

Remedies

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A dermatologist with a can of liquid nitrogen can remove a wart in four to five seconds. I can remove one, overnight, with a clove of garlic and a Band-Aid. Your fingers will smell for days, but the wart will never come back. You won't have to bite or scratch at it until blood rushes over the spongy lining anymore. You can hold hands with whomever you want and not feel ashamed or embarrassed. My great-grandmother taught me how to do this. She taught me all the things she learned from her grandmother on their *pueblo* in Northern New Mexico when she was a little girl. If you have a stomachache, drink peppermint tea, with honey, at the hottest temperature possible without scalding your tongue. If you have a headache, put slices of potato at your temples and let them draw out the pain.

As long as I can remember, it seemed like anything that could go wrong with the body, Great-Grandma knew how to fix, or at least ease away until forgotten.

The first time I got lice, I was eleven years old. Ma tried to wash them out of my hair with mayonnaise. She heard about this trick from another receptionist at the dentist office. Ma came home with a big jar of Kraft, the good stuff. She held my head over the kitchen sink, took a serving spoon, and plopped a hunk of mayo across my scalp. With a Marlboro Light bumping up and down on her lip, she swirled the mess into my long brown hair until my entire head was sappy and warm. As she puffed smoke in and out of her lipstick mouth, I could see the missing tooth on her right side, the spot she always hid from everyone, including me. After she finished, she tied a plastic bag over my hair, tying it at the middle of my neck with a rubber band from the newspaper.

"Here, let it sit for fifteen minutes," she said.

She dashed her cigarette out on a saucer and began to part her own black hair. Watching from the kitchen table, I saw her lean over a teal Cover Girl compact on the countertop. She ran her red nails down each

white-scalp part in her hair. That scalp seemed whiter than anything on Ma's entire body; the whites around the brown circles of her eyes didn't compare. Her eyes went up and down and back again for what seemed like two seconds but could have been two hours. Snapping the compact shut, she glanced toward me.

"All right, all right. Put your head over here by the sink."

She ran the water over the back of my neck. Hot, too hot. Her large breasts bumped into my back.

"Ma, why can't we just ask Great-Grandma about lice?" I whined, fighting back nausea from the egg smell of my own head. Water began to rush down the front of my Tweety Bird T-shirt.

"Look at me." She turned my face toward hers, the water filling my eyes and nose, choking me.

"You can never tell your great-grandma you have lice. Understand me?"

I tried to ask her why, but she shoved my head back under the water and kept kneading my hair with her strong hands—the way Great-Grandma kneaded *masa* on Christmas Eve. Face down in the sink, I could see the ends of my long hair hitting the chrome in front of me. Even though water rushed my eyes from the sides of my face, blurring my vision, I swore I could see white lice eggs standing out against my brown hair, as the ends swirled into the black pit of the drain. When Ma had finished getting every last drop of mayo out, she wrapped my hair in a towel and handed the jar to me. She lowered her own head over the sink.

I always knew that our lice came from Harrison, my half brother. The first time Ma and I picked him up from his mom's apartment on Grant Street in downtown Denver, it was snowing. The big clump snow. The worse-than-rainstorms snow. We huddled at the front entrance, beneath the red-tarp awning in our scarves and secondhand Sorels. I searched the grey streets with my eyes. Large pine trees lined up in rows, and wrinkled pieces of trash lay strewn in the gutter, visible even under the white blanket of snow. This neighborhood, it wasn't far from Great-Grandma's, but it could have been a different state for all I knew. Ma pushed 13B on the intercom and a harsh voice answered, "Who is it?"

"It's Millie. Let us up."

As we waited, Ma reminded me about my manners.

“Now, this is your brother. I know you haven’t met him, I know we never see Daddy anymore, and I know this must be weird, but he’s your blood too. It’s important to know your blood.”

