





BETTER FRESH



By Parker Penafiel



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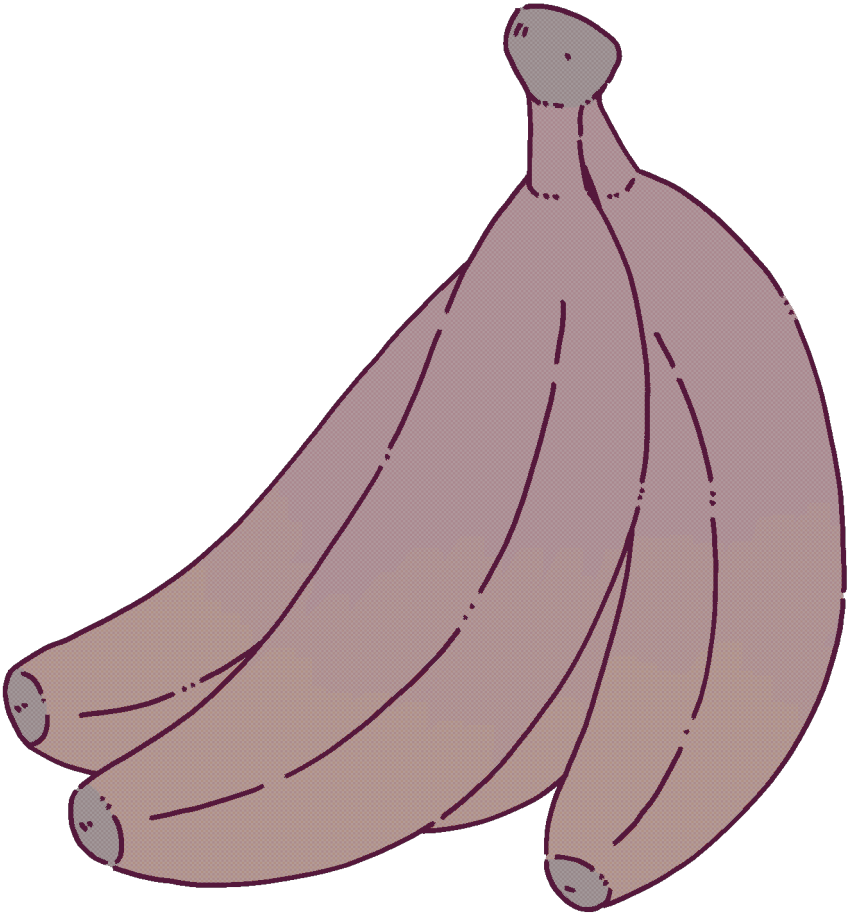
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INTRODUCTION

Culture can be incredibly nebulous, and a lot of culture is lost in the process of immigration. While I could go on a whole diatribe about how much of this is because of systems, how much of it is intentional, and why it happens, I find it's better expressed like this.

It's Better Fresh is an anthology of vignettes about plants, and how the perception of them changes when they're imported. Much like people are shaped by their cultural context, so are plants.



PURPLE BANANAS

My father told us many things about Ecuador, and we knew which parts were true because he was a bad liar. Once he tried to convince my brother and I he didn't speak a lick of Spanish, and when confronted about the second language he used on the phone too loudly to be stealthy in the slightest, he tried to convince us it was Chinese. This may have worked had he managed to keep the self-satisfied smirk off of his face, but apparently imagining the pay off of such a lie was too amusing.

So when my dad told us about the purple bananas, I knew that it was an indisputable fact. I didn't have access to the internet to check for myself, so I believed him.

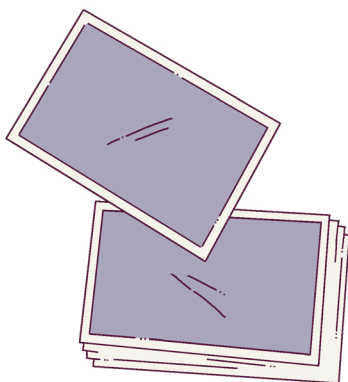
It was only years later I had proof of what I knew to be true.

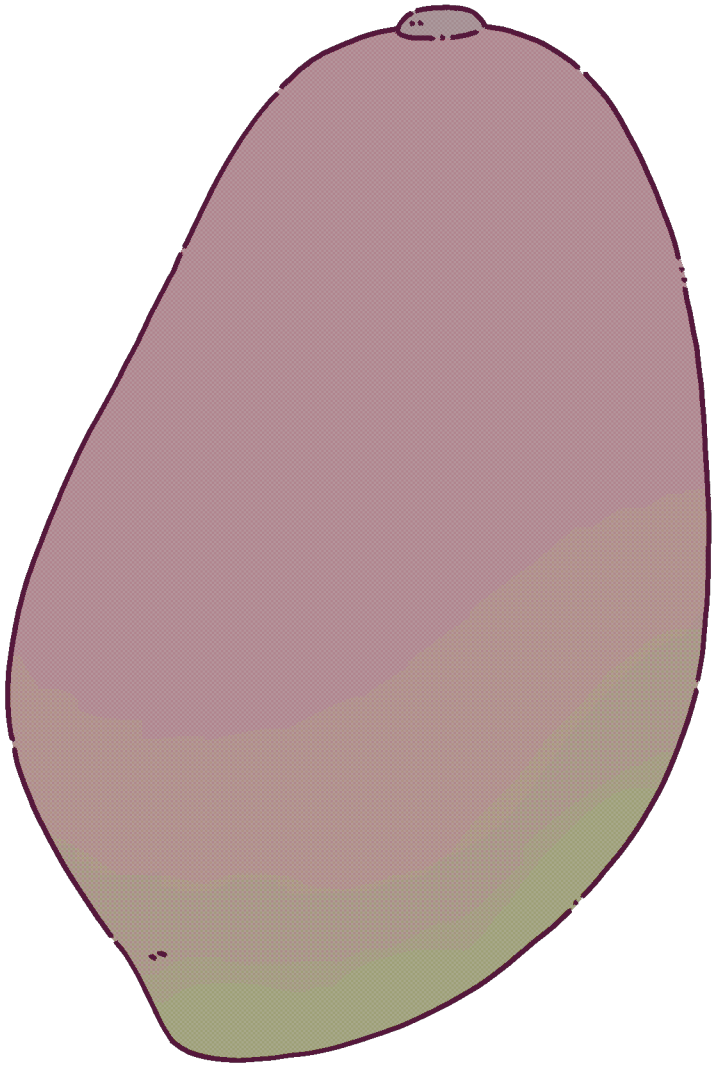
After reading about Flat Stanley being sent through the mail in a comically large envelope, my teacher tasked us with recreating the stunt—not by dropping something heavy on ourselves and buying a flat rate box, but by making a little paper doll, and sending it to a friend or family member that lived in a different town or state. Then they'd send the paper doll back with pictures of their travels, writing as if the paper doll had penned their own travel notes. Some kids had to struggle to find someone far away, but I barely had any family in my hometown, they'd fled as far away as they were able to as soon as they were able—as if being too close would get them sucked into the gravitational pull of little ol' Mudville, as it was briefly named.

