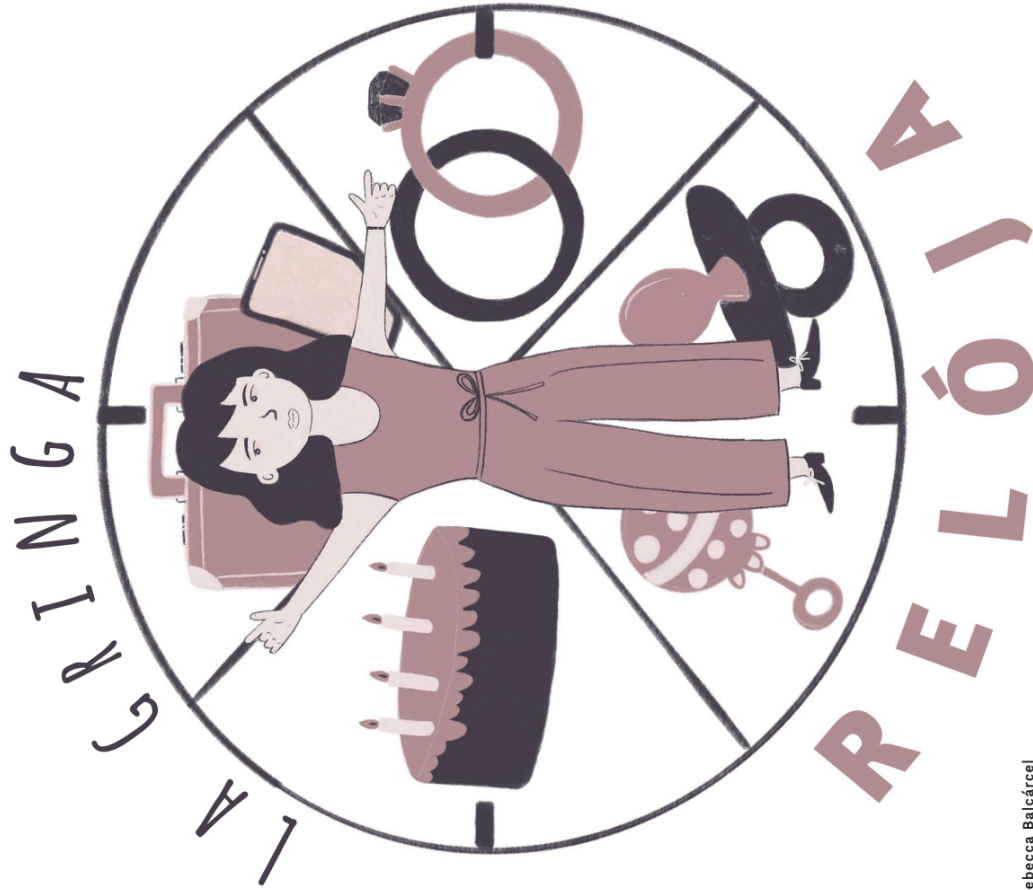




By the time I met her, she was already known as la gringa relója.

The American watch woman, you might say, and I saw her myself many times because she married my uncle Tito. Tito swore he didn't mind the watch grown into her wrist, confided that he found her unique (who could disagree?), and knew that no other man in history could be as certain that his bride would arrive on time for the ceremony. Which she did. In fact, quite early, and the middle-aged in the crowd whispered that this was a good sign. They were looking for good signs because Tito was 38.

Wearing makeup for the first time, I sat with excellent posture on the third row, hoping people would notice, but even more, hoping to see the left wrist of la gringa relója. The ceremony afforded no opportunity, but at the dance, el baile, following, I was lucky enough to present her with a cup of punch.

After she swirled across Abuela's tile patio with her father, new father-in-law, eldest brother, and finally the groom, I glimpsed through the crowd that she was seated, and I snatched my chance. She reached for the glass with her right hand; I politely kept eye contact as she nodded her thanks. When her left hand raised to steady the rim, I looked.

In a glance, I mentally photographed a frame to study in private, back at the punch bowl. I filled cups by feel while staring into the middle distance.

It was true.

Over her watchband, two folds of skin met in a curving crease, and a silver-rimmed oval Timex face was sunk into her wrist. Her cream-colored flesh was pressed to pink around the edges of a roughly circular trough that appeared to be a size larger than the face, and all I could think was that this was from her frequent winding of the thing, which I saw her do throughout the night. As she observed her guests, I could see her mind ticking.