Before I could respond to anything she had said, a long buzz vibrated the brass speaker box and Ma swung hard on the lobby door handle. Inside, dark oak handrails had been scratched to a light brown and the apartment doors had crooked black numbers hanging across them, and a strong smell of garlic or mashed potatoes or something else entirely seeping out from underneath. We walked up a flight of creaking stairs until we reached the end of the hallway. When we got to 13B, Ma raised her hand in a fist, held it mid-air, and knocked twice, hard.

A woman, who I assumed was Harrison’s mom, answered the door. Her face was puffy in all the wrong places—under her blue eyes, along her yellowing cheeks, beneath her chin—and the rest of it seemed deflated. Looking down from her face, I noticed her breasts flopped inside her see-through nightgown and a triangle of black pubic hair was visible beneath the peach satin. She smelled of drugstore perfume and something overly sweet to the point of being rotten. Maybe fruit left out too long in the afternoon sun.

“Harrison, get your ass over here,” she hacked out.

He appeared, hunched over and skinny as hell, looking down at the filthy floorboards beneath her.

“Have a nice time with your sister,” she said, raising her head toward the ceiling.

Ma looked her up and down with elevator eyes until she finally grabbed Harrison by the bony wrist.

“Hi, Harrison. Do you remember me? I met you once when I came over to talk to your mom,” she said, while smoothing his hair down. A wide smile she never used on me came across her face.

“Um, kind of.”

“Well, good. You’re going to stay at our house for a few days. Did you bring your toothbrush?”

I let out a laugh, a short popping sound, a single pink mitten held to my mouth. Ma pinched the back of my neck with her long nails, stopping any rude comments before they got further up my throat.

“This is Clarisa. She’s your half sister. You guys are almost the same age.”

Ma turned to look at me. “Say hi to your brother.”

“Hello, Harrison. I have been *dying* to meet you.”

He scratched his head a bit, with confusion or lice, maybe both, and said *hi* right back.

As we turned to leave, his mom slammed the door. No goodbye or hug or anything. Going down the stairs to leave their building, we passed an old porcelain bathtub with claws at the bottom. Great-Grandma had one just like it in her upstairs bathroom. This one, it wasn’t in a bathroom though. It was just sitting there in the hallway, rusted, unused. Ma said that in the old days people shared bathtubs like that. They shared everything. They had a lot less than we do today. But I asked Great-Grandma about it later and she said those hallway bathtubs were only in buildings where dirty people lived, people who did awful things for a living, people she prayed for each night before she rubbed her cold cream on her face in slow upward strokes, because downward caused wrinkles.

When Harrison came over, we never went to Great-Grandma’s. Ma said it was because we were too busy and had errands to run. I knew the truth. While Great-Grandma hated all of Harrison, she only felt that way about half of me, my father’s half, the white half.

Great-Grandma lived in a red-brick Victorian house on the edge of some park named after one of the saints—which one, I can’t remember. One weekend, while I was staying over, Jerry Springer came on TV as we baked apples pies.

“Ah, *mija*, I hate these hillbilly white people,” she said, rolling the crust with her knotted fingers. “They are given every chance to make it in this world and what do they do? They throw it all away on trailer parks and drugs and can’t even take care of their families. Just like your father.”

“Yeah, I guess, Great-Grandma,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Him leaving your life was the best thing that ever happened to you and your mother. If he wouldn’t have left you on his own, I would have made sure he did by myself. Now, my baby, switch the station. I want to watch my stories.”

I wiped my flour-covered hands on the white-lace apron she had made especially for me, and clicked the dial to channel seven. The picture was fuzzy on purpose, part of the show. White people with pearls and pretty eyelashes kissed or lied and cheated on each other. That’s how she liked her people on TV—blond and scandalous.

“See, my baby, doesn’t Tiffany look gorgeous this week? You should grow your hair out like that. I know some herbs you can make into a tea, but you must be careful.”

