On the Way to Believing

Thesis

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By

Mallory Patricia Laurel, B.A.

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Thesis Committee:

Nick White, Advisor

Lee Martin

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Abstract

The following collection of stories takes place, for the most part, in the border region of South Texas known as the Rio Grande Valley. In these stories, I explore how one comes to faith—specifically, Catholicism as practiced by Mexican-Americans in this region—in childhood, and how, in adulthood, this faith is tried, how it is manifested in everyday life, and how, as a result of these trials, it inevitably strengthens, evolves or dies away. These characters, then, are at various points on the path to believing and, as such, wrestle with an understanding of grace as set forth by the examples of their mothers and other believers around them.

Dedication

For my parents—your sacrifices make this possible; your lives forever hold my attention.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank all of the teachers who have so generously offered their time and wisdom over the last three years, especially Nick and Lina, who have supported and challenged me in equal measure, given me the confidence to embrace this subject matter and implored me to silence the doubts that nip at my heels with every step.

Vita

2005……Harlingen High School

2009……University of Notre Dame, B.A.

2009-2012……..Project Assistant, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

2011-2014……...Program Coordinator, Illinois Humanities

Fields of Study

Major Field: English

Area of Focus: Creative Writing, Fiction

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PROLOGUE

"Page after page I could write and still find I had scarcely begun. There are so many ways of looking at things, and so many infinitely varied shades, that the palette of the Divine Painter alone can provide me, when the darkness of this life has passed, with the heavenly colors capable of bringing out the loveliness discovered to my soul.

Nevertheless, since you have told me you long to understand as far as possible my heart's deepest feelings, since you want me to set down the most consoling dream I have ever had, and my 'little doctrine,' as you call it, I will write the following pages for you."

--St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*

TESSITURA

I have watched my mother pray more than I've watched people do most things. I know to keep quiet when she does it, as prayer is often a quiet passing of the time. And why shouldn't it be if its intent is to communicate with God? Of course, occasionally, more often when I was younger, I would join in. The Rosary is good for voices in unison. Sometimes, on the three-hour drive to my grandparents' house in Laredo, my parents would say the rosary together in the front seat, and in the back seat I would whisper my part, always a little behind the beat, thinking diction was a way of giving each word, each line of prayer, its due. As with most children, I took its purpose quite literally.

I am in a choir now, a good one with a symphony. Art finds its way into my life through many different doors, and I like it that way. I often don't think of it as praying because I don't pray much anymore, but I imagine if I described what I do and what it feels like when I'm singing with one hundred other voices, someone somewhere might say that there is no difference. My mother would not. She would say that I sing in a choir.

And with this choir, I breathe and utter—say, speak, voice, emit, express…the dictionary gives me poor substitutes. I suppose "pray" is the only word for what we do together.

Selig sind, die da Leid tragen, den sie sollen getröstet warden. Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted.

It isn't the words that make *Brahms: Ein Deutsches Requiem* prayerful, sacred though they are. It is that they *sound* beautiful and arise almost imperceptibly out of the strings, as discernable as a light wind in your ear, as if God is whispering, not wanting to startle you with the news, two-fold: your pain is necessary, and it will bear fruit.

Sometimes, I think my mother doesn't know how to be anything but miserable. She considers her life a hard one, and indeed, it's had its moments: more than some, not more than others. I directly participate in her misery, of course—some of her problems are my own, if from a slightly different perspective. And they wear me down on certain days. I always debate whether I should tell her this; if it would make a difference to know that I suffer, too. I've certainly found it to be true that misery loves company, which is perhaps why so many choirs sing requiems.

I think the biggest difference between my mother and I comes down to this: I've seen my mother do very few things besides pray. But praying without beauty is only misery; when that pain finally bears fruit—that is art.

THE SACRAMENTS

Having reached the age of reason, the children at Immaculate Heart of Mary took turns confessing. They kept score, counting the seconds between the red and green lights above the confessional like the Mississippis between thunder strikes. One girl clobbered the record—ten whole minutes she was in there!—but everyone saw the look on her face when she came out and, even though they didn't know the name for that look—*what's that word again, despair?*—they knew well enough to say nothing.

Now they were ready for Communion.

They knelt around the altar, giddy to taste the body of Christ, when they heard a loud moan coming from the back of the church. They turned to look but their mothers glared at them, so they faced the front and tried their best to ignore it. But as the priest continued, the moaning gave way to sobs, deep and guttural, as if being violently yanked out from the stomach—a grown man's sobs. One of the moms stood and walked quickly to the back of the church, her heels hammering the tile along the way. She took him by the elbow but he wouldn't go. A few of the dads hurried back to help. The man thrashed his body and fought them all off, not because he was strong but because he was desperate. A boy, one who had a habit of knowing things that the other kids didn't, passed the news along: the man was a drunk. "I've seen him here before. He's always drunk," said one girl. "That's why he's called *a* drunk, dummy," he responded.

The man was tall and gaunt with long white hair, his skin a coppery color. His clothes—a button-up, a big silver buckle and blue jeans that were tucked into his cowboy boots—looked like they belonged to someone else; or maybe they had been his clothes when he was a different man. They were too neat for someone so drunk, and hung on his scrawny frame the way a shirt drapes bodiless on a coat hanger. He looked half dead, which also meant he looked half alive.

The men couldn't get him to his feet; his ankles kept collapsing beneath him. Some of the children laughed now that they could see how drunk he was. But then he shouted, "I want Communion! *Dame*, *por favor. Quién es?* Who are you to stop me?" and everyone got quiet. In the end, it took four men to lift him, as if he packed some unseen weight somewhere on his body. After he was gone, they all received the Holy Eucharist but no one, not even the adults, thought of Christ. They only thought of how badly the man had wanted it and how easily they had gotten it. And the children, they couldn't understand what the big deal was—it just tasted like stale bread.

SERIOUS CHILD

It was cane-burning season when my older sister, Becky, ran away. My mother used to talk about her *vibrations*—what was arguably just intuition, but which she understood as some God-given sense about the world. The cashier at the grocery store gave her good vibrations; my gringa English teacher, bad vibrations. I used to think that if she could really feel something, if just as birds used the earth's magnetic field to navigate, my mother could detect seismic shifts in the room and feel all the good and evil floating through it, clinging to people like a bad odor, then maybe she had seen something clinging to us.

Becky and I had spent so many evenings that summer out in the country, where a quilted landscape, lush with neatly combed cotton fields and citrus groves, was intersected by farm roads and levees. The Rio Grande Valley was so relentlessly flat that the levee roads were the only real vista we could find. Becky was an expert at maneuvering Dad's little Honda between the mud tracks left by F150s that regularly used these private embankments. We'd turn off the road onto the ridge and drive until the view was the same in every direction, field, sky and nothing else. It was the kind of spot you'd go with a boyfriend to get close and do other things that your mother didn't approve of. At least, that's what I would think about. It was a habit of mine to take inventory of the possible sins contained by any and every moment, something that, at that point, had not yet become an exhausting endeavor. As for Becky, out in the country she got quiet, when

she was never quiet. Depending on where your head was at, you could sit there on the outskirts of town as the night's big mouth swallowed the day and feel either far away from home or far away from everywhere else. In any case, being out in the country—taking a step away from your life, taking stock—could make any silly girl go serious.

Flores was a small town, overgrown like a weed between the sprawl of the South Texas prairie to the north and the Mexican desert to the south, crowing in the distance somewhere just beyond the Rio Grande River. Most people thought about leaving but few ever spoke of it. If you did, it was only because you thought you were better than the rest, or so it went. "Crabs in a barrel," Becky called it. And so, many people left without saying a word and not a word was said of them thereafter—a mutual good riddance.

We'd only speak of them in our prayers. After Becky left, if there was nothing good on TV and Dad had been fed, his belly full of rice and beans, Mom would say, "Let's say a quick prayer for your sister," as if that were the only thing she could do to keep from thinking about her. We'd end up praying a whole rosary as we knelt on couch cushions underneath a framed picture of Jesus Christ, who was the most attractive man in Flores, his Anglo face, his strong cheekbones and soft curls glamorously lit in all the portraits of him that hung around town in dry cleaners and carnicerias.

After a while Becky started to call again, but our mother wouldn't let us speak. "I don't want her filling your head with ideas," she'd say.

"At least you're someplace sunny," I once overhead Dad say on the phone. Florida or California. Or L.A., I thought, and tried not to get jealous.

I spent afternoons in Becky's bedroom, trying on her bras over my clothes, reading notes she kept that were folded like origami into footballs, the lines colored in with red and blue pen. Most of the notes were about Zeke.

Zeke was taller and lighter skinned than most of the other Valley boys Becky had to choose from, boys who were brown and squat and in love with their mothers. He lived on the northern edge of town, close to the airport, where eighteen-wheelers kicked up dirt that was sifted onto the road like sand drift and skinny dogs played chicken with the traffic. Mom tried to squeeze him between Becky and me, making a burden of me by forcing me to tag along on their dates that summer, but she and Zeke would find ways to shake me anyhow, give me quarters to play arcade games at the bowling alley, or make me sit in front of them at the movies so they could do what they wanted without me seeing, but I'd hear them kissing and steal glances between the seats. With Becky around, no lesson meant for me ever landed exactly where my mother intended. Instead, it was stirred up in some current that sometimes caught me underfoot and pulled me in, like seeing Becky and Zeke together in a dark theater. I sometimes tried to swim my way out of this current, reaching for words like "right" and "wrong," or "good" and "bad," as if they were buoys in the water, but the harder I swam towards them—well, a current is a current.

…

"Don't let Father Ignacio touch you," my mother said to me in the car on the way to church one Sunday. "Don't even let him shake your hand too long. And always make sure there's someone else there when you're with him."

"You're freaking her out," Becky said.

"Good," my mother said. "You could learn something from her."

"I could get away with murder so long as I'm a virgin!" she screamed.

"Don't talk like that in front of her," my mother said.

Of course there I was, standing in the sacristy before Mass, fiddling with the hem of my altar server's cassock so it wouldn't drag beneath my feet during procession, when I looked up and realized I was alone with him. Terrified, I excused myself to the bathroom and prayed my Mother wouldn't find out.

