

# La Oruga (The Caterpillar)

Category: Longing

written by Ayisat Adegbindin | February 6, 2026

*Hay que volar, hay que encontrar, su propio futuro.* (You've got to fly, you've got to find your own future.) –Lin Manuel Miranda

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*Gracias, mi hija.* (Thank you, my daughter.)

I struggle to stand up from my kneeling position next to my patient's bed, touched by her choice of endearment. I'm a second-year medical student, and her kind words have a potent antianxiety effect. Realizing I'd asked her everything that I needed to, I now ask a question I'd been wanting to: *Where's your crossword puzzle? (¿Dónde está tu crucigrama?)*

As the medical interpreter translates my question, I scan her plain hospital room and quickly spot the puzzle my intern and I had printed for her; it's tucked into a cubby in the wall, a half-pencil with no eraser resting on top of it, still sharp.

Only one of the words is filled in: *Comida que comes por la mañana* (Food you eat in the morning) – *DESAYUNO* (BREAKFAST)

Odd. Maybe she's tired. But besides her morning walk around the unit, there's not much for her to do. Looking at her, it isn't obvious why she's in the hospital, but her dramatically elevated liver enzymes tell a different story.

Moving to the other side of her bed, I ask the interpreter to stay on the phone.

*Here, let's do one together!*

Getting back down on one knee, I read: *Fruta de piel roja?*

Her eyes flit from me, to the paper, to my phone, and back to me.

*La fresca?*

*Yes! Perfect! Good job, Señora! Now you do the next one!*

As she listens to the interpreter translate my words, her dancing eyes meet my smile—which requires no translation. Then she replies:

*I want to, it's just that sometimes it's hard for me to read.*

Undeterred, I ask her at what grade she stopped school, making a mental note to get her a new crossword puzzle at a different grade level. Anything to cure her boredom, to be of actual use to her.

*I never went. My parents couldn't afford it. But all five of my children went*

*to school, and now their children are in school, too.*

Afraid she'll see the tears flooding my eyes, I bounce my gaze around the room again, this time settling on her pink house slippers, fluffy blanket, and fresh clothes, all laid out for her to go home in—spots of color in the stale room, proof of the legacy she'd built.

*I don't feel bad for myself, just content with what God has given me.*

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