Of course I picked Ecuador, the family furthest and with the most different lives. In return I got pictures of purple bananas stacked on a market table, a whole roasting pig, and my family with the little doll I'd carefully colored. I was happy to point out the oddly colored bananas to anyone that would listen, as if it were my gospel to spread.

Even among the star fruits and okra in the nicer grocery stores, purple bananas were completely foreign to the small town, so the photos were my only proof. Because of this, I didn't get to try one until several years down the line. It was small, and more red than purple. The flesh had a light orange tinge, and it tasted delicate, sweet, and almost floral.







MANGOES

The first time it occurred to me that people could develop allergies was the day my mom's lips swelled and blistered angrily from a mango flavored drink. She turned back in the driver's seat to face me before leaving the driveway, running a finger over her bumpy lips, "Can you tell there are blisters?"

I shake my head no, but you can tell.

She told me then, when she was a kid she never even liked mangoes! The mangoes at the

supermarket were picked green, then ripened on their way to the produce section, making them expensive and less flavorful. Fruit is better fresh, it's a cliché for a reason.

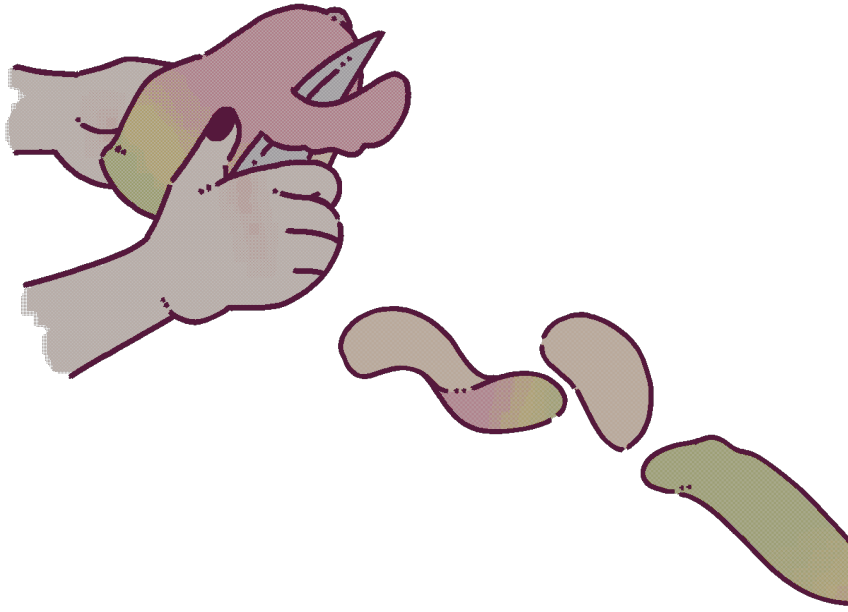
Ecuador was different. I don't remember it—I spent most of that trip being doted on and carried up and down the mountain in a woven basket—a man came up the mountain with a car full of mangoes, shouting and waving to get the attention of potential customers. They'd been picked no more than a few miles away, and with the conversion rate and abundance, a pile of change could be exchanged for several mangoes.

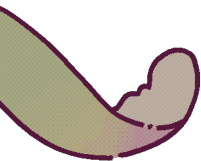
My mom has never liked meat that was too gamey, picking around the dark meat when we had chicken, and taking an extra helping of salad when we had steak, so she struggled to find food to eat the summer we spent in Ecuador.

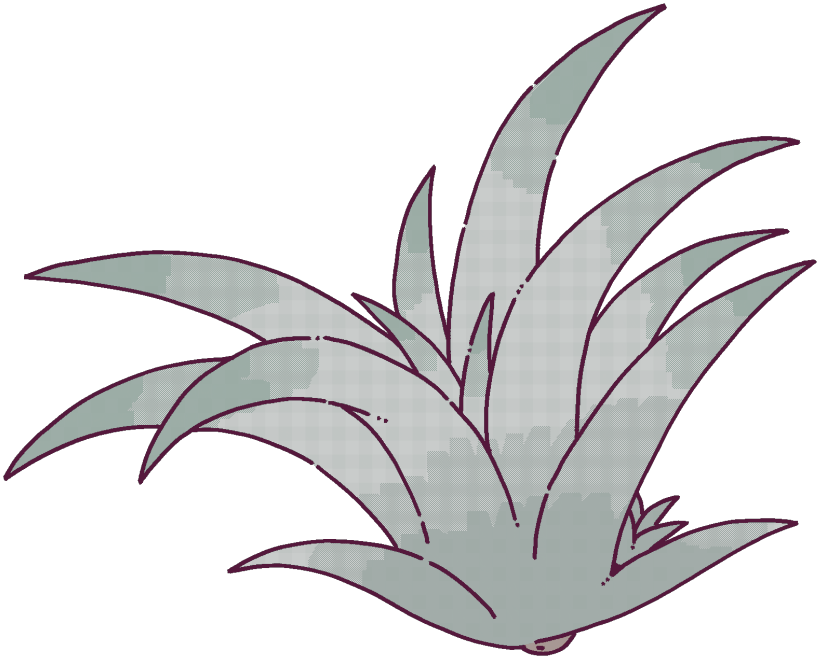
She survived on fruit, cheese, and fresh bread, with mango as a frequent main course. That

was the summer she learned how an allergy could sneak up on you, and that your scalp will sunburn given the chance.

In the following years I'd get a mango drink when I didn't want to share, though I loved the flavor regardless. She'd roll her eyes at me and steal sips from my brother and dad. It was only later on I felt a tingle and a burn as I tore apart a fresh mango, getting the hairy fibers stuck between my teeth, that I learned myself that pettiness will bite you in the end.







