placed the baby on the rusty folding bed she and her children shared with her husband, a drunk who worked in the oil fields of Veracruz, and only came home once a year at Christmas. She was up to her ankles in mud--a big, bamboo tree trunk had gotten jammed in her door, a bright pink plastic grocery bag caught on one end.

She rolled up her sleeves, pulled up her skirt, and tucked it in at the waist, and began clearing the mud off the square of house bricks that formed their hearth so she could light a fire to dry the place out. As she scraped the last bits of mud from the top of the bricks with a piece of river stick, she thought about what she could get for her children with the five hundred American dollar reward--a clean, safe apartment, small,

but clean and safe--the medicines for the little one's asthma--the shoes they so badly needed--a nice meal of cabrito and frijoles borachos for everyone at *La Principal*. In a rage, she got up and ran to the edge of the river, yelling across to the other side, "I don't give a damn about my bay-bee mon-ee," over and over again, until she stood there in a daze, hyperventilating in the hot sun and the humidity.

She walked back into the house, staring at the wet ground below her, mesmerized by little shiny things that caught the sun's bright light. She knelt again in front of the hearth and began removing the bricks, one by one, stacking them to the side. She was covered in sweat. The sun, shining brightly again outside, hit the tin roof and turned the hut into a steamy oven. She looked around the room for something to dig with. She found nothing, so she opened her tiny cupboard and grabbed a tin plate to use as a shovel. Back at the hearth, she started digging like a mad woman. She dug deep. In fact, she dug so deep that she had to lie flat on the mud, the hole in front of her, her arms barely able to reach the bottom to scrape out still more dirt. She got up and looked around for the plastic flowers she had found in a broken vase in the dumpster by the bridge a long time ago. She knew they were around somewhere. Unless, of course, the river had washed them away when it had turned over the little wooden table the broken vase and flowers had been sitting on. She finally spotted them under the cupboard. She reached for them and sat down cross-legged on the mud and wove the plastic flowers into a crown.

She got up and balanced the heavy jar, holding the baby upright on the wet bed, then reached down to the floor for the flower crown. She placed it around the lid of the jar and fastened it by tightening the wire. She stared at the baby for a while, then she took the jar gently, set it down into the hole where she laid the baby in the jar on its back.

Then she walked out to the river's edge with a cup in her hand, filled it with water, and walked back into the house, a dark, heavy river-bed rock in her other hand. Placing the cup of water by the hole, she lay down on the muddy floor again. She struck the jar once, and it broke exactly in half--the shock of formaldehyde struck her face.

She fainted.

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A photo of the baby in the glass jar appeared in the newspaper a day later, in the back pages, next to Hints from Heloise and Your Daily Horoscopes. Underneath the picture, it read, "\$500.00 REWARD FOR THE RETURN OF THE TWO-HEADED BABY." When I saw it, I ran to the bathroom and threw up.

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When she woke up, weak, pensive, she stared at the child in the broken jar for a long time. Finally, she reached down into the hole again and pulled the bottom half of the jar from under the baby's feet and slipped the top half off over the baby's heads. She placed the jar next to the baby, sharp edges pushed into the soft ground so as not to hurt it and placed the plastic flowers over the baby's heads like a crown. She sprinkled river water from the cup into the grave "en el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo." Still in a waking-state, she filled the grave with damp dirt, laid the bricks back in place and covered them up with mud.

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On the next day, so many years ago, my Tia Lila and I were on our way across the bridge to buy coffee at the market, whole bean caracolio from Veracruz. She couldn't get it on the American side, and she loved it. Or at least that was our excuse to be able to stand on the bridge while the water flowed under us just a couple of feet away from the rails. The kids selling newspapers, ragged, dry mud caking their shoes, wailed out the news of the reward for the two-headed baby. One of them stuck a copy of the paper in my face. There he was again, in living-color, on the front page. I grabbed on to the bridge's rail, stood at the very tip of my toes, and locked my chin on the railing, my head over the side. I threw up again into the waters of the Rio Grande.