They say she had the entire bus schedule in her head. She knew how late the No. 4 could run and still connect with the 12 to the movies. She memorized birth times — everyone she met. And she knew exactly when to take her casseroles out of the oven, those with cheese taking 140 seconds longer to brown than those topped with fried onions. Tito would eat well, I was sure, and would never arrive late for appointments.

Seated under a swoop of hot pink bunting, la gringa started fidgeting when the single clock in Abuela's house read 7:50 p.m. (it ran slow). She pulled at a curl behind her ear. Los mariachis were to arrive at 8 p.m., and I thought when 9 p.m. struck, they really would ramble in at any moment. The guests weren't concerned. Tito's brothers all played guitar, and records kept people dancing, but la gringa relaja paled. Glances at her watch rivaled those directed at Tito in number. She began twisting the curl tightly around her finger. And I began to worry.

At 9:15 they burst in, full of stories. Tamales at their previous gig, *y uno más*, the other hostess kept insisting, but *Let the music begin!*, and soon trumpet blasts pommelled the air. Señora Reloja's color returned, and her attention ventured from the watch for longer spans until I forgot to observe her and

was coaxed from behind the punch bowl to dance by Alberto, my second cousin on Mama's side.

I saw her many times from then on, mostly during holidays and family celebrations. But only three years later, Tito came to my quinceañera alone.

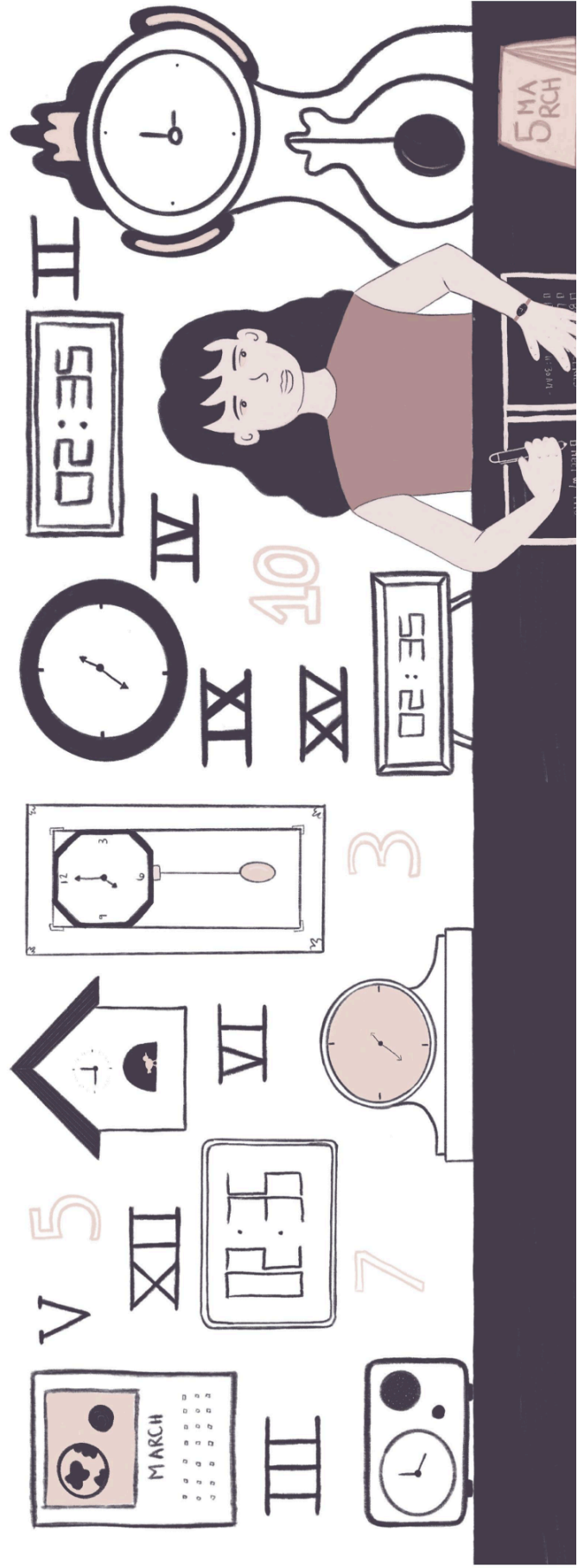
"She wanted to come, but her father called from the States." And throughout the evening, Tito watched the clock.

That entire year, whenever we saw him, he arrived and departed precisely on the hour. He telephoned if he expected to be delayed. I never saw him wear a watch, but he would announce how long he could stay when stopping over with a chicken for my mother. "I'll need to go in 10 minutes," he would say; then we sat and counted with him until he left. He would not eat except at certain times, refusing even los panitos my mother offered, saying, "No, mi Relojito will serve supper at 6:30."

We didn't meddle, though people gossiped that their house was filled with clocks. Clocks covered the walls, and between the clocks, numerals, painted or carved from wood, filled the gaps.

I tried to imagine Relója sorting days into piles of hours, minutes and seconds, giving Tito a portion for his pockets, enough for work and bus time, keeping a share to sprinkle about the house on laundry and dishes. I thought of leftover numbers being pasted on walls each day or packaged into envelopes and filed. She reportedly had calendars, a collection dating back 35 years, and daily planners sent to her from the States by her father with rectangles plotting each hour.

Then, for a month, no one saw her.
And so, I was startled the day she knocked on our door. "Your mother," she said, striding through the living room, right to the kitchen.



"Lo siento, Relója, but she is not here," I said.
 "She is on my list. I must speak with her."
 "Tia, sit down. Your face is flushed. I will bring you some water."
 "No, dear, I must give her this news from 2:15 to 2:45; then catch the 2:55 bus to cousin Carmen's. From there to the family Pérez. By the end of the day, everyone will know."
 "What will they know, Tia?"
 La gringa clutched a packet of folded papers. She circled the room, shifting the packet from hand to hand. At last, she stopped and looked me in the face.
 "I will tell you." She closed the curtains with two swift jerks and seated herself in my father's chair. As her shawl slid from her shoulders, I could see the in-grown watch and next to it, low on her forearm, a second one. This new watch lacked hands, but its angular face displayed black numerals and marked each second's passing with a blinking colon.
 "Esperanza, sit."
 I lowered myself into Mama's chair.
 "I have made calculations, and it's undeniable: I am losing time. At first, I thought it was only a few hours, but the lost time has accumulated to over three years. Oh, I have been imbecilic not to notice! Look at this."

She spread out charts and schedules, pointing to particular boxes on a grid of times and activities. These she compared to other pages. "You, see?" and I nodded, though she used words I did not understand. "On this day: 50 minutes unaccounted for. Here, the 25th: 40 minutes. Not only that." She pointed to the new watch. "This time is two minutes ahead of this one. Every moment is passing faster than I realized."
 "But, Relója, surely —"
 "You do not understand. From the time I was a girl, I knew numbers — the beautiful unchangeables. One. It is you, part of one family. It is Tito and I, one flesh. It is this planet, shared by us all, circling one star. Two is left hand/right hand, night/day, heat/cold." Without even looking at her watch, she said, "It is 2:35. Do you feel the duality of two, the holiness of three, the solidity of five, and the hidden flavor of seven hiding in 35? I have no time to explain. But listen. From the number of my birth, I have calculated my death. It was some years off, I thought, but now I see my last day approaching. Your mother must help Tito when I go. He is the eldest, but she is next, and he will not be able to arrange things. Promise me you will tell her this."

"YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. FROM THE TIME I WAS A GIRL, I KNEW NUMBERS — THE BEAUTIFUL UNCHANGEABLES. ONE. IT IS YOU, PART OF ONE FAMILY. IT IS TITO AND I, ONE FLESH. IT IS THIS PLANET, SHARED BY US ALL, CIRCLING ONE STAR. TWO IS LEFT HAND/RIGHT HAND, NIGHT/DAY, HEAT/COLD."



SCAN ME

SCAN THE QR CODE to
 HEAR the inspiration
 behind the story from
 Rebecca Balcarcel.

"I promise, Relója, but won't you ..."
 "Give her this. It contains the dimensions of my body, the address of my American relatives, and numbers for their telephones." She laid down a slim envelope. "The bus stop is six houses plus two blocks away. I must go."
 She kissed the top of my head and was gone before I could stand, but she left a white box in my hand. Under its lid lay a slip of paper with neat lettering laid atop a necklace clock. *Para Esperanza*. I fumbled with the clasp but put it on. I tried to sense the ring of numbers against my chest.
 I had worn it for three weeks when news of her death reached us. Papá gathered us around the table and said her heart had stopped beating. It was out of sync with the ticking Timex. As Mamá put a handkerchief to her eyes, I noted the time. It was 10 after 10 by our slow kitchen clock, eight after by my mother's new watch, which she often forgot to wind, and just about 12 after by my own necklace clock. Its navy blue, round face darkened the center of a gold-colored heart.
 While my parents talked further, I excused myself to my room. I packed the necklace in its paperboard box and tucked it into my bottom drawer. I slid it under an unsent note to a boy and a sweater from the North that I never planned to wear. ●