AIR PLANTS

I first laid eyes on the odd thing in a book, placed in a soil-less glass vase, touted as a plant that needed only air (and water but that's much less attention grabbing). With my typical childhood naivety I thought the plant was floating, and the glass vase did little to dissuade me of this.

I was obsessed with air plants, desperate to hold onto anything in my world that still seemed magical, even if I'd look silly in the

process. The amount of time I refused to give up the Santa Claus lie is proof enough of this.

That same year for Christmas my friend gave me two small air plants of my own, in a little glass bowl with a small red bow. The adjustment was difficult as I forgot about them on and off as soon as the excitement died down, overcompensating whenever I remembered the plants. One rotted away in protest. The surviving plant managed to clone, dying but leaving a descendant who would make it many more years and split many more times.

There was only one store you could get air plants from, overpriced and tossed into clear bowls with a price sticker taped on the side of it, like the often pilfered pin bowls in a Hot Topic. Despite the lack of sophistication, the variety and unfamiliarity of the products brought me awe. I'd have a similar reaction to an exotic pet store years later, only to learn of their poor treatment of the animals after they'd closed.

Looking up into the trees filled with interlocking branches and little grey hitch hikers curling into the bark, I remember feeling a rush. I kept a small air plant on my bedside table the entire month we stayed with my Abuelita. It was one of the few times I lived somewhere so clean, as that little plant was one of my few possessions during that month, there wasn't much to make a mess of.







WOODSORREL

As a kid I knew cognitively Ecuador was a real place—I'd even been, even if I was still too young to remember—but it was hard not to let the imagination of a child take over when it was often just the backdrop for stories my dad told.

I would sit in bed and plead, "Papi, will you tell us stories about Ecuador?"

The setting was so different from the small town we lived in, and he was a very different

child from myself. Bolder, more protective, more active. It was all unfamiliar in an intoxicatingly alluring way that only a story can be.

I didn't always have to beg though, sometimes the stories would come naturally. We'd be sitting in the grass and he'd pluck up a small yellow flower and some leaves that looked a lot like clovers, and he'd pop them into his mouth while I stared; I knew quite well by then I wasn't supposed to eat things from outside, and I had certainly tried. While my mom told me not to eat stuff outside, my father knelt down and told me what I could eat and how to find it. He'd eat it first, say, "Like that." and then find a good piece to give to me to try.

The woodsorrel was no different, but we called them clovers and little plantains. The seed pods looked a lot like plantains, down to the angular ridges and curved shape, and they'd explode into tiny seeds if you flicked them. They also would pop in your mouth if you bit them, and tasted stronger than the rest of the plant which all tasted a bit like lemon.

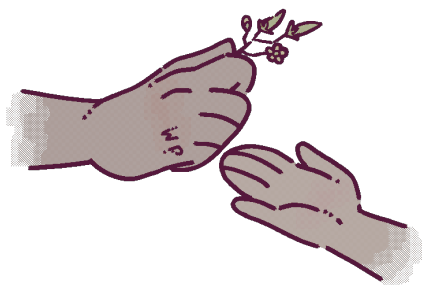
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After the impromptu foraging lesson he smiled and said, "We had these in Ecuador too. But they got a lot bigger. Like this." and he took his

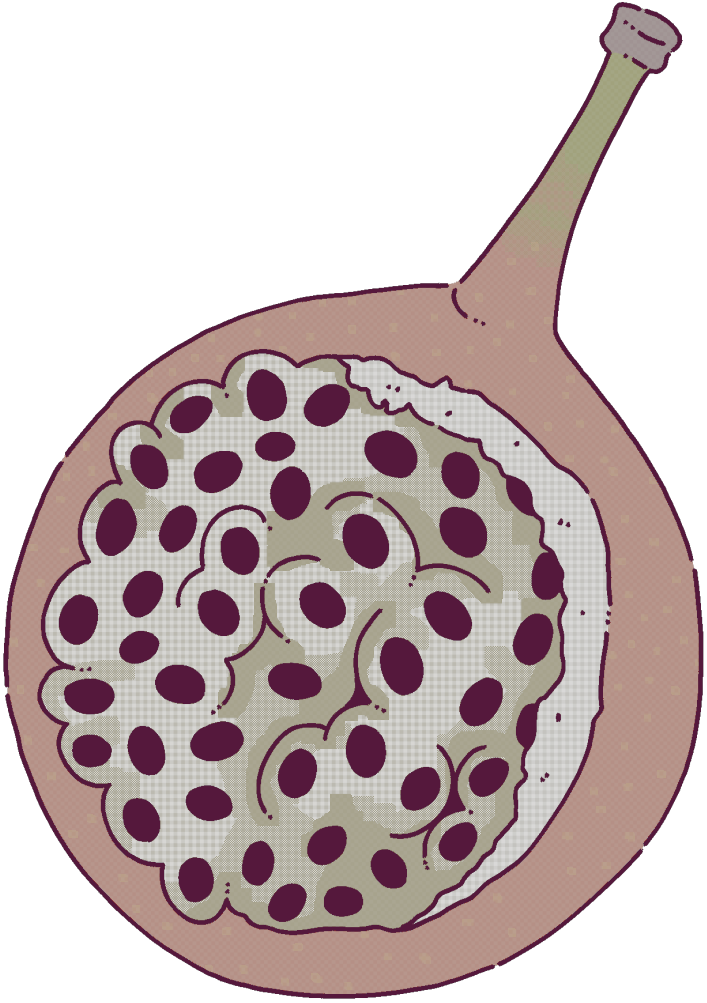
index finger and thumb to make a circle the size of a quarter.

Everything got bigger in Ecuador. There were no winter lows of -15 degrees to kill anything that tried to get big.

Picking fruit and foraging became one of the few things my whole family liked; even if we groaned and complained about mosquito bites while holding the bowl for my dad as he stood on top of his ladder, tossing every other wild cherry into the bowl, snacking on the rest. The proof was in purple stained fingers, and that none of us ever turned down an opportunity to take a walk out back during cherry and berry season.







GRANADILLAS

A carton of passion fruit juice sat in the white garage fridge for months, emptying and being replaced quickly. We discovered the local supermarket sold it and it was quite in vogue in the Penafiel house. My father would mix half a glass of the juice with lime seltzer—he was always in the habit of watering down juice, but for once his mixing added to the flavor rather than taking away from it.