I began to wipe down her countertops with a yellow and green sponge. Great-Grandma’s eyes clouded over—they always did when she told me of a remedy—and she looked back from the TV set, about to give the recipe for healthy hair. “Listen, my baby, you must be cautious with this tea.”

That’s when she stuck her hands as thin as tissue paper out to mine. She felt cold, empty of blood. Her wedding band dangled below the bulge in her finger. She had a story to tell. It was always this way when there was a story. As she opened her mouth, I watched the ridges in her face spread wide and smooth over, making her appear young again, if only for a second. Then the words came.

“*Mija*, you had a great-great-aunt, Milagros, the same Milagros your mother is named after, and let me tell you how she ruined her life, how she used the herbs too often, how her black hair grew so long and so beautiful that all the men in our pueblo and even from far away wanted to marry her, how she would not choose one because she believed the longer and more beautiful her hair grew, the better her choices of husbands would be, how one night, when the rest of the children were sleeping soundly in the same bedroom, her black hair coiled around her neck like a dark snake, squeezing all the life from her throat.”

The story was over as quickly as it came, like a sneeze. I pushed the dough scraps into the wastebasket and looked down at the ends of my hair. I wondered what they were capable of.

Most of the time, I ignored Harrison or picked on him. A true big sister, even if we never talked about that. We had no need. Ma was always there reminding us every five seconds.

“Be nice to each other,” she would say as we sat silent, watching TV in the den. “Neither of you have anyone else. Just each other. Your only connection.”

For some reason, I didn’t buy this, and I don’t think Harrison did either. Back then, I didn’t think he felt connected to anything other than the lice devouring our heads. I had Ma and Great-Grandma. They seemed enough for me. I didn’t need a brother or even a father anymore.

I remember that first weekend he stayed over. As soon as we got home, Ma pulled out the extra comforter, the one with holes in it and all the cotton bunched together in the corners. She spread it across the couch in the den and made a little bedroom up for him. For the first few hours, Ma just sat in there with him and asked him questions about our dad. Harrison usually said, *I dunno*, but Ma kept at it.

“Does he ever send you presents for your birthday?”

“One time he did. A Hot Wheels set.”

“Oh, wow,” Ma said, stroking the back of his neck. “That must have been exciting.”

“Yeah, it was really fun, but it broke right away.”

“You know, Harrison,” she added with that same warm smile I saw when we first picked him up, “you look so much like your Daddy. It’s like you’re him but as a little boy.”

I, on the other hand, tried avoiding him as much as possible. Each time I walked into his space from my bedroom, I looked at his slumped over body and felt something like hot, blacktop tar in my guts. With him in our den, our living room smelled as bad as his apartment complex. He had these dark bags under his eyes all the time. They looked like someone hit him real hard and never let him heal. His T-shirts had holes in the sleeves and his jeans were worn thin, covered in a fine layer of dirt at the butt and knees. The worst part, he smelled like pee. That’s mostly what someone would notice about this kid.

“Hey, Harrison, why don’t you use that bathtub in the hallway at your crappy apartment?”

“No one uses that, Clarisa. It’s busted and old.”

“Well, you probably should. You smell like a litter box.”

He never said anything mean back or stuck his fist out to punch me like my little cousins did when I yelled at them, and he didn’t tell Ma on me either. Instead he just acted crazy. In the middle of the afternoon, he would open my dresser drawers, stick his face against my T-shirts and jeans, turn our microwave off and on, and ask annoying questions in that strange, shaky voice.

“Do you get recess even when it snows real bad?”

“No, we have an inside day.”

“How about your teacher—is she nice? What color is her hair?”

“For your information, my teacher is a guy.”

“A guy, really?”

“Leave me alone. Don’t you go to school, too?”

“What about our dad? Why doesn’t he want to see any of us?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t want lice.”

He may have been just a year younger than I was, but even then I could tell we were worlds apart. What I hated most about Harrison—besides that each time he came over, the lice came back, biting at my scalp until I scratched it red—was that he looked like my dad. Even as a little boy, he looked like Daddy.