There was also the time when I was ten and a boy kissed my cheek at the water fountain at school. I cried and cried until they sent me home. When my mother came for me, I told her what had happened. Then I asked her if I was pregnant. She laughed so hard that the fat on her arms wobbled and her eyes filled with tears. But when she was done her face hardened and she said, "No, *mija*." Then she pushed my hair, wet from crying, away from my face and said, "But you're lucky this time. That'll teach you to flirt with *cochino* boys."

For years, every night before I fell asleep, I'd pray to God to keep me from thinking about boys or flirting with boys. I'd even ask him to protect me from having sex with boys, as if it were a thing that just happened to you. *Don't let me get pregnant*, I'd beg, my fingers laced together tightly under the sheets. *Don't you dare let me get pregnant.* And as I prayed I felt something like weakness *and* strength, control and the lack of it, which, I figured, must be what my mother meant by putting something in God's hands. I wondered if there was a way to avoid it, whatever it was that might eventually tempt me into mischief. And I thought of Becky and asked myself, what makes a serious child? What made Becky, and what made me?

We were the same in many ways. Scolded by the same mother, bent over for the same spankings. We learned the same ghost stories from friends at school, stories about La Llorona, the weeping woman, full of regret, looking for the baby she drowned in the canal—a bad decision with a *cochino* boy made legendary. Our world was identical—always egg tacos in the morning and picadillo at night, and always vacations to San Antonio to see the Alamo again. We went to church together and recited the same prayers just loud enough so that our mother would know that we were still paying attention. Despite all of this, where I recoiled, forever in the shadow of the hour of our death, she longed for the sun and wasn't afraid to burn in it.

…

One evening after sunset, when Becky and I were out on a levee, a small plane in the distance surprised us, bobbing and diving only a few feet above the ground it seemed. At first, we thought the pilot was drunk. I watched breathlessly as it skimmed the road we had just driven, getting closer with each pass. Parked there with our lights off, we were invisible to them.

Becky started telling me that at Zeke's place you could feel the jet engines of the airplanes as they flew over his yard on their path to the runway, that she and Zeke would lay in the bed of his truck and that every time the plane roared above them they'd stretch out their arms and legs and, for a moment, dare the plane to fall, feeling exhilarated and invincible when it didn't.

I had stopped looking at the plane, vaguely sensing that whatever threatened us hung on some decision being made next to me. She looked unfamiliar to me there, hypnotized by the peril of each descent and intoxicated each time it missed us.

"Stop it, Becky! Stop!" I said and it startled her.

“It’s okay,” she said and turned on the car, our headlights catching a jackrabbit just as it darted in front of us. But, as if suddenly remembering her point, she asked, “What, don’t you believe what Mom says? God’ll keep us safe.” Her tone was mocking and I couldn’t tell if the cruelty in her voice, something she had only recently perfected, was meant for our mother or for me, for believing her.

The car rocked forward and gravel popped underneath as we made our way back in the direction from which we had come, the plane still buzzing somewhere above us. She drove slowly and cautiously with both hands on the wheel, her way of apologizing. Against the night’s black canvas, I could make out the shadow of something trailing behind the plane as it swooped over us. The shadow thinned and fell, vanishing into the field.

“It’s a crop duster, kiddo,” Becky said as if that somehow removed the threat. She had gotten what she wanted, had sought out to prove to me how flimsy our mother’s lessons were. But she seemed to have realized how cruel a thing that was to do and tried to take it back.

“I know,” I said, surprised at how easily I parroted her bitchiness. “Could you drive a little faster, please?”

She didn’t say anything but the car picked up speed. The rest of the way home I thought of all the other things that she and Zeke probably did in the bed of his truck and elsewhere. I wasn’t exactly sure why, but it seemed to settle my anger in two ways: as I vindictively tallied up her sins to satisfy my own conscience, the process of conjuring the filthiest parts of my imagination somehow proved, I thought, that I wasn’t as pathetic as she had made me feel.

…

It was July, a month before Becky left, deep into the scorch of summer, and we were on our way to South Padre Island. Becky was driving, and her friends were crammed into the passenger seat beside her and with Zeke and I in the back seat. Becky said I could sit on Zeke's lap to make room, and when we settled in she teased, "Don't you two look so cute and cozy together?" Everyone chimed in and I must have blushed because Zeke leaned close and whispered, "Relax, she's just jealous."

After thirty-five miles of coastal wetland, we could see the Queen Isabella Causeway that stretched across Laguna Madre. Becky rolled down the windows—"In case we hit the water," she said—and everyone held their breath to see who could last the length of the bridge. I exaggerated and puffed out my cheeks while I snuck in small breaths through my nose. The humid air that rushed through the open windows stunk of seaweed. Gulls were flying all around us, flapping above the cars, mewing and laughing. My muscles tensed as we approached the highest point of the bridge where you could still see the contrasting shades of asphalt from its repair after the collapse a year before. As we crossed the peak, I felt Zeke's hand slink under my shirt. He laid his palm flat on my back and let it linger there for a few seconds. Then, he ran his finger along the inside hem of my shorts and traced my spine lightly with his fingertips up to the knot of my bikini. I felt a gentle tug on the string. He pulled a little harder and the strings fell loose. I didn't dare look at him, didn't even move; instead, I stared at the choppy marina below us slapping the concrete pillars that disappeared below the water, not quite believing what I was feeling. By the time we descended the bridge and traffic halted at the stoplight he had removed his hand. Everyone exhaled together and laughed, except for Zeke and I, and Becky turned to us and said, "I saw you cheating, kiddo."

Most days that summer I biked to the public library where I'd find an isolated corner hidden among the stacks and sit cross-legged with Renaissance art books between my knees. They were the only kinds of books that didn't make all that naked flesh feel shameful. My favorite was Titian's *Mars, Venus and Amor*, the muscular arm reaching below her, grabbing her ass, his fingers tempting the place between her legs that I, even in the sixth grade, didn't have a word for. The other girls had started wearing real lingerie, the colorful kind with bows and lace. I was still gangly and boyish. And yet, in my daydreams I had a Venus body with hips and breasts, and Zeke's hands were grazing my back, squeezing my thighs, adoring the mounds and peaks of me.

Of course, I never told anyone what had happened on the bridge. I figured, if I kept it secret, then they couldn't call it a sin and take it away from me.

…

One night, Becky came in after I had already gone to bed, though I wasn't asleep yet. I had been thinking about Zeke, hoping to dream about him that night after having read something in *Cosmogirl* about visiting your crush in lucid dreams. When she sat on the bed I pretended to be asleep, but somehow she knew that I was still awake.

"I won't be taking you to the levees anymore," she said. For a second, I was worried that she had found out about Zeke, but as I sat up in bed and scrambled for a way to explain, I was distracted in part by the troubling realization that I only felt guilty when I was close to being caught.

"It's just pathetic," she continued, "daydreaming about the rest of the world, as if it wasn't just right there." I was momentarily relieved to not hear his name, to instead hear her say

something I had heard her say many times before, but the usual spitefulness in her voice was gone and now the words sounded strange and hollow coming out of her mouth, as if whatever had once made her believe them was now gone.

"Did you get in another fight with Mom?" I asked.

"Don't blame her, okay? I know it's my fault that you'll think that, but just don't," she said. I was confused, and I never felt as young as I did in that moment, unable to think of a single thing to say.

"It was always easier for you," she said. It sounded bitter coming out, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see something desperate in her expression that I couldn't detect in her voice. "Just forget everything I've ever told you. That's what's best."

She was crying. She pulled me close and hugged me. I could feel her breasts against me and I wondered what they looked like, and if Zeke liked them, and how long it had been since our mother had seen them. It occurred to me as strange, how many times our mother had bathed us as children and had seen us naked, until the moment when we could hold a bar of soap and remember to wash our own *nalgas* and scrub ourselves clean. Did she understand when it was the last time?—because after that, the body under our clothes became a secret. I wondered whether it was the secret of it that she hated most, and it made me feel closer to Becky to have our mother's hate in common.

"Whatever Mom said to you, she's wrong," I said.

"No, kiddo," she said.

"She is, Becky," I said. "You'll see."

"Hey, don't worry about me. I'll be fine," she said and laughed a little to prove it. "Go to bed now. I'll see you in the morning."

After she left my room, I lay awake replaying what had passed between us, sensing, in a way I never had, that it would matter one day, that a single moment could echo long into the future. What had our mother said to her? She was always saying something, making Becky and I feel like criminals, deviants. And as my mind spun in anger, I hardly noticed my mother and Becky's voices down the hall, the front door open and close, and a car idling outside, its door slamming shut, and the sound of it driving away.

…

For years, we hear about the things we're not supposed to do. If only we hadn't been warned about them so early and often, their temptation made so vivid and alive, because when I got to be Becky's age when she had run away, her sins, the ones my mother and I prayed for together, were the ones I knew best.

I liked tan boys with buzz cuts and blue eyes that descended on our little brown town every fall from places like Minnesota or Ohio, which sounded exotic to us. They were students at the military academy—nice, white boys who would make our Mexican mothers proud. On weekends, the academy buses would shuttle them to the mall or the movies, but most Friday nights we'd spot the stragglers in their uniforms, making their way down the main strip on foot. Sometimes my girlfriends and I would offer them rides to the movies, and they'd pile in, our bodies quickly getting acquainted to the closeness.

We'd sit in the back row of the theater, where the projector beams bounced off of the dust floating above our heads, and give them hickeys or suck on their earlobes while we rubbed their khakis. These things were new to us, but easy to learn, as if we had been born to do them. Afterwards, we'd take them out to the levees where other kids from school hung around a barn that was next to an orchard.

The night it happened, the air was warm and smelled of bitter oranges. He and I left the others around a bonfire and found a dark place where they wouldn't see us. Becky would laugh and my mother wouldn't believe me, but I thought of God when it happened. I expected the guy to be clumsy about it, for us both to fumble and grope awkwardly together, but he wasn't clumsy and it occurred to me that it might not be his first time. That's when I remembered something my mother said about God being everywhere, and I was sure that God was watching us then, watching me fail like so many other girls before me, girls who might have had their first time with him, too. I thought of all the times my mother prayed for Becky and my sins, and all the times I had prayed for my own, and I realized the occasion of it, the way faith *depended* on sin, because out in the middle of nowhere, so far away from everything and everyone, you could only feel close to God just after you had disappointed him.