I wouldn't recognize that small purple fruit from the carton when I saw one for the first time, in appearance or in taste.

My brother, my cousin, and I sat with my Abuelita, leaned against stacked cement blocks. We chattered back and forth in a crude mix of Spanish and English, as the English speakers spoke little Spanish, and the Spanish speakers little English.

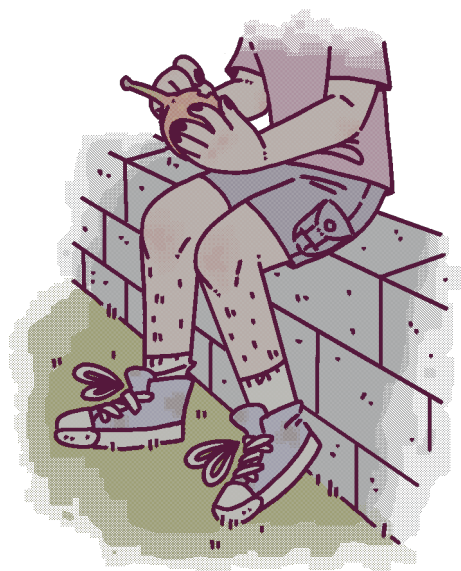
My Abuelita interjected to get our attention, abruptly ending our game of charades as we trained our attention on her. She reached into her striped, woven, market bag and retrieved a green produce bag with six peculiar looking orange fruits. They were smooth and rounded, with light yellow speckles and a long antennae at the top. She held one out to me as she repeated the familiar name the woman at the market had used, "Granadilla." I repeated it back to her, consonants sticking behind my teeth, the word crawling out of my mouth clumsily.

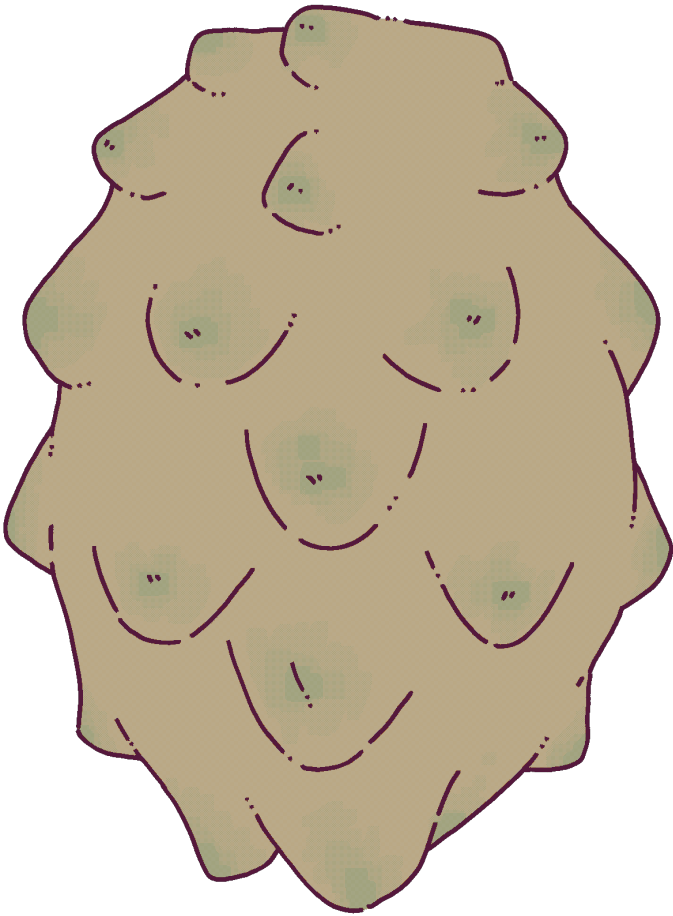
"Gracias" I sputtered, happily taking the fruit and looking at my cousin who broke into the waxy shell with deft fingers, tossing bits of orange casing into the grass. I copied her movements, and was rewarded with a cluster

of small black seeds, each coated in a clear jelly. I'd later learn this was the same fruit from the carton in the garage, when trying to explain the fruit to a friend. The shell felt the way I imagined a dried gourd would, smooth and a bit waxy, but it was filled with spongy white flesh that cushioned the seeds and the gel around them.

She sucked it out of the shell and chewed the seeds, and my brother was already joining her. I hurried to follow.







PITAYAS

My Abuelita got up early every morning, earlier than even my father, who would occasionally “sleep in” to 7 or god forbid, 8. Some mornings she’d already have been driven to the market by one of my tías when I woke up.

We settled into an uneasy routine, trying to never let ourselves forget how temporary it all was. In just a few weeks I would be back to microwaving pancakes for breakfast, if not skipping entirely, and I better not get used to waking up to the smell of fresh tamales.

I sat at the kitchen table closest to the wall, nursing hot chocolate milk with chunks I'd long ago given up on fully mixing in. When my Abuelita and tía Jenny got back from their trip, I was still at the table, blinking slowly as I tried to adjust to the light—like a disoriented raccoon. Tía Jenny set a bag on the table, excitedly beginning to explain in a combination of English and Spanish the treats she'd brought home—fruit being the most exciting of them all.

My dad grinned, explaining the Spanish as he leaned over the bag and explained his favorites, and how long it had been since he'd had each, and how the type I'd had in the grocery stores paled in comparison to the real thing.

A spiky yellow fruit caught my eye, and it seemed, my father's as well, as he pulled the palm-sized fruit from the bag and slowly spoke its name, "pitaya."

Despite our enthusiasm, my tía furrowed her brows, mumbling in Spanish as she tried to reorganize the warning into English, before

turning to my father and stating it simply in Spanish for him to translate.

“She said don’t eat the entire thing. They’re a natural laxative, so eat maybe half.”

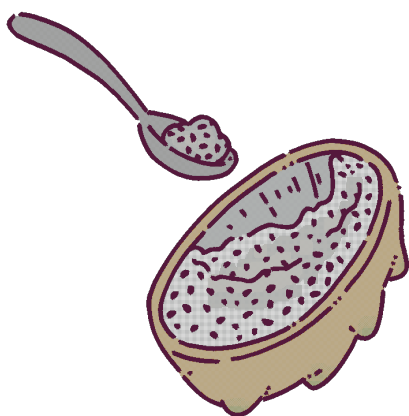
I nodded, only half listening. “Split one with me?”