I can’t remember what Christmas it was. I must have been younger than nine. Daddy stopped seeing me for good after that age. Me and Ma didn’t have our own townhouse back then. We still stayed with Great-Grandma because no one else wanted us. Every now and then we would visit Daddy for a couple days. We were over there for Christmas or maybe it was some days later. Sometimes on Christmas Eve he stayed out too late and couldn’t be up for Christmas morning. But this day he was up, whatever day it was—no black bags under his eyes or sour breath reeking of beer and cigarettes. He was wide awake, smiling at Ma, kissing me on the forehead. It was rare, but when he was there for me, it was everything I could ask for—just the three of us together, loving each other like those families in Great-Grandma’s stories. Even though those pretty families fought every now and then, they always came back together, no matter what.

Ma cooked all day in his one-bedroom apartment—ham, cranberry sauce, green bean casserole, cornbread. No tamales like at Great-Grandma’s though. He never liked that. The heat caused all the windows to blur with fog. Only in the areas where the snow melted off the roof in zigzagging streams were there visible paths in the steam. We were all together, just the three of us, sitting at his fold-out card table in the corner of the living room. Daddy started the prayer and I looked over at the creases around his dark eyes, wondering if I would get those someday. I loved being near him when I could—loved it when he cupped his hand on the back of my neck and I could feel all the calluses coarse against my skin. He smelled of work, of cars, and that special orange soap he used to wash away grease. Everything about that Christmas was perfect, even if it really wasn’t Christmas. A day I’ll never forget.

“Millie, I think we forgot the butter. Can you grab it?”

Ma looked over at me and asked if I would be nice enough to get Daddy some butter. I hopped out of my chair and headed for the tiny kitchen. Opening the fridge, I swooped down and grabbed the butter from the door. Walking past the garbage on my way back into the living room, I noticed a Christmas card shoved beneath Ma’s dinner mess of empty green bean cans and cracked egg shells. I don’t know why I did it, but I stuck my hand inside the trash, pulling out the mushy card. Inside it, there were pictures of a little boy I had never seen—a little boy with dark eyes and light brown hair swinging a baseball bat. I stared into his face.

“Clarisa, did you find it?” Ma yelled from the table.

“Hold on!”

I shoved the Christmas card as far as I could back into garbage. I put the butter on the table and told my parents that I would be right back—that I needed to wash my hands before dinner.

In Social Studies, I scratched and scratched until a louse slid down the back of my neck and onto Destiny Sanchez’s desk. She screamed so loud that the principal heard it from his office, or that’s what the other kids claimed. It was the fourth time in a year that I had gotten lice from Harrison. I was sent home from school, indefinitely, until the issue was resolved. ‘Expelled due to health hazards’ is what the official pink slip read. A few days later, Harrison, like most weekends that year, was visiting. Ma seemed more upset than usual about the lice, but she didn’t show it in any obvious way. She just tried the mayonnaise, then olive oil, then rubbing alcohol, then over the counter shampoos. By the time she had finished, our townhouse smelled something like pasta salad mixed with wet paint. It seemed like I would never go back to school.

It was a Saturday morning when Ma drove us to some hair salon in the part of town by Daddy’s work. We drove for a long time on the highway. All the buildings went from beige cement to glass boxes with a bluish hue. The mountains got closer and closer in the distance until we were almost in them. After Ma exited the highway, I saw a street sign and knew exactly where we were. I knew because Daddy worked in a car shop on that street with the same name as Harrison. I always remembered in case someday I needed to go there, like if Ma didn’t come home one night and Great-Grandma wasn’t answering her phone. I could ride my bike to his shop if I needed to. I never did, though. I never needed him.

The salon was pink and white with mirrors in every direction. The ladies working there all had names like Janelle, Danica, and Stacy. Their hair was a cloud of yellow with streaks of brown and red. There were magazines stacked across a glass coffee table in the waiting area and a large water cooler bubbling in the corner. Soft music came out of the ceiling. I began to flip through a glossy magazine, showing Ma hairstyles I thought she would like.