…

In August they burn the leafy tops off the sugarcane. It takes too much time and effort to sort through all the extra vegetation on top and so, to make it easier to harvest the sweet part, the only part that ends up mattering, they burn it off. When they do, though the fields are outside of town, everywhere in Flores it rains sweet ash that flakes into thin bits like burnt feathers. It was

like that in the morning when I woke up and Becky was gone. I cried for days, but not my mother, not one tear, and for years I held it against her.

When Becky and I were little, we would climb onto the roof of our house and try to catch the ashes in a mop bucket, grab a handful, and rub them between our hands. We'd use it to smear lines on our faces and chase each other around the backyard with branches in our hands, running and whooping. Our mother watched us from the back door through a curtain of ashes, and I remember Becky saying that Mom was part of the game, that the goal was to keep from getting caught by her. But she never chased us, only watched us run around in circles as we pricked each other with our makeshift weapons and tired each other out. And so, for me, the point, which my mother seemed to know already, was never to outrun her; it was always to outrun Becky.

PRAYER

Everything had been exciting at first. My brother and I waited with my father for almost two hours to collect eight sandbags, four for the front door, four for the back, same as everyone. In line, we saw my friends from school and adults from church, my parents' friends and coworkers, our teachers.

The adults discussed their preparations, supplies. My friend's dad had taken his boat out of storage, and Mrs. Alvarado, my Bible School teacher, had filled her bathtub with water.

They had given the hurricane a name, something friendly, your neighbor's name, yet when they talked about him he sounded like a guy you wouldn't want to meet.

Everyone was scared, maybe not of the storm, but in the ultimate sense. It's why people seemed so relieved to see each other, why when Mrs. Alvarado suggested a prayer circle, they all thought it was a good idea. And when someone from the back of the line shouted, "This isn't church," they prayed for him, too.

I noticed a man behind us who was reading a book he had brought with him. As the grownups around me prayed the rosary together in anxious voices, some almost moved to tears, I watched him turn page after page. He didn't look up once. Not to see if the line was moving. Not to check his watch. I didn't know it then, not exactly, that much later I would want what he had: that thing that let him just stand there and read, not afraid, not a care in the world.

When we returned home with the sandbags, we found my mother in the kitchen slamming cabinet doors. The grocery store had sold out of prayer candles. She only had a St. Anthony that she kept under the sink for whenever she misplaced her car keys or her bankcard. She took it out and set it on the counter, saying that anything was better than nothing.

It wasn't until my father asked that she realized she had forgotten to buy batteries for our flashlights.

…

The rain was like ordinary rain. It sounded the same, like those beaded curtains that hippies hang in doorways. And it wasn't acid, didn't melt our hands when we cupped it. It even smelled the same. The boys who lived across the street had lied when they said that hurricane rain smells like *caca*.

The only difference was that it didn't stop. It came at night while I was in the bath. I listened to its soft thud against my bedroom window as I fell asleep, my wet head sinking into the cold pillow. And when I woke up the next morning, the room was dark and the rain was still falling.

Someone was already awake, watching the news in the other room. I could hear the wind outside, beating against the house, making the storm windows thrum and rattle like a chainsaw. I looked outside, expecting to see Armageddon—piles of debris, bodies washed into the yard—but other than some branches and palm fronds scattered around on the grass, there was nothing that lived up to the nightmarish snapshots that had swum around in my head in the days leading up to the storm.

Around lunchtime my brother pointed out that the swimming pool was overflowing. We all looked and then ran to the other side of the house. In the street, the sewers gurgled and a current twisted around the parked cars.

By the time the water reached our front doorstep, a lake had formed in our backyard, engulfing our swimming pool, which was obscured in the depths like some kind of underwater cave. My mother rolled up towels and pressed them tightly against the bottom of the doors while my father and brother propped up the furniture on metal folding chairs. As they worked, I kept watch by the window. The palm trees taunted me, lurching forward and then back. Forward—slowly, slowly, until it seemed inevitable this time—and back.

"Will they fall down on us?" I asked my mother.

"You can pray about it if you're scared," she answered.

So I pictured the long trunk of the tree towering above me, its sharp palms whipping around and shaking loose, crashing down on us. I imagined where it would fall on the house, on which room it would collapse. From these things I prayed for protection. One had to be thorough, I thought. Eliminate all the alternatives. Like how to picture God you had to picture the Devil, too. Then I said Hail Mary's, as many and as fast as I could, speeding through the words as if they had a cumulative power: *Now and at the hour of our death. Now and at the hour of our death.*

Around what would have been dinnertime, the living room carpet squished between our toes like swamp grass, so I prayed harder, setting my mind so firmly on the things that scared me, imagining all the terrible twists.

This was how I learned, in the middle of a hurricane, that fear was a kind of prayer. It took much longer to realize that prayer was just another kind of fear. Still, my mother liked to do it, said it was cathartic—"like talking to God"—and I could see how it was easy to call something so powerful a god.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO FATHER BILL

Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.

Those used to be the words. We'd recite them on our knees, some of us with our eyes closed, some open. They came after the priest's big number, a sing-song of words percussed by the tinny chime of bells, and even now I'm not sure if the bread becomes the body of Christ without them, like, does the rabbit leap out of the hat even if the magician doesn't say *abracadabra*?

With the exception of these words, which are usually whispered, as if they're our most personal and intimate exchange with God, most things we say in church we say in loud and clear voices. In fact, one pastor we had wouldn't move on with the Mass unless he was satisfied with how zealously we had said them, and, like a drill sergeant, he had us say them over and over again until the whole church was practically screaming "Amen." For many years, twin sisters who, together widowed and declining in years, had moved to South Texas from Italy, would lead the congregation in prayer from the front pews, always the loudest voices in the church, declaring in big Italian voices, "Lahda hear ah prreyers." Just to hear them was to know that they believed.

The words didn't always mean much to me. To say them was just the last formality before we could get up and stretch our legs and rub out the carpet patterns branded onto our

knees. I had said them every Sunday of my life, along with all the other holy words I had memorized and then automated. But I wasn't a flippant child. I knew that, because they calmed my mother, the sacred words and rituals must have had some kind of power.

Anxiety had destroyed her nerves. A heavy thunderstorm could send her running laps between the front of the house and the back, checking the puddles forming in the driveway or on the patio, willing the water to abate. This particular anxiety had its origins in a storm that happened when I was very young, when my mind was still half sludge and my memory was only just starting to kindle, and it had forever spoiled her faith in the weather (her faith in general left intact). It was either a tropical storm, or a minor hurricane—I can't exactly remember. Or maybe just a rain shower, blustering its way north from Mexico. We've since archived the event in our family history as simply "The Flood." Truth be told, it didn't matter what did the damage because the damage was done: dining chairs stacked on the dining table, an unplugged TV on top that was wrapped in a comforter in case the ceiling leaked; frames and books and videotapes piled onto a sofa that was balanced on another sofa, the bottom layer submerged in a foot and a half of mud-colored water that had the sweet and sour smell of sewage. Of course, I don't remember the swamp in our living room or the elaborate scaffolding of our home goods. A man in an orange canoe rowing past our house is the only image I can summon from the event, and even then, I might have seen that on TV in the weeks that followed.

But the evidence of this chapter in our lives lingered for decades. I bragged about the watermarks on furniture we salvaged, pointing them out to visitors. My mother hated when I did this, preferring to show off the kitchen cabinets, which were nice and something we could never have afforded without the flood insurance money. But the real damage was the way my mother

trembled when it rained. Our cocker spaniel was just as terrified of storms and took refuge in the oddest places—behind the commode or in the nest of electrical cords behind the TV. But the poor thing was on his own while we tended to our mother. My brother lit pillar candles with guardian angels on them, and I knelt at her feet rubbing her bunions while she prayed the rosary. I could see her fingertips go white as she tightened them around the bluish iridescent beads. Her eyelids, too, were squeezed shut so she had a look of pain about her, like the goal was to shit out a black rock of fear and nerves and then it would be done. It was in those moments that I wondered if the praying was helping or hurting.

But then, her rosary would finish, and though the palm trees were still rocking outside in the wind and even I had started to get nervous watching them flirt with the ground, she had passed into a dopey state of peace, her face suspended in a kind of half smile, her arms limp at her side, her breathing deep and in her belly. The change was often so sudden that I'd wonder if she had been faking all along, for what reason though, I couldn't possibly imagine.

"Thank you, Jesus," she'd say. And, as if she sensed me doubting it, she'd add, "See, God takes care of us." With that she'd get up to find the dog, leaving me on the ground with hands that stunk of feet.

For a while, praying didn't have that effect on me, even though I exerted a considerable effort. I'd bow my head and close my eyes, all sanctimonious, as if the Savior's face was painted on the inside of my eyelids. Once, I lied and told a girl in my catechism class that I had seen the Eucharist rematerialize into literal flesh in the priest's hands. I only remember that I did it, not what I had hoped to gain from doing so. Of course, she never believed it so it didn't feel like a

sin that I needed to confess, but, without acknowledging the deception out loud, it started to fashion itself as the truth in my head and I wondered…could I have seen it and simply…forgotten? Could that memory have become a lie only because it had gathered dust in my mind? After all, I believed in "The Flood," though my memories of that were all second-hand, so distant they felt like fantasies. It seemed to satisfy me that it *could* be true.

Like this, I stumbled into the logic of a believer and found my way into faith, as I understood it. Only say the word and I shall be healed, more or less.

…

Two decades later, the Vatican changed the words: "Lord, I am not worthy *that you should enter under my roof*…"

The new words were clunky, the image too real, too concrete. It was hard not to think of the roof of my mouth, of everyone's mouths, full of yellow teeth and coffee breath. I imagined the piano teacher from my childhood whose breath smelled like rotten milk, the sacred words like a cartoony plume of stink rising from her between her lips. Each time we came to the part where Jesus would enter under our roofs, my concentration slid down into the unceremonious muck, the dwelling place of things like milk breath or armpits or my mother's bunions, especially the biggest one on her fourth toe.

We had a new priest, Father Bill, who was visiting for a few weeks. It was during one of his first homilies at our church that he said, "Life is funny. It's like conducting an orchestra with one hand and wiping your ass with the other," and the whole congregation erupted. A few even clapped like he had said what we had all been thinking for years, and it was a comfort to know that all of us were in the same boat, that it wasn't just sin we were up against but also, perhaps

more so, the detritus of being alive, full of itchy asses and burps and all the other things that felt quite apart from and perhaps even contradictory to the divinity we contemplated every Sunday.