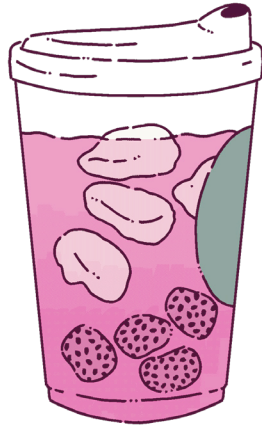
We dug into the fruit with little regard for the warning, and 10 minutes later my Abuelita chuckled as she passed the line for the solitary bathroom.

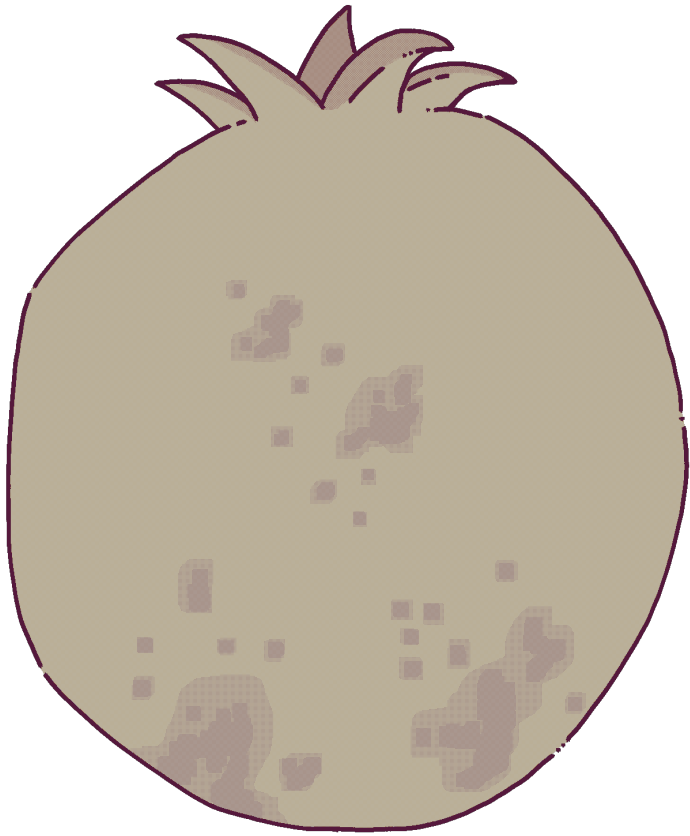
I didn’t realize it was just a yellow dragon fruit until years later. It didn’t quite have the “scales” of a pink dragon fruit, but little rounded, green, nubs.

I swished the rehydrated bits of dragon fruit around in the bottom of my soon-to-be-discarded Starbucks cup.

They’re much better fresh.







GUAYABAS

My father doesn't like guavas like I do, eating them quickly and with a desperation that only comes with starvation or the feeling of juice dribbling down your chin and up your forearms, with the knowledge that any wasted time just increases the risk of having to wash up past your elbows or change your now sticky shirt. I eat them over the sink, not minding the gritty seeds or slightly bitter outer flesh. These too are better fresh my dad tells me, but he'll happily eat canned guava paste, and I can't exactly skip down to Ecuador for a snack so I disregard this.

I often forget that guayaba is the word for guava. Like when you say a word too many times and it stops meaning anything, when you change the meaning of a word frequently, you'll forget it ever meant anything else.

My dad is a man of nicknames and monikers, it's never Edison but Liso, it's never Ethan but Teeto, it's never Zaida but Cubano. This applied to friends and neighbors as much as it did family. Within the walls of our home we'd speak the nicknames, but outside we whispered, as if its owner might sneak up on us at any moment; and in such a small town, they just might.

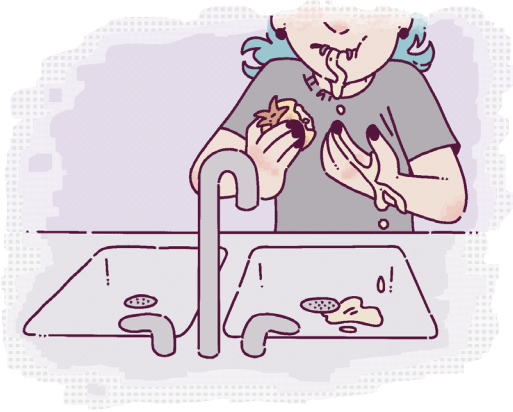
My brother quickly picked up my father's method of naming things, creating a bizarre game of nickname telephone in my house.

Each nickname is an inside joke, and each time I come home for break, there are more unfamiliar names for familiar faces.

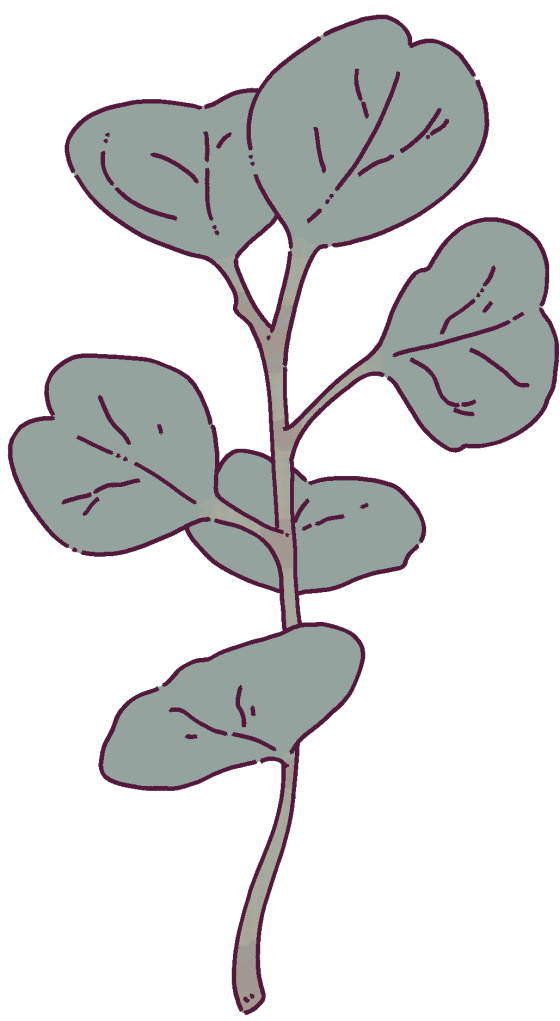
My mom is Elizabeth until her brother cannot say her name and she becomes Tiz for 30 years, she has a mug with nicknames for Elizabeth and then she becomes Libby, she likes Tisdale wine she becomes Libbydale, and then Libby Ladoo, and then just Ladoo.