“Oh, and look at this one. I like her bangs,” I said, folding the page over for Ma to see.

“Yeah, that is nice, baby. You guys are also getting haircuts.”

“Here?”

“Yup, but I already told the lady what to do. Don’t need to worry about picking anything new out.”

Usually Ma would take me to the Cost Cutters down the road from our house. It was five bucks for a kids’ cut and I always got the same thing—long, no bangs—but last time, we were refused service. No one gave a reason why, but we all knew. Ma tried to cut my hair by herself that day. I ended up looking terrible, like we were poor or something. I couldn’t believe this place was her second choice and it bothered me that she was willing to spend any money on Harrison, never mind the price of an expensive haircut.

When one of the Stacys, Danicas, or Janelles called me up, I jumped up out of my seat and walked over to her maroon spinning chair. She smelled of green apple perfume and peppermint gum. There were specks of golden glitter across her eyelids and her teeth were the whitest and biggest I had ever seen. As she spun me around in the adjustable chair, her freckled chest was directly in front of my face. I kept looking at all her jewelry—her silver bracelets, diamond heart necklaces, gold hoop earrings. Everything about her seemed pretty and soft. Everything about her seemed like those white ladies on Great-Grandma’s stories. No wonder I wasn’t paying attention to her scissors as she trimmed up my hair and brushed the strays from my shoulders. And it was no wonder as she swiveled me around to face my reflection that I burst out crying.

Blunt, short, just above my ears. My features were soft and low compared to the jagged brown strands of my new hair. Tears rolled over my cheeks in slow motion. Looking to my left, I saw Ma had gotten the spunky version of my haircut. To the right, I saw Harrison completely bald, his brown hair in curls across the black-and-white checkered floor.

We looked like prisoners. With all the mirrors beaming our faces back to me, I couldn’t believe I was stupid enough to keep my eyes on the hairstylist instead of my own head, but I wanted to look at her, I wanted to see that type of woman in person. She kept asking me what was wrong, but no words would come from my mouth. Then she looked worried, like Ma was going to ask for a refund or something, like we couldn’t pay. A look I had seen a thousand times. I think we both were relieved when Ma handed the receptionist a check. On the way out, one of the women tried to sell her an anti-dandruff shampoo on top of the haircuts. Ma just shook her head, her short hair stationary against her scalp.

“You know, the kids both have it pretty bad. This would get rid of it for sure,” the stylist insisted.

Then it all made sense. We had to go to this place. Somewhere cheaper would have recognized us from a mile away.

Ma was crying. Harrison and I heard her when we were fighting over whose turn it was for the only working Nintendo controller. At first it sounded like the neighbor’s dog yipping, but it got louder and steadier. I threw down the controller and Harrison followed behind me. Sitting on the toilet with the lid closed, her head in her hands, she was itching, pulling at the short black strands. Red bumps were visible across her scalp and the nape of her neck. Snot and tears dripped down her face, over her lips, and onto the front of her white shirt. I stood in the doorway, afraid to go near her. I had only seen her like this one other time—when we stopped seeing Daddy, or he stopped seeing us.

“They won’t go away.” She sobbed into her hands, gargling a bit.

“What, Ma?”

“They just won’t go away.”

Harrison stood behind me. As I turned to look at him, his dark eyes filled with tears which lingered inside, not dripping, just resting above his bottom lashes. The reflection of the pink bathroom was barely visible in those dark eyes and then I was back to seeing Ma, alone, on the toilet with black hairs across the floor and in her lap. I wanted to scream at him to leave, to walk home, take a bus, find some way to get out of our lives, but instead I just told him to watch her while I ran to the kitchen and did what I was never supposed to do—I called Great-Grandma.