Father Bill had probably made jokes his whole life. He had that kind of face that wasn't meant for seriousness, with a bulbous tip on his nose like a clown's and jowls that sagged like a old dog's muzzle, pulling his lips down with them so that when he said blessings over the Eucharist or divvied it out to the congregation all the words sloshed over his bottom lip and out of his mouth unceremoniously, a splash of spittle always along for the ride. Of course, it should be said that he wasn't condescending or stern like the other priests, and I liked him enough, or something about him, but he was, essentially, a funny man, not a holy one.

Perhaps this is why he was a roamer, a road act, moving from town to town for brief engagements. Never a pastor, always a sidekick, and though he claimed this is how he preferred it, I wondered if his humor about life had betrayed his ambition. After all, the church led with the agony of the Savior on the cross, the ecstasy of sacrificial pain. In the midst of such serious business, it was no wonder nobody wanted to put their soul all the way in the hands of a smiling man.

Still, he was harmless, welcome, refreshing even, so when, during parish announcements at the end of Mass, he mentioned that he preferred staying with a parish family instead of the parochial residence next door, I decided to extend him an invitation. I insisted to myself that the urge to invite him was untethered to any moral payout, and that I had simply done it because it was a good and kind thing to do and that good and kind things came to me quite naturally. But when I saw the congregation swarming around him after Mass and how he entertained them,

shaking hands and cracking jokes, it occurred to me that he looked like a politician and it made me feel cheap and a little pathetic as I settled into the crowd to wait for my turn with him.

I had my daughter, Victoria, alongside me. Victoria had inherited my mother's anxiety about things, hers of the moral sort, so that she fretted over other people's sins like they were a cold she could catch. As is usually the case with children, she couldn't be any closer to God, and I tried not to envy her for it.

"Hope you washed your hands after wiping," I said to Father Bill when I introduced myself, having decided at some point that, despite not being a particularly funny person, my wit would help distinguish me. He looked at me quizzically and my heart stopped. I tried to recover.

"Conducting an orchestra with one hand, and the other?… I enjoyed your homily is what I mean to say."

"You said ass," blurted Vicky, mercifully, and he began to laugh.

"I thought swearing was a sin," she explained.

"Sorry, Father. She's very—" I paused to think of the right word.

"Devoted?" he offered just as I had started to say "opinionated."

"Yes, that's it," I said and bowed my head without knowing why.

"Well, it's only a sin if you mean it to be," he explained, bending to meet her at eye level. Vicky seemed unconvinced. "I didn't use it in a mean-spirited way, you see." Then, seeming either to give up in the face of Vicky's curiosity, which even to me often looked like skepticism, or, perhaps a little doubtful of his own logic, he straightened again and I sensed his desire to move on.

"Well, we were going to invite you to come stay with us, but I imagine at this point someone beat us to it," I said, again with an unfamiliar coyness, trying to project, despite myself, the utmost deference as if to erase the earlier me that had made a joke. *I never make jokes,* I tried to say with my softened expression.

"Actually, no," he shrugged, "most people aren't thrilled about the idea of having a priest hanging around the house. They feel like they're being graded, I think." It occurred to me that I hadn't fully considered this but before I could think of a way out of the invitation Vicky tugged sweetly on my arm and begged me to let him come.

"That being said, bonus points with God if you do," he said and winked, and before I knew what I was saying, I insisted he stay with us.

…

He pulled up in front of our house in an old, beige Volvo. We met him in the driveway to help with his suitcases but his belongings were packed into plastic grocery bags from Midwestern stores I didn't recognize, some full of socks, underwear, white undershirts, some dirty and some clean from the smell of it. There were two bagfuls of books, double-bagged in fact, the handles on the initial bags they were packed in having snapped from the weight. And the last bag was a gift for us, oranges that he had purchased on the drive down from one of those fruit stands along the highway that sell citrus and Mexican pottery. He said they were the most beautiful oranges he had ever seen, and though they looked like ordinary oranges, gleaming and swollen with juice, I took his word for it that these were better than the oranges I knew.

As I gave him a tour of the house, he moved through each room ahead of me with a childlike curiosity, taking liberties to look closely at objects that caught his eye—a framed

picture on a side table, a wall painting. My mother would have hated this. Like most things, a home always looks better in periphery, never closely enough to notice the dust, the clutter, the ordinary neglect. When she was still alive, she leaned heavily on shortcuts that minimized effort but nevertheless assured the casual viewer of cleanliness. Most of these tricks involved closets, cabinets and drawers—she was fond of the way doors kept untidy things in. She'd get around to clearing them out eventually, but, for the time being, what they can't see won't hurt them, she used to say of company, which is what I thought of when we got to the kitchen and Father Bill walked up to the refrigerator and opened it. "Big refrigerator," he remarked and quickly moved on. Perhaps he thought it was complimentary, a sign of his interest. Or maybe he was so used to seeing the proverbial dirty laundry of his congregants that he thought the literal kind was fair game. In any case, I tried to move him along.

"Are you tired, Father? We can leave you alone to unpack," I said.

"Oh, I have all night to do that," he said. He looked around the room and craned his neck to peer into the next.

"The bathroom is just over there," I said, pointing.

"Do you have cable?" he asked.

"We've got satellite," said Victoria, who was already unpeeling one of the oranges, shaking off the sticky threads of rind from her fingertips.

"God bless you," he sighed and slid out of his loafers where he was standing and followed Vicky into the TV room. For the next hour or so, they watched re-runs of *The Nanny* as I finished up a few loads of laundry and started on dinner. The water for potatoes had just gotten to boil when Victoria ran in.

"He snores so loud!" she said.

Father Bill was slumped over in the La-Z-Boy recliner. Vicky tiptoed exaggeratedly around him and held in her giggles with her hands over her mouth. His legs were splayed out and his toes were pointed away from each other, exposing the holes in his socks, one on the pad beneath his big toe and another through which his pinkie toe fit. His knuckles mashed his cheeks and pulled his lip up into a sneer, and one roaming digit was fingernail-deep into his nostril. On the wall behind him hung a framed picture of Jesus that had belonged to my mother, some print of mass production that might have hung in thousands of living rooms, the same no-name artist's rendering that each owner treated as their own personal portal to the divine. In it, Jesus gazed out contemplatively, ever the composed savior with his combed hair and dry-cleaned robes. I once saw my mother kneeling beneath that picture reaching up to touch it as she prayed for another storm to pass. It always worked, of course; the storm always did pass.

Mistah Sheffeeeld, whined Fran through the TV.

"He looks funny," said Vicky, who now stood beside me.

"He does, doesn't he?" I said, afraid to know if we were talking about the same man, and unsure, in fact, of who looked funnier.

…

Whatever I thought I had achieved in the realm of domestic order was thrown into disarray by Father Bill. I can't think of a single thing he did without leaving some shrapnel of his activity behind. God forbid he should have ever had to hide for his life. For example, in the middle of the night he liked to make egg salad, which is only something I knew because somehow, by the next morning, eggshell shards had littered his path around the house. And

though I never saw it, I imagined Father Bill pacing around in the dark, rolling eggs on the wall here or a table there, whatever hard surface happened to be closest, feeling the brittle thing, like a delicate desert skull, softly breaking in his hands. Or, when he brushed his teeth, he dripped foamy puddles of toothpaste onto the faucet head and all around the sink top like a dog flinging his head around to shake the drool off. Or, once in a while, I'd come home to find a pair of socks hanging on a chair or the banister, presumably to dry, though (and maybe I was projecting) occasionally their erratic and distant arrangement from each other suggested some kind of artful prank. Of course, I never sensed any of it was intentional. He was like a teenager, or someone who paid no mind to the mess he left behind because there had always been other people around to clean up after him, other doting congregants who wouldn't dare ask a priest to *maybe, perhaps, would you, could you, not do that? Amen.*

But I didn't like having a thing I couldn't confess, and so when I said my nightly prayers, I found myself pleading for patience which I had learned, after many years of praying, was not a thing one should pray for, that God couldn't grant you a single thing except for the patience to accept *his* will and that that alone would give you the peace you so desperately sought when you whispered to the Lord. My mother knew this; she was good at praying. You'd think it was the kind of thing that's done well if it's done at all, but people can pray all day and night and not get anywhere. It worked fast on my mother, like a medicine that's quick to do its job, cruising through the bloodstream on a jet ski. She never taught me how to do it, never sat me down and said, "Hold your hands this way," and "Say these words." I suppose she expected me to learn by example.

I once went with her to a healing mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan, a massive structure built next to the expressway where the Bishop—at the time, De La Garza—said Mass. Many of the other congregants arrived in wheelchairs or walked with canes. The woman who sat behind us was badly cross-eyed. We were there because my mother had worried herself into such a state over a million little things, not the least of which was whether her suffering continued because she wasn't praying enough. The worries had grown into little red pustules on her arms and ribs and, convinced though she was that it was some kind of punishment, it turned out that she had just given herself shingles.

I had never been inside the Shrine before, but, like some kind of optical illusion, it seemed impossibly larger on the inside than it appeared on the outside. I wondered if I was just one of many who had been tricked, gaping slack-jawed at the domed ceiling painted like the sky and pews that seemed to stretch forever around the altar like a field of collapsed telephone poles, blown over in orderly fashion by some holy, nuclear blast. All of the usual Sunday chatter was absent. People had a grave look about them, already kneeling and praying before Mass had even begun. A group of women near the front were saying the Rosary in Spanish which had always frightened me more than it did in English, sounding less like a prayer and more like an incantation. I had been around believers my entire life, had been to hundreds of Masses. And I knew that people travelled to Lourdes where the Virgin Mary appeared to a woman; that they drank from a nearby stream or splashed its water on them, hoping it could heal. In some cases, it did. I knew that faith made amazing things happen. Or maybe, faith made people believe that amazing things happened, which, to those people, was the same thing. I had heard, and in some cases seen, these fantastic parts of my religion, but it had always felt like a distant relative of

what we practiced, which was a much more serious business. But there it was in front of me, so desperate and so ardent, and it made me want to know, maybe only for a short while, what it felt like to believe as easily as they did.

When the healing portion of the Mass began and we stood and lined up in procession to the altar, I didn't expect my mother to make me go. I didn't need healing, I told her. I was fine. But the truth was that I was scared and she knew it. Up ahead I saw men and women fainting when the Bishop touched their forehead to bless them. When they came to, they were crying and looked relieved, as if some great burden had been exorcised, if not the disease itself. Even still, as we approached the front of the line I prayed that nothing would happen.