Xavier was Xavie, then Xav when he grew out of that, and Guayaba when my father tried on the name for him. It stuck, but Xavier refused to stay out of the game of telephone and soon my dad was Guayaba too. And that stuck as well.

Sometimes I'm handed the phone, told it's "Guayaba" and if it wasn't one of the Guayabas that handed it to me, I'd be left to figure out which Guayaba they meant.







EUCALYPTUS

I stand in a cubby while I wait for my mom to finish grabbing or exchanging whatever's brought her here. She promised a quick trip but I learned a long time ago that I should find a way to occupy myself regardless. I ignore the pressure at the base of my skull, a sure sign of a blooming headache, instead choosing to scan the small wooden shelves and glass cases of one vendor with a metaphysical slant. Rose quartz, amethyst, citrine, eucalyptus oil. The variety of smells are an assault on my senses, but it's preferable to sitting and staring at the wall while my mom fiddles with the register.

A drop of oil for smell, something done sparingly with a precious and scarce resource. Eucalyptus is rarer back home, made exotic and spiritual by marketers who are happy to lean into the idea of folk medicine, even if first they must peel away the fingers of its originators.

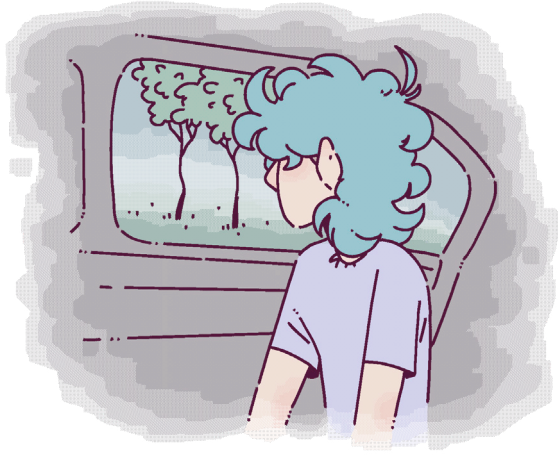
In Ecuador I look out the window as we travel down the winding mountain roads, half understood Spanish drowned out by the sight. Eucalyptus trees, tall skinny, with smooth bald trunks and an almost blue color, peeking over the curve of the mountain, out from behind a small wooden house on stilts to steady itself on the uneven ground.

Eucalyptus is burned to keep the sauna hot, the scent of the tree permeating everything as it burns. The air thickens, and my breaths come quick as I try desperately to extend my stay, eyes darting between my father and my own hands. I don't want to leave before him, and my focus has become so intense, my Abuelita fades away, along with the edges of my vision.

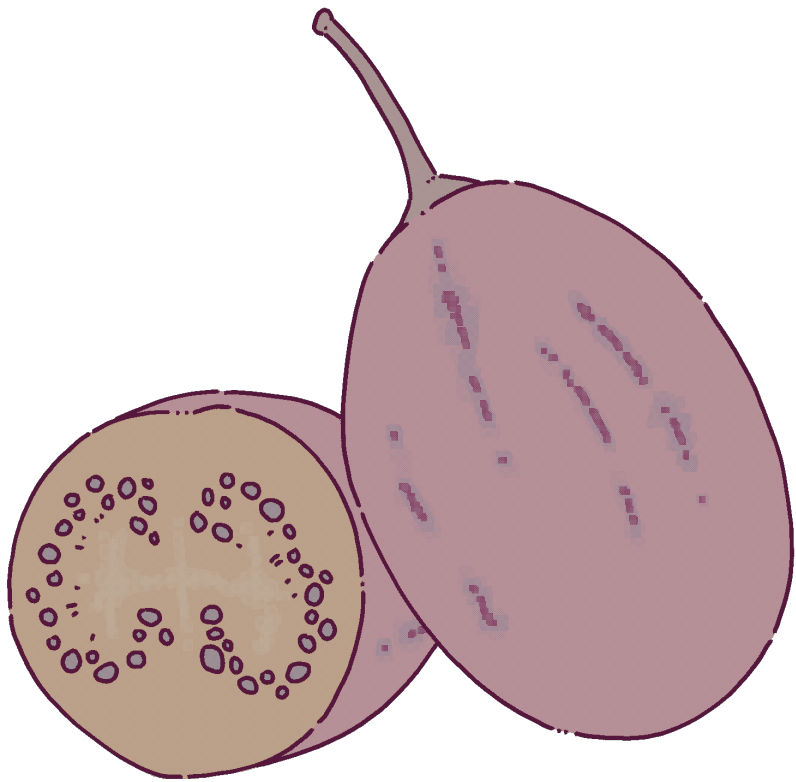
I later learned that anything with oils will disperse them in the air when you burn them, as my mom and her friends were unfortunate enough to learn when having a bonfire in high school and not recognizing the poison ivy that made its way onto the pyre. Localized poison ivy is bad on its own, and I pray I never learn what happens when it makes its way into your bloodstream.

It's only after we finally leave the sauna that we realize my Abuelita didn't follow. My dad and I exchange glances as we wait, as five minutes turns to ten, then fifteen, and she still doesn't leave. We hold our breath, wondering if she's still able to catch hers, or if she's passed out.

She finally emerges after twenty minutes, unphased. The feat she's just accomplished goes unmentioned, lest we reveal how much we struggled for the five minutes we managed.







TREE TOMATOES

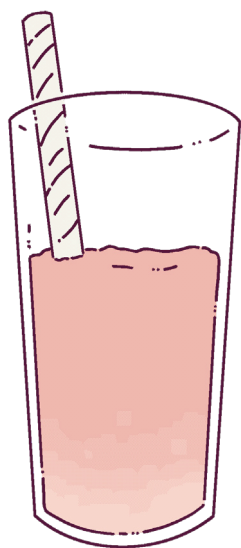
There was a small tree in front of my Abuelita's house, and from it hung a red fruit with streaks of darker purple and a resemblance of plum tomatoes. It wasn't too surprising to hear them called tree tomatoes.