I told her what had happened, and had been happening for months. I jumped right into it and she screamed so loud that when she finished,

I heard true silence in our townhouse kitchen. The dust froze in the shoots of sunlight sneaking in through the cracked blinds. The phone cord slowly rolled back. The swan neck of the drain stopped dripping. It all was calm, or at least until Ma's muted sobs bumped up from down the hall, interrupting the dead air.

Ma didn't hit me or scream at me or anything when I told her Great-Grandma was expecting us. She just got up from the toilet, silent and red-faced, and walked to the car. Almost like she had been waiting for this day since the beginning. As soon as we arrived, Great-Grandma marched our blunt haircuts and Harrison's shaved head into the upstairs bathroom. With arms as skinny as chicken bones, she wobbled up the winding staircase behind us with a large pot, the one she used for *menudo*, in her hands. Inside the pot was a plant she called *neem*, mixed fine until it was like green dust, then poured over boiling water. Two hands around the edge, she told us to get on our knees and drape our heads over the frozen brim of the bathtub with claws. I didn't want to touch the porcelain. It would sting too much but I knew had to. That was the bathtub I had bathed in as a baby, the bathtub where I had rinsed my knees and elbows with Ivory soap every year until I was nine, and that was the bathtub Ma sat in as she sponged her pregnant belly stretched wide with me inside. That was the bathtub to end all of this. I got on my knees. Slowly, from behind me, Great-Grandma poured the bitter water over my head. Thick fog filled the room. When she finished, she told me to stand up.

"*Mija*, take this. Make sure to get the backside of their necks to the front side above their foreheads."

The pot was in my hands, heavy with liquid. I had no idea how I would hoist it and even less of an idea how Great-Grandma was able to do it. "But Great-Grandma, I don't think I can lift it."

"Don't be such a *malcriada*. Of course you can."

I braced myself, steadied my knees, and lifted hard into the steamy, warmed air. My arms trembled as I moved the stream of water over Harrison's scabbed neck, up and down, and back again. Though I struggled with the weight of the pot, it was easier than I had imagined it would be. It could have been the easiest thing I had ever done. As it came time to pour the liquid over Ma, I saw her blurred reflection in the pool of water spinning down the drain. Her eyes were dead, staring at the

porcelain tub. I could tell she knew they would come back each and every weekend we picked up Harrison. Our scalps would blister, scab-over, and itch for the rest of our lives. In that moment, with the mist of *neem* floating around us and my little great-grandma on her knees rubbing the sore spots of Harrison's head dry with a white towel, I knew Ma thought she had failed—at what, I am still not sure.

The next day, Ma put on a full face of makeup, ran mousse through her lice-free hair, and dropped Harrison off at his apartment on Grant Street with the claw foot bathtub and the peeling grape and apricot wallpaper in the hallway. I waited outside in the car, looking up at the window I knew was his. I wanted to catch a glimpse of him in the afternoon light one more time. I wanted to see my only connection in the world shut the blinds. That was the last day we ever dropped him off anywhere.

I can cure head lice, stomach cramps, and bad breath given the right herbs. Before Great-Grandma died, she gave me a booklet of everything she knew. Inside, with an unsteady hand she had drawn pictures of plants, and beneath them, their Spanish names, their scientific names, and just for me, their English names. For the most part, I stick to over-the-counter remedies. They are cleaner and work faster and come in packages with childproof lids. But every once in a while, when I get a real bad headache and the aspirin isn't cutting it, I take slices of potatoes and hold them to my temples, hoping that all the bad will seep out of me.

I used to see Harrison in the city every now and then at a party or concert. He would smile and look my way, but we never exchanged hellos or anything like that. I know he remembers me from all those years back. Nothing about us has changed much in a decade. Sometimes I wonder if my dad looked like him as a young man when both our mothers fell for his shit. Other times, I just wonder if he's still giving everyone lice. But more often than not, I don't think about Harrison at all. That's just the way these things go. ☹