My mother went first. I was so nervous, bracing myself for that mystical wind to blow through me, that I barely reacted when her knees suddenly buckled and she collapsed in front of me. Fortunately, two ushers waiting off to the side had been ready for her. Maybe she had that look about her—something in the eyes—and I wondered who would have caught me with both of them occupied. I watched them lower her to the ground, the weight of her, which usually made her look so solid on her feet, now unwieldy, and she flopped onto the tile like warm dough. For a moment, I started to panic, thinking something was really wrong with her, but then I saw the other fainters around her and remembered where we were. All of them, including my mother, had the same look on their faces. Before, it had looked peaceful; but now, not peaceful. Pained. The pain of disease exiting their bodies, I thought, like a river running backwards.

Or…nothing.

There it was, like a clarion call, that thing that had festered in the back of my mind and it nearly knocked *me* down. Yes, maybe their pained look was the sudden, vacuous grief of feeling nothing at all.

When we returned to our seats, I tried to get answers, asked her what happened and if she was okay, but she just raised a finger to her lips and pointed to the altar. When the Mass finished she still hadn't said a word and continued in silence during the car ride home. Was she afraid to tell me what had happened? Confused about the nature of it? She turned on the radio and scrolled quickly through the stations, most of them tejano, barely letting the singers get a word out. She flicked the knob impatiently and when she finally let the frequency rest on static I wondered whether she had just given up or if that was in fact what she had been looking for, as if the crackling electromagnetic hiss gave voice to some cosmic distance that we felt more strongly with every mile we put between the Shrine and us. Or maybe I alone felt that distance growing—between me and what I had just witnessed, yes, but from my mother as well.

Suddenly, as if answering a question I had just asked, though I'm sure I hadn't said anything at all, she said, "I was just praying so hard." Then, as if it clarified the point, she said it again: "So hard."

And that was all. There are many who would have asked what she was praying for, which is a perfectly reasonable question. But what I really wanted to know, which is perhaps the reason why I didn't deserve the answer was this: Was she saying that praying was the reason something happened, or that nothing happened in spite of her prayer?

…

One evening towards the end of dinner, Father Bill had been sharing his thoughts on a homily he was working on. It was always hard to tell if he was soliciting feedback or just in need of an audience. After all, he was an orator by calling. I imagine it's hard not to desire the floor when God himself has summoned you to it.

"I just think it might be helpful to talk a little about faith, about what it really looks like. Everyday, I mean," he said, leaning back in his chair with one hand resting on his bloated belly, the fingers tucked into his shirt between the buttons. Vicky didn't look like she was listening, instead mindlessly dabbing at the pool of grease on her plate, the color and consistency of motor oil, which had oozed from her enchiladas.

"You don't think that's been covered already?" I asked with more snark than I had intended. After two weeks with him, my patience was starting to wear thin.

"You know what's fascinating?" he asked, ignoring me. "What you learn about your congregation when you live among them." I dreaded where this was leading. "Call it the shepherd getting to know his flock," he added, tonguing a mash of tortilla and ground beef, which he had shoveled into his mouth between thoughts.

"Isn't this what you said people didn't like about a priest coming to stay with them?" I asked.

"Well I never said they were wrong," he said cheekily. A piece of food flew from his mouth somewhere onto the dishes in front of him and we all noticed, but he seemed pleased with himself nonetheless.

"Well go on then. Tell us what you've learned from *studying* us."

"Do you really want to know?"

"I'd rather find out here than at church with everyone else on Sunday."

"I wouldn't embarrass you," he said, finally catching on.

"Not intentionally," I added, surprising myself. I reminded myself that this was a priest I was talking to, especially when I noticed Vicky paying attention, having recognized the irritation in my voice. "Please, go on, Father," I demurred and smiled at Vicky to reassure her.

He laughed a little to himself, as if I had just helped prove his point, and I so badly wanted to stand up and leave the room, a thing I had fantasized about so many times in the middle of Mass.

"About ten years ago," he began, "I spent a month at a church further west, right on the border. Just one month, but I did at least a dozen funerals. That's not easy for us, you know, so many like that. But they always happen in waves, just like anything else," he said, shaking his head. "Anyway, it was an old church with no air conditioning, and it was the middle of July. We kept the doors open for a breeze but it didn't do much. Even my cassock had started to feel damp. And the family…talk about adding insult to injury. It was an older woman who had died, someone who had lived a long life, but I got the sense that she still played an important role, like maybe she was the glue, and they knew that they weren't just losing her but also a certain way of being a family. Or maybe not, but I see that happen a lot—everyone's always mourning more than one thing. So, people are caught up in the Mass, going through the motions a bit, their thoughts somewhere else perhaps, and, I'll tell you, this used to be the kind of thing that really got on my nerves, but that was when I still took myself far too seriously. So, I'm sitting there drenched in sweat and fuming a bit and suddenly I see a dog walk up the center aisle. Now, there were a lot of strays in the neighborhood so you'd think it would've happened more often, what

with the doors always open in the summer, but this was the first time I had seen it. He was just a mutt, kind of shaggy, so dirty you couldn't really tell what color he was. But it was remarkable, the way he, or perhaps she, trotted around. I was used to people behaving a certain way in church. They walk a certain way, speak a certain way. They're penitent, you know? And this dirty little dog comes along, walks right onto the altar, sniffs the lectern, makes its way over to the censer and sneezes once he gets a whiff. I think we were all waiting for him to lift a leg but he didn't seem interested in desecration. It was as if the dog had just decided to see what all the fuss was about."

"What did the family do?" I asked. I hated to let on that he had grabbed my attention, but I was inexplicably captivated.

"They were furious! One of the woman's daughters tried to chase the dog out. Then another joined her. Soon there were at least three of four people running after the dog, and all the while it just kept darting between pews having the time of its life."

Vicky had burst into a fit of giggles, and while Father Bill allowed it, unable to stop himself from enjoying her amusement, I could tell he was trying to keep the moment from getting away from him. He straightened in his chair, readying himself and us for the point.

"I couldn't understand why the dog had made them so angry. After all was said and done, it was only a minor disturbance. But they were really distraught. I thought about it for a long time, even after I moved on to another church. And one day, it dawned on me."

He was now speaking with peculiar air that made me squirm. Was it his direct gaze? The slow, considered way he was moving through his sentences? I was deeply troubled by this new,

strange sensation of being addressed so directly by a priest. He wasn't speaking to an entire congregation anymore; he was speaking to me.

"Faith," he said, as if it was obvious. "Our lives don't make it easy. They're messy, banal: where is God in a traffic jam, and so on. People don't like anything that makes it any harder than it already is."

"Like the dog," I said.

"Exactly," he said, wagging his finger. "That dog was trespassing on sacred ground, mocking them in their most vulnerable moment. You know, you'd think that people at a funeral would want to be comforted, hear that their loved one is with God and so on, but actually that's not the case." He corrected himself. "I mean, that *is* the case, but it's not what they want to hear necessarily. It's the rituals they need, the call and response, the Eucharist, the bells. They need it to lift them out of the muck of their everyday lives. They need it," he concluded, wiping his mouth with a napkin and tossing it onto his plate, "to feel worthy."

I heard him, I really did; after all, it was the first time he sounded like a real priest and I wanted to listen. But something still nagged at me, as if there was some variable that he was forgetting. I knew what it was, but I wasn't ready to talk about that with him. Others might understand, but it was precisely because of who he was, what he was, that he wouldn't.

"Does it help them believe?" I asked, my voice slightly brittle coming out.

He considered this carefully, waiting before he spoke. "You know, I don't know," he said, sounding surprised. "But even if you don't come around, it certainly occupies the time."

…

I wonder why it's so easy for my daughter to believe. Occasionally, she talks to God, out loud and everything, like he's in the room, the way my mother used to talk to the Virgin Mary. Theirs is a relationship with the Divine that I'll never understand. As I said, I try not to be jealous of her for it, but it sure does feel like there's some kind of gene that skipped me. It's actually a comfort to think of it that way, though I know it's all nonsense. But for all my bitterness I still want to protect her faith, make sure it lasts as long as humanly possible.

There's a scrap of paper I keep in my nightstand, slid between the pages of a book of little consequence. Vicky found it one day, nosing around my things. Thankfully, she's too young and innocent to gather anything from it. All she did was practice her name on the back. But she'll remember it, I think, and come back to my nightstand to look for it one day. That's what I worry about.

It's not my scrap of paper so much as it's my mother's, a record of the very end when the tubes in her mouth kept her from talking, and so kept her from praying. In a way, then, this paper was her last prayer. A few disparate lines spaced apart, some of them illegible, scrawled hastily by her trembling hands:

Last night they put me in a straight jacket I panicked and cried this morning because they didn't let me out

When will they take out the tubes

I just got the first shot

This evening The doc said

At noon

I'm scared.

The last line is written clearly, unmistakable. I hate many things about it, but especially how it stands alone, like she knew the room that it deserved. It depresses me, this punctuation at the end of a life full of faith.

I am on the other side of this prayer, sitting next to her too-firm hospital bed with its starchy sheets, the only one answering. There is no way to remember what I said in response. By now, any memory of it has been replaced by all the things I've thought to say since then. I wish I could remember. I hope I said something that gave her comfort, but I think we had both started to suspect that I was the worst person for the job. And so, for that reason, I wonder if that last line was less a prayer and more of a confession to me. Or, a concession—*well lookee, you were right after all*. Faith is a thing that bends and bends until it breaks. This is what she was saying, more or less. We make room for so much, trying to fit stray dogs and traffic jams into the celestial pattern, and each new thing bends it a little more until, in the face of death, it can take no more and snaps.

But how beautiful to have believed for a time.

And so I plan to hide this scrap of paper, mostly from Vicky, but also a little from myself. I would like to forget it altogether, in fact, if only He'd just say the word.

MIRACLE MAN

When a tree falls on a man and he dies, it's a tragedy. When it falls on a man and he lives, especially a man like Victor, it should teach him a lesson. That's how Sylvia felt about it. Her husband wasn't a bad man, at least, no worse than most men in Flores, full of onion gas and prone to exaggeration—so, bloated on two accounts.

Her father, for instance, had for decades let the family believe in an accumulated wealth in the tens of thousands. He sold used books and comics out of a renovated train car, but nobody, not her or her mother or her two brothers, ever doubted that such a venture could be profitable. After all, he had the gusto of a successful man. But when the bill collectors came to the house they all knew the fools he had made of them all because he was too ashamed to be the fool himself.

Sylvia knew better than to marry a man like her father, but knowing better was one thing, and finding better was another thing altogether. To Victor's credit, and Sylvia's for that matter, he was a romantic who had pursued Sylvia with little restraint: love letters filled with poetry, saccharine and rhymed, even when the syllables were too many or the vowels mismatched, and ambitious dinners, many of them, always stewed and tasting too much of cumin. No prideful man would grovel the way he did in the beginning.

Only later, once her notions of love had aged, could she see the way a man's pride hides itself once its master has caught on to its own folly, like a bacteria mutating in order to skirt around an antibiotic. To put it another way, he was a man used to his own stink, and so it wasn't a matter of being too proud to admit the meals or the poetry were bad; he just couldn't see it.

She tried to remember this. A wife's patience, it occurred to her one day when she was feeling particularly merciful, depends on making excuses for their husbands.

…

Her memory of the day the miracle happened often lingered not on the event itself but on the half hour or so before it, a period of time about which she sometimes felt naïve and stupid, other times (most times) wistful. 'The Devil you know,' those mornings were....

It happened on a Saturday, what used to be a day off, but women with paralyzed husbands don't get days off, and she tried to be the graceful sort that she never had been before and ignore this new, unenviable fact of life. She had been sitting outside on the back patio, watching her little dog inspect the perimeter of the yard, occasionally lifting his back leg to pee on something of interest. A bush, a fence plank. It was early and the sun hadn't shown itself entirely but the birds that lived in their pecan tree and occasionally perched on the chlorine buoy that bobbed in their swimming pool were already at it, squawking to each other from one yard to another, across the alley, and down the street. One bird in particular emitted a sound like a giant zipper, and as if the zipper had caught someone's groin between its metal teeth, its song ended with a screech.

Her eyes stung with exhaustion as she tried to find some stillness among the racket. It had been a difficult night. Victor had gotten up twice to pee, which meant she had gotten up twice.

The first time, she had helped him out of bed and onto the plastic commode that now lived next to the bed, and when he was done she had helped him back under the covers. But the second time, only an hour or so later, she had slept right through his calls. It wasn't until, drifting out of a pleasant dream, she shifted onto her side and felt the sheets damp beneath her that she had noticed Victor was awake.

"You let me piss myself, goddamnit," he said bitterly.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"What do you think I've been trying to do the last ten minutes?" he asked.

"It's not like I was ignoring you. You think I want you to pee on me?" He didn't say anything but she could feel him stiffen with anger.

The left leg of her pajama pants was soaked through but she wanted to get Victor changed before his mood became unsalvageable. She pulled a clean towel underneath his naked lower half and removed his soaked clothing. Then she put a fresh pair of underwear and shorts on him and helped him up and onto the chair so she could take the sheets off the bed. He was paralyzed from the waist down, but his arms lay limp and she sensed that he had hardened himself as she helped him up, as if he were vindictively making himself heavier with whatever reserves of movement he still retained somewhere deep inside his muscles.

By the time she had gotten clean sheets on and put Victor back into bed, she was too awake to lie down again. She went to the living room and put on QVC, hoping the empty chatter would lull her back to sleep, but she couldn't bear to hear how hopeful they sounded about whatever useless product was for sale. Before, she had wanted those things, was good at imagining her life around them and pitting her happiness on a single addition. Only a few months

prior she had decided that softer sheets were something her life *needed*, and as she remembered this irony, and the wet sheets she'd have to wash later on, her heart ached for that life. Now, she just needed sleep, she thought as she heaved her body round and round in the recliner. Tired of trying and failing, she decided to get up for good and make some coffee.

She liked it in the backyard where there was no detritus of the accident lying around. No prescription bottles of pain medicine, or piles of neglected laundry, or rented rehabilitation equipment scattered everywhere. She could pretend that the house she sat outside of was a different home, that the husband sleeping in that bed was not hers, and that the only problems that lay waiting for her inside were minor and conquerable. She thought of a card that a friend from church had given her shortly after the accident. It said, "God only gives us what we can handle." The letters were embossed in blue under a pair of bodiless outstretched hands. She hadn't felt comforted, hadn't felt special for being chosen to endure a little more than the rest simply because she was capable. Frankly, she would've rather been one of the weak ones who didn't have to wipe their husband's ass.

As if she were being punished for the thought, it was then that she remembered she was still wearing pants soaked in Victor's urine. Tired and resentful, she left her coffee and dragged herself inside, but as she opened the back door she could hear Victor screaming her name from the bedroom.

She ran to him, imagining all the ways her life was about to get harder, dreading what she would find, what new bone would be broken. *Curse that bone*; *do your job,* she thought, feeling as if Victor's body was in rebellion against her.

He was standing beside the bed when she walked into the room, gaping down at the legs that held him up. Prepared as she was to see Victor on the floor pulling at the sheets or cradling his bleeding head, in the midst of her relief she didn't notice that he was standing.

"What's wrong?" she even asked. After all, she had seen Victor standing on his own two feet for over 30 years—why should it seem so odd when he had only ceased to do so a little less than a year ago?

"Look," he said and took a tremulous step forward.

Sylvia screamed. "You'll hurt yourself, Victor! Sit down!" She grabbed his arm and tried to force him into bed again.

"Just look," he said again, pushing her away.

At first he held his left arm up and to the side, like a man walking the high wire. Sylvia remained close, ready to catch him.

"Ya! Give me some space. You'll make me fall," he said.

"You're going to make yourself fall!"

He looked at her defiantly and dropped his arm to his side.

"I can't watch this," she said and looked away, but she could hear his bare feet slap the tile, heavy and erratic, like a baby walking.

"My God," she said finally, sitting down on the bed as if it were her legs that were now giving out. "How—what do you think—"

"There was a man," he said in a way that almost seem practiced. "A few months ago. Do you remember? He had long, white hair. He told me something, and I didn't think it meant anything, but I prayed about it anyway."

He paused, and it irritated her that, at a moment like this, he would delight in the drama of it. “Well?” she asked, waiting on the edge of the bed looking up at him. He suddenly seemed so tall and it occurred to her that it had been almost a year since he had stood over like this.

“He put his hands on my head like this,” and with one hand on top of the other, Victor pressed firmly on Sylvia’s head. Sylvia closed her eyes, surprising herself at the instinct to play along, but then he removed his hands. She opened her eyes. He had taken a step backwards, hesitant, she thought, to let her share too much in *his* holy experience. “He said that I would do two things again. Walk and—and make love to my wife,” he said.

“Victor—”

“I know it sounds crazy, Sylvia,” he carried on, “but I felt something.”

“You *felt* something,” she repeated, embarrassed when she realized he wasn’t talking about sex. “What are you trying to say, Victor?”

He thought for a moment, putting his hands on his hips like he was thinking through a mechanical problem, which it technically was.

“I mean, do you think he was a— you know?” He didn’t want to be the one to say it. Who does in a situation like that? Who ever wants to be the ridiculous one to go out on that limb and join the ranks of people who see the Blessed Mother in a tortilla or the face of Jesus on a tree stump?

“What? An angel?” she said, filling in the blanks.

“I don’t know,” he said defensively. “Do you?”

Sylvia tried to remember the longhaired man. Ever since the accident, dozens of strangers had come up to him at church to wish him well, and they said all manner of things, some as

cryptic as the longhaired man's divinations. One woman they didn't know recounted a dream she had about Victor in which he was the eagle on the Mexican flag, the one sitting atop the cactus wolfing down a serpent—the eagle didn't look like him, of course, it looked like an eagle, but she knew that it was him, she explained. Around tragedy, everyone fancied themself a prophet. No, the longhaired man didn't stand out in her memory, and anyway, her thoughts had been pulled to the last time she and Victor had had sex.

For the closing of that chapter of their marriage they couldn't blame the tree that had fallen on him; all that business had ceased long before. She wondered if Victor had actually prayed to make love to her again, if that had been something he was wanting, or if he only cared to walk, would have been happy with that alone, and that if given the choice between making love to her and walking, he would have chosen the latter. And could she blame him? Could she blame him for any of it, she often asked herself, even before the accident, but this was not the time to figure it out once and for all, not in the wake of something amazing like Victor walking when he should not have been, when God had decidedly taken that away. But hadn't he given it back, as well? And from which should they extract their divine lessons—the former or the latter?

"I don't know, Victor," she finally answered, and they remained together in that silence for what felt like a long time, as if the explanation would materialize in front of them. But it didn't, and with each passing moment the novelty of Victor standing faded a little. No one ever thinks about ten minutes after a miracle. The first thing you eat. The first commercial you see. The rest of life stays ordinary, only everything is moved a degree or two to the left.

Sylvia stood and, meeting Victor at eye level for the first time in a year, was suddenly moved to touch him. She put her palm to his cheek and held it for a moment. It wasn't something

she had ever done before, and she wasn't quite sure why she was doing it now. She could tell he was just as surprised, and, embarrassed for both of them, she removed it quickly.

"I need to change," she said and kissed him quickly where her hand had been. "My pants are covered in your piss."

They worked out that it had been about three months since the mystery man had laid his hands on her husband. She thought it funny how a stranger putting their hands on you ordinarily made someone memorable, but once word got out, people loved touching her healed husband even more than they loved touching the crippled one. At church, of course, but also at H.E.B. while grocery shopping, or out for dinner. One time, Victor was standing at a urinal when the man next to him looked down and asked to touch him. The man had been having problems with his wife. "In the bedroom, you see," he told Victor. "I've tried everything. I need a miracle."

That's what everyone called it. Sylvia had grown to loathe the word. The local newspaper was the first to call it that, even before the church. Most of Victor's doctors didn't go that far, which Victor concluded was a matter of pride.

"God forgive their egos," he said. "They can't admit that some things are out of their control."

But the town of Flores wasn't short on believers and a few doctors relented.

"There's no way around it," one of them said. "That your husband is even alive right now, much less walking around, is miraculous. Praise God, you know?"

Victor was sitting right there next to her in the exam room but the doctor said it to Sylvia regardless, and Victor nodded serenely, as if pitying Sylvia for not having reached that realm of enlightenment where he was presently dwelling.

"You should find that man and buy him a car or something," the doctor cracked. Sylvia had wanted him to keep the part about the man out of the story, especially with the doctors, but Victor disagreed, felt he shouldn't keep the work of God a secret.

"I owe the man something," Victor added solemnly. "He saved my life."

As for Sylvia, she wanted to slap that man, or the doctor, or Victor, or all of them.

It didn't take long for people to start driving by the house and taking pictures with their phones. They posted the photos to Twitter and tagged them #*MilagroenFlores*. Sylvia swore that in one of them she could see herself through the living room window and, horrified, she started keeping the curtains drawn. Victor, on the other hand, was fascinated with the miracle's existence on social media. One of the young guys at the church had shown him how to keep up with the action on Twitter and every once in a while she'd catch Victor checking on "the numbers" in between rounds of solitaire. Of course, it was only a matter of time before it fell into the hands of teenagers in town and soon the miracle's hashtag was attached to things like a video of a kid breakdancing in the cafeteria or a picture of some innocent girl's big, round bottom.

"Ay, Victor, they're just kids," she reassured him.

"They don't believe in God anymore," he said, clicking his teeth and angrily scrolling through the posts too quickly for her to read them over his shoulder.

"You're not the only person who gets to believe in God, Victor. It's the miracle that's hard for them to swallow. People don't believe anything they read these days," she said.

The area around his desktop computer was cluttered with little vials of holy oil and holy water, prayer cards with saints on them, rosaries, small pink and blue bears holding pillows printed with faithful words—the spoils of being a walking miracle, in addition to the gift of walking itself, of course.

"You want me to clear some of this up?" she asked, starting to collect some of the cards.

"That's it! They need to see me," he said, ignoring her. "Just like Jesus had to appear to his disciples to make them believe."

"*Pos* they're teenagers. What are you going to do? Walk up to them at the movies and say 'Look, I can walk now'?"

"Mr. Villareal is a vice principal at Flores High School," he said, stoically scrolling through GIFs of miraculous, twerking asses.

Before the miracle, social currency was earned with men like Mr. Villareal or Mr. Ortega, who were in the Men's Club at church and served as ushers and Eucharistic ministers. He always insisted on getting to Mass early, and though he never said as much she knew it was to socialize. She tried not be bothered by the fact that a manly handshake from one of them could brighten his day more than most anything. *How are you doing Victor? Is Sylvia giving you a hard time, Victor?* They squeezed his shoulder tenderly or prayed over him, and doing so seemed to satisfy each of them a great deal, as if their well wishes meant they had done their part. *Victor, God let you live for a reason. He has something special in mind for you*.

That last one she heard a lot.

Sylvia wasn't the sort to go around thinking she was special. In fact, to think that you were was to consider yourself entitled to something that you weren't, to think yourself superior, to inherently regard all the rest as less than special. That being said, she supposed it was the kind of sentiment that was allowed when someone was so obviously down on their luck. Better to regard certain circumstances as special rather than tough; a crap hand; plain ol' rotten luck. *Don't worry about those bum legs, Victor—you're special*! But Victor ate it up, really got it drilled in there that he was chosen. *Chosen.* Not just in the wrong place at the wrong time, because who's ever heard of a palm tree falling on a man walking his dog for no reason whatsoever? *Everything* happens for a reason, or so went the million different reassurances Sylvia had heard in the months following the accident.

Of course, Sylvia thought, she was chosen too: chosen to wait on the chosen one.

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The high school couldn't interrupt classes with a whole assembly just for Victor, so they decided to fit him into the pep rally that took place during last period on football Fridays. Victor and Sylvia arrived to the gym early, where several students wearing grass skirts and plastic leis were busy braiding and hanging streamers. Some were taping paper palm trees to the cinderblock wall of the gym and a few were unraveling a long roll of butcher paper that had been painted with the words "Pummel the Panthers." Centered on the massive wall across from the bleachers was a 20-foot portrait of a cardinal, Flores High School's mascot, with bulging muscles ripping the seams of his football jersey and eyebrows rotated almost vertically in rage. The radio was being pumped through the loudspeaker, playing a sexy reggaeton beat that one of the girls swiveled her hips to. Sylvia had to shout to get her attention.

"My husband is Victor Marroquin," she said and waited for the young girl to recognize the name. "He's the guest speaker today. The, um—" She didn't want to have to say it. "His legs," she said instead, motioning at Victor's lower half.

"Oh yeah," the student said. She turned and shouted to someone, "Hey, Cassie, it's the miracle guy." A girl by the locker rooms, presumably Cassie, was talking to someone in a cardinal costume that, in its retro varsity sweater, was decidedly less menacing than the version staring down at them from the wall. She looked to where Sylvia and Victor stood.

"Where do we put him? Am I supposed to get him a chair?" the girl asked.

"Can't he walk? Like, isn't that the miracle?" said Cassie.

"Oh yeah," the girl said. "You can stand right, sir?" she asked Victor.

"Of course I can stand," Victor said, not helping the situation.

"We'd like to be able to sit at some point," said Sylvia. And to Victor, "I'm not going to stand the whole time."

The girl looked confused. "Hey, he needs to sit," she shouted back to Cassie.

"I don't *need* to," said Victor.

"We'd *like* to," insisted Sylvia, to Victor as much as the girl.

Sensing the issue hadn't been resolved, Cassie walked over, visibly annoyed by the simple demands of being in charge of pep rally decorations, and Sylvia felt compelled to offer that they switch for a day. "Okay, sir. We can put you right here in front," said Cassie. She motioned to the front row of bleachers, which had printed "Reserved" signs placed on them.

"Are those for us?" Sylvia asked.

“That’s for the football captain and the head cheerleader. But you can sit there, too, I guess.”

“There he is, man of the hour!” said Mr. Villareal, who was walking towards them dressed in the same formal clothes that he wore every Sunday and a school ID tag around his neck. Sylvia was surprised at how squarish he looked outside of church.

“Sorry I’m running late, sir,” he said, reaching out to give Victor a firm, two-hander. “Meetings all afternoon. But the kids, they’re really excited for this.” They looked around at the fluorescently lit gym and the glittery teenage girls standing around talking and laughing, oblivious to their presence. The three of them, helpless without the Sunday pleasantries, sat on the bleachers as the dance beat filled the silence.

“Why the palm trees?” Sylvia asked, finally.

“The students pick a theme for every pep rally. I guess it’s a Hawaiian thing?” he explained. Sylvia watched it—the palm tree that had chosen Victor as its victim—slowly dawn on him. “Oh my god, Victor. I can have them take them down. I didn’t even think about it.”

“It’s okay,” said Victor. “It’s symbolic, no? They have their enemy,” he motioned to the Pummel the Panthers sign, “and I have mine.” The palm trees stood motionless across the gym. Sylvia side-eyed the buff cardinal looming over them.

The mascot was first up, stumbling along with the cheerleaders through a skit that was maybe supposed to be funny but Sylvia couldn’t figure out how. Then the dance team performed, pumping their lithe, spandexed bodies feet away from where Sylvia and Victor sat. Victor was bobbing his head and tapping his foot to the music, every gesture now exaggerated somehow as

if every nerve and muscle had been not only healed, but also reinvigorated. Just watching him made Sylvia tired.

Before long it was Victor's turn, and as Mr. Villareal introduced him to scattered applause, Victor nervously adjusted his tie and picked off a dog hair from his pant leg. Sylvia had gotten his best suit dry-cleaned the week before at his insistence. "I don't want to look like an invalid," he had said, though Sylvia still didn't understand why a suit was necessary. She had to admit, now that he was wearing it he looked handsome.

When Mr. Villareal handed Victor the mic, he fumbled with it for a few seconds and the feedback made the crowd recoil. Some laughed. In the bleachers behind her, titters and whispers sporadically erupted. Next to her, the cheerleader and football captain discreetly took a selfie. Victor didn't seem to notice, was saying something about God's plan and lifting his legs one at a time like a puppet whose wooden body had just been made into flesh. *I'm a real boy,* she imagined him exclaiming.

She turned around to look at the crowd. Of course, she would never admit that she got a little satisfaction out of watching them knock Victor down a peg or two, but what she saw instead was a sea of blank, bored faces, some lit up by the radiant glow of their cell phones, which they thumbed at slack-jawed and empty-headed. Hundreds of little dummy souls wholly untouched by this tragedy and mystery that had graced her life. They couldn't know what the days were like for her when she woke up thinking Victor would never walk again, when he got to be the saint everywhere he went, and she the slave. *I don't care about you either*, she wanted to scream at them. It was the first time it had occurred to her to be grateful for what had

transpired, that perhaps that longhaired man had blessed Sylvia, not just Victor, and that this was more her miracle than his that they were ignoring.

Then, she saw him, in the last row at the top of the bleachers in the very corner of the gym—a man with long, white hair. She squinted to make him out more clearly. He didn't look familiar, but there he was, serene and attentive, at least, that's how she read his face as she examined it for angelic qualities. Where were his robes, his ringlets, his enormous wings? Was *that* her angel? But how ordinary he looked. She looked at Victor to see if he had noticed but he was still blabbering to the students in the other direction. Should she stop everything and call attention to him? But how stupid she would look if he were just a man. And if he were an angel, would he really just fess up to it, and who would believe him without proof? Before she could decide, Victor had started wrapping up and the students were already reacting to the preparations happening off to the side under the basketball hoop, where several football players were helping each other tie coconut bras over their jerseys. As Victor finished, the tepid applause bled into the uproar for the athletes who, anxious to revive the crowd, were already pumping their arms, ready to lead everyone out of the gym and towards the practice field for the bonfire. A swarm of students quickly emptied onto the floor as the band played the alma mater, and Sylvia and Victor were swept up in the crowd as they shuffled en masse out of the building. In the bustle, Sylvia lost track of the longhaired man and she frantically spun around, scanning the horde on her tippy-toes.

"What are you looking for?" asked Victor.

"Just wait," she said excitedly, but as they were pushed along there was still no sign of him.

Occasionally students would shove past them, panting and happy, laughing loudly, some with blue or red candy stains on their tongues, holding onto their friends to keep from being separated, and, not being able to help it, they'd notice Victor, recognize him as the guy from before, the miracle guy. They'd look at him a funny way, and then her. What *was* that look on their faces? Not quite pity. Something else, something more hurtful: she must be the miracle guy's wife, the witness, the un-blessed, dragged along on this sideshow. How embarrassing, that glance said. And then…they forgot her. With her still in their sights, she saw them delete that silly man and his sad wife from their happy, carefree lives. Their friends tugged on their arms and they carried on ahead of them, laughing, so light on their feet without all of that baggage.

"Sylvia, what is it? What did you see?" asked Victor, the crowd thinning around them.

Not again, she thought. "Nothing, Victor. I was mistaken," she said to him, keeping the sighting to herself. She couldn't bear to be in both their shadows.

That evening, she tried to shake off her anger. She reminded herself, as she had many times before, that of the inconveniences she had endured in the thankless months before the miracle, none could be greater than not being able to walk or feel your legs. So what if he never noticed her slaving away, wordlessly accepting every overture? And sure, maybe he had never once said thank you.

Feeling the anger rise again, she grit her teeth at the thought.

NO—she batted the thought away. She would be the picture of patience. *She* would be the saint. Maybe only God himself would know that in the end, but that's all who mattered wasn't it?

Victor was quiet all evening. Sylvia wondered if maybe he *had* noticed the disinterested audience and had been humbled into silence. As she pondered his embarrassment, she doted on him more than usual, like she had before the miracle (and many years before that, now that she thought about it). She served him dinner, got up to fetch him seconds, cleared his plate and refilled his drink, even laid out his pajamas for him and helped take off his shoes. He needed none of it, and yet, she would do this for him, poor thing. She hated to see him brought down so low even though part of her thought it was good for him. Of course, she tried not to celebrate. After all, she was God's humble servant.

"I'm proud of you, Victor. For what you did today. I hope you know that," she said as they were getting ready for bed. She untucked the sheets on his side of the bed so he could get in. She noticed that he sat first, then swung his legs over onto the bed, the way he used to before he could walk, and her heart ached again.

He nodded. "I feel right with God about it." At the foot of the bed, his feet pitched the sheets like a tent. As he flexed them over and over again, the blankets were pulled off of her.

"Good. That's a great attitude to have," she said encouragingly, patting his leg to settle him and smoothing the sheets over her as she inched her way deeper under the covers. "They're just kids, like I said."

"Exactly. I told you they had to see me. It made all the difference. Did you see their faces?"

She turned her head to look at him, desperately searching his face for some indication of a joke. "Did *you* see their faces, Victor?" she asked.

“I could feel their spirits lifted, Sylvia. I mean, it was beautiful, the energy that filled that room. I don’t know if you felt it. Maybe only I could. Really beautiful.” He had started a set of leg lifts as he spoke, grunting obnoxiously at the effort, as the blankets were hoisted like a ghost rising up from under the covers.

“Stop *doing* that!” she blurted, slapping the covers down.

“Stop doing what?” he asked, wide-eyed and confused.

“You’re—you’re pulling the sheets off me goddamnit,” she said and jerked the blanket away from him.

“I’m just doing my exercises.”

“Well stop it. You’re not the only one sleeping in this bed.”

“Why are you upset with me?”

“I’m not upset. Why would I be upset? I should be grateful. Thank you, God,” she said towards the ceiling. “Thank you, strange man who healed my husband.”

“So you don’t believe me. You think I’m crazy for believing he was an angel?”

She thought of the longhaired man she had seen earlier that day and how she had believed, no question. Then that pesky guilt started to seep in as she started to regret keeping it a secret and making him doubt.

“I can’t help that God chose me, Sylvia,” said Victor.

“Please, I’m not jealous of you, Victor,” she said incredulously.

“Well, you don’t seem happy with all this attention I’m getting.” He paused to let his grand conclusion settle. “Ah, see, you think I don’t notice anything.”

She sat up suddenly, so suddenly in fact that Victor crouched a little as if afraid that she would smack him.

"Okay, so this man, this angel, he's responsible?"

"In a way," said Victor, tentatively.

"We should be grateful to him? For everything *he's* done for us."

"Well…yes," he responded.

"Turn off the lights, Victor. I'm tired and I want to go to sleep." She threw herself back down onto the bed with her back to him.

"Wait a minute, this isn't done yet. I'm not tired," he said.

"Of course *you're* not tired," she said, which was the closest she had come to telling him everything. She was thrilled at her own honesty. This was it: her heart thumped faster as she waited for him to finally make sense of everything, to place into context every irritation or impatience she had ever let slip. Then, she heard a heavy sigh and the click of the bedside lamp.

Sylvia woke a few hours later. The air was heavy with quiet and the soft blue early morning light had begun to wash out the bedroom's darkness. She reached over to her side and felt sheets and bed, no Victor. She got up and walked through the house, but he was nowhere. His car was still in the driveway, his wallet on the kitchen counter. She had started to get nervous, but then she looked through the kitchen window out onto the backyard and saw him.

He was sitting where she had so many mornings, on the patio chairs they had purchased as a set decades ago when they were first married and setting up house together. They had talked about having friends over for BBQ and margaritas. Then, with even grander plans, they had dug

out the lawn and added a swimming pool. And there were a few parties, but only a few. Some things had panned out, some hadn't. Some had gone horribly, but that was the case for everyone, she supposed. She had at least proven to herself that she could get used to a large helping of hardship, but she was terrified of more, as if, at some point, she could reach her limit. And then what?

Victor, thinking he was alone, lifted his legs and stretched them out in front of him. He prodded at his thighs with his fingers as if testing for doneness—no; it dawned on her—testing for feeling. She thought of all those mornings she had had alone to herself when she couldn't sleep, when she was afraid of what the day ahead would take from her and what horrible reality would replace it. Now he was afraid, she realized, because a miracle, with no earthly explanation, could be taken away in the same manner it was given: in the middle of night while you're sleeping.

She left him there, alone with his thoughts, thoughts she assumed but could not know for sure. Maybe she was making excuses for him; even still, she went back to bed and slept soundly for a long while.

MRS. CIGARROA

It was only after we were engaged that I was invited to Sunday lunches with Cristiano Cigarroa's parents, and even then I sensed that I didn't belong, which was ironic considering.

In 1977, to go across was very easy. No passports or fences. It used to be that you could just decide to drive there without a second thought. And we would—it was the thing to do when it was still the place to be seen, especially on Sundays after Mass. Take the Cadillac over the bridge and let the valet handle it. If El Rio was too busy, there was always La Palapa. And sometimes, if Cristo's father wanted a sirloin, we'd just go straight to La Palapa because their steaks came from the best carnicería in Nuevo Laredo. Everyone knew that and if you didn't know that then you didn't have any business being there.

His mother was still mourning the death of Coco Chanel six years earlier. "*Una francesa elegante*," she wept as she unkinked her necklace and smoothed the Savior against her blouse. She was constantly fixing herself in this way, petting the tweed of her skirt and jacket like it was chinchilla. The woman lived in tweed, even when it was ninety degrees outside, but I never saw her break a sweat. She'd baptize herself in Chanel No. 5, and sometimes she'd bring the bottle in the car, insisting I apply some before we went into the restaurant, which I tried not to take personally.

Inside, she'd order the alambre for both of us to share. "*Tiene vegetales*," she'd say, but they were caramelized in ham fat, the onions limp and sweet and charred around the edges. Between courses she'd pick at Cristo, sweeping dandruff from his shoulder or correcting a furious sideburn with a licked thumb. In those days, I had been blow-drying his hair to look like John Travolta's, but she didn't care for his modern look.

She always ran into someone, usually families we had just seen at church. She pointed out daughters of friends across the restaurant, many recently married, their hair and skirts and last names ironed out—no kinks, no wrinkles, no rolled letters.

"*Mira, parece que Natalie Wood, sí Cristo*?" she'd ask. How retro, I thought, but you couldn't pay me to turn around and look at that light-skinned whoever. I'd just sit there like a windowpane as Cristo's father, useless as always, twitched his eyebrows and my Cristo fed himself another bite of steak, used to his mother needling his fiancé but no better at defending me. If the grease dripped down his chin, I knew to sit there and ignore it. The last time, when I had pinched a corner of my cloth napkin and dipped it in my water glass to fix him up, she laughed. "*Siempre estás limpiando*," she said, smiling. "Are you going to bus our dishes, too?"

After lunch, we'd always walk to the plaza, Cristo and I in procession a few feet behind his parents, past women crouched on the street with screaming babies in their arms who looked up at me like I was the same as Mrs. Cigarroa, and I still feel ashamed when I remember how much I enjoyed that. At the plaza, there would be a mariachi playing an old standard on his guitar and the way it made her smile you'd think she had requested it, as if the whole world was suited to her every whim. It was shady there under the trees, where the tasseled fronds of Queen Palms grazed the shaggy tops of the ash trees beneath them. The air smelled intensely of green,

like jalapeños, and the whole scene could make you nostalgic for something that was still right in front of you.

I was supposed to take his name, an old name in Laredo, one that I would've worn like jewelry. Maybe he sensed this, or maybe his mother told him so. She always had me figured out, knew my "girl from the wrong side of the tracks" play, if you considered that a play. It was all just as well because when I remember the foolish way I repeated our names together in my head, even after the whole thing was called off (even sometimes still, in my weaker moments), it makes me feel better to not have heard the name Cigarroa in years, to not have read their daughters and daughters-in-law's casserole recipes in the society pages of the paper—they don't print those anymore.

Nobody crosses like they used to, either, at least not in that direction. The last time for me was a few years ago. I went with a man who looks like he could protect me, which is something I don't need as much anymore, but if you're still young and pretty like I was back then, you'd be stupid to go without one. We paid fifty cents to cross the bridge on foot. It's not smart to drive there anymore; the lines of traffic are too long. We bought tortillas and avocados and browsed the pottery. Then we stopped at a bar and had a beer with tomato juice in it and Tajin on the rim, and another; and then, feeling a little drunk, we walked to the plaza.

There were no mariachis, but there were men in military greens cradling automatic weapons. I thought about asking one of them to play something, but that was the beer talking. Everything becomes antiquated eventually. Even the plaza, which was already quaint back then—now, it's a place for drunks and guys hustling massages and Xanax. I hope she knows this.

I hope her tweed is shaggy and her pearls are dull. It would be a shame if she had died when things were still hunky-dory.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I have included here the lyrics to the song, “Las Mañanitas” (author unknown). It is often sung in the place of “Happy Birthday To You” in many parts of Latin America, including Mexico. In South Texas, however, we serenade our mothers with it on Mother’s