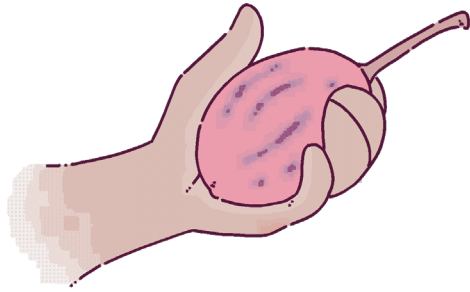
My dad guided us down a slight hill to the base of the tree in my Abuelita's front yard. He delicately picked off a ripe looking tomato and bit the top off of the fruit, pulling away with a slurp, before turning it to us and showing us the inside. It was bright orange with black

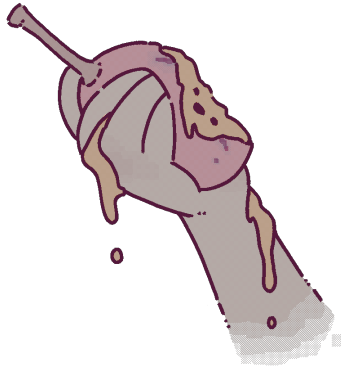
seeds clustered in two tight c shapes that faced each other, looking like a poorly drawn bow-tie.

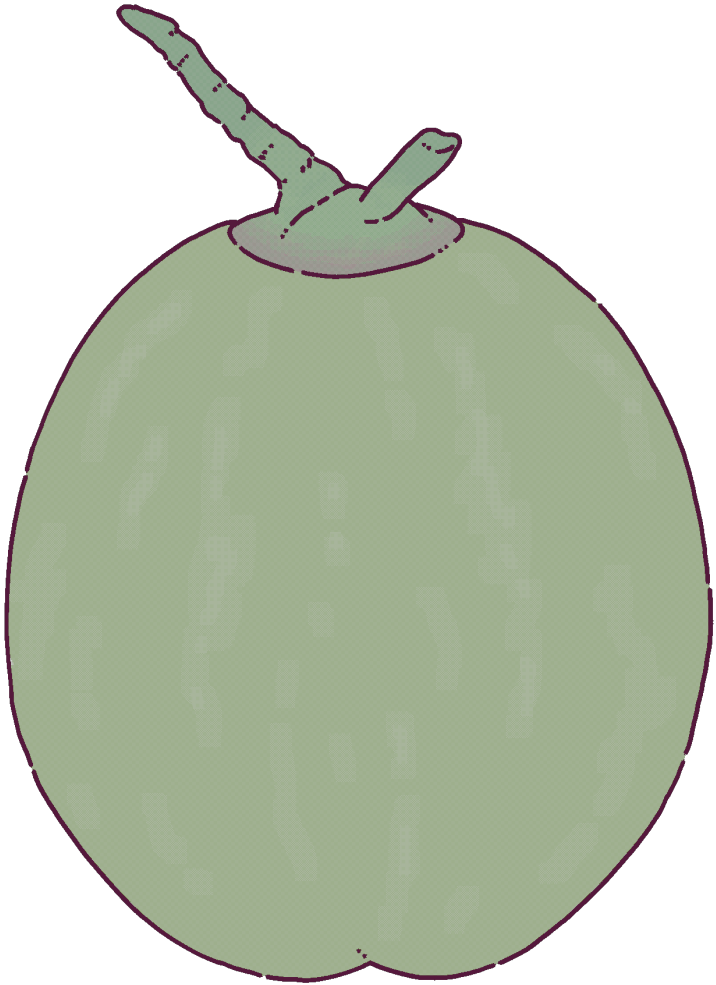
My brother and I took turns nibbling at it. It was oddly sweet while maintaining a savory and sour tang. I swallowed my bite and pushed it into my father's hands again, deciding I didn't like it. My brother happily took it, while my dad circled the tree for another good one.

I was surprised to see how many things were tree tomato flavored during our stay. Tree tomato smoothies, sauces, and juices followed us from restaurant to restaurant.









COCONUTS

We sat in the back of a van while the driver chain smoked out of the window to stay awake. He was taking us on the 4 hour trip from Guayaquil up to my Abuelito's house in the mountains.

My mom turned back to me, "We're stopping if you want anything."

My eyes scanned the side of the road ahead of us, stopping at a group of people clustered around little stands. I had seen a few on the

way, but only through the glass of the window. I nodded and waited for the car to stop before slipping into the aisle and out of the sliding door.

I tailed my dad, not wanting to be separated from the only truly bilingual member of our family. I didn't pay as much attention as I should've in middle school Spanish, and while being stranded in Ecuador would be a great refresher course, I didn't want to find out just how rusty my Spanish was.

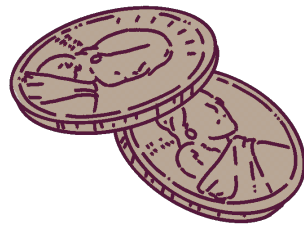
The stand was full of food and drinks, all fresh and served in front of you, overflowing to the point that bags of chopped and peeled sugar cane hung from the sides of the stand.

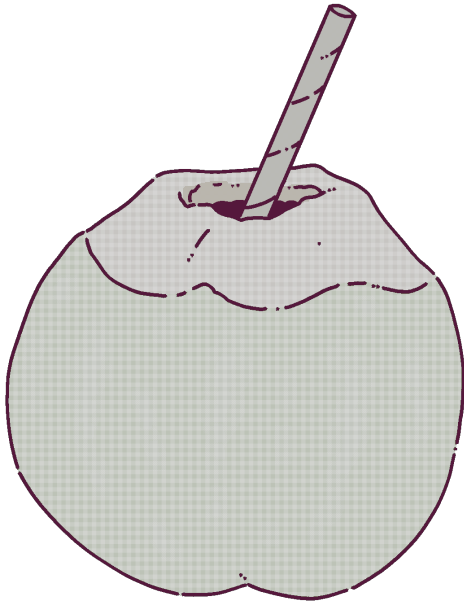
I picked a coconut, and a woman chopped the top off and stuck a straw in, before handing it to me whole. Money exchanged hands, my brother gnawed on his sugar cane, and I nestled back into my seat in the last row.

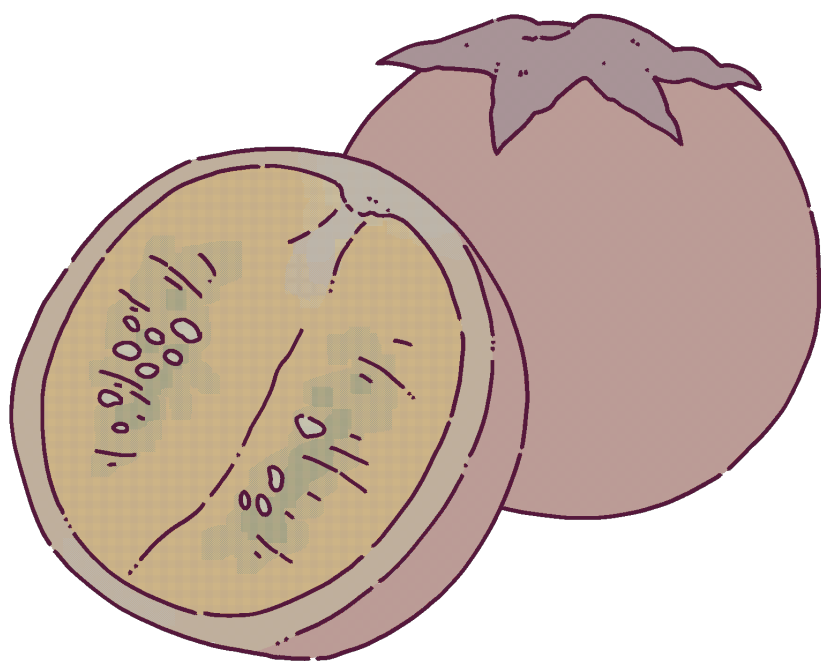
I sipped the coconut water happily, setting it back in my lap each time I finished. I didn't want to test my bladder since we had a long drive and most public bathrooms in Ecuador charge for toilet paper. Quickly, a new problem arose though as we hit a small bump, and coconut water splashed in my lap.

I began to drink as quickly as I could, trying to avoid getting any stickier, as hoping there wouldn't be too many bumps in the winding dirt roads was futile.

After drinking half of it and still being splashed, I gave up, resigned to being cold and sticky until we reached Abuelita's house and I could change.







NARANJILLAS

I was supposed to be home for Halloween. That had been the plan when I'd bought the bus ticket. I felt clever too, it was right near campus and I would get home early on Halloween day to celebrate with my friends that evening.

Instead I sat on my skateboard in the bus terminal, spiraling while trying to keep my mother's nerves from fraying too terribly.

I missed the last bus, and they started ushering people out of the terminal.

I migrated outside, standing with two women in tight dresses, leaned against the shiny black glass of the building.

My mom frantically tried to make plans, to find me a place to go for the night. My dad called my tío Edison, since he was just 30 minutes away, but it was a long shot since it was already one in the afternoon.

Tío Edison was close by and spoke English, but he didn't answer. Any family would be better than being on the street until 10 am waiting for the next bus.

I was verbally ferried into a taxi by my mother as soon as my Abuelito offered me a place to stay.

While it was nice to see a familiar face, the unease of the communication barrier

remained, as we exchanged only a few words at a time.

He still had the Shakira poster on his wall from last time I'd been there, and his roommates were out. I'd never met his roommates.

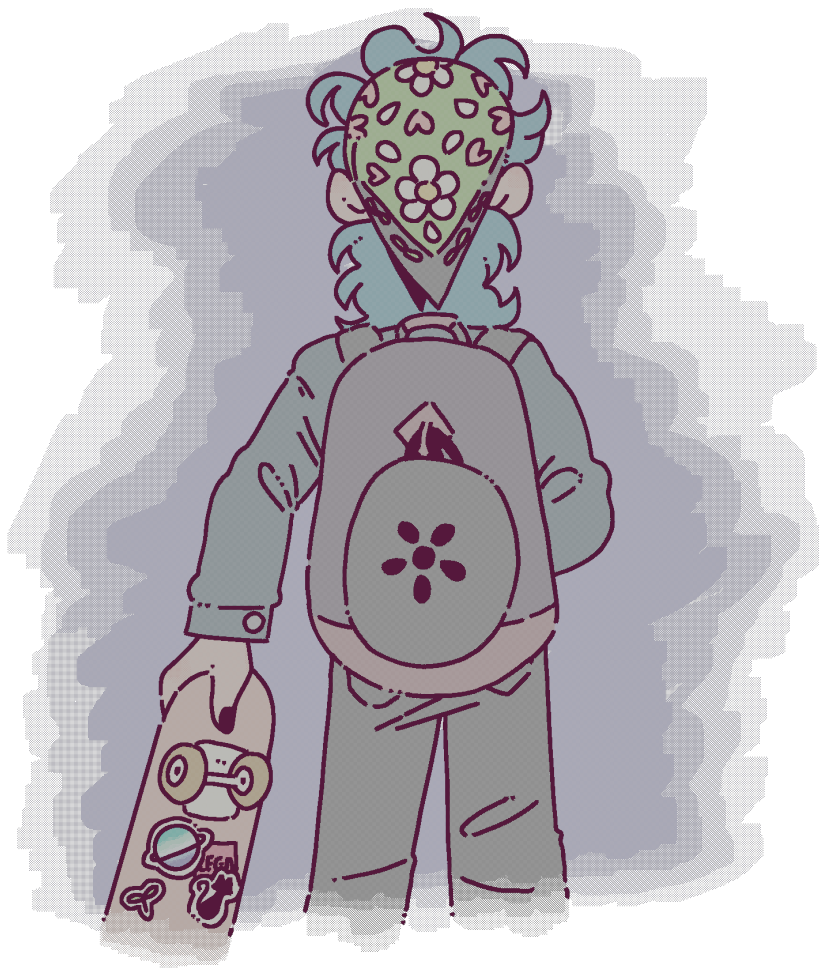
I only slept well because of how worn I was. The rush and panic of the night left me hollowed out like the pumpkin I wouldn't get to carve that year.

We took the subway back to the train station, a man with a black plastic bag repeating some sales pitch in Spanish as he tried to sell a small orange fruit.

I smiled for the first time in 10 hours at the familiar little fruit. Naranjilla was one of the fruits I never tried, but constantly saw, stacked among the granadillas and shelled snap peas on a market table. It wasn't home, but there were pieces of it still in this neighborhood. It's no wonder my Abuelito likes it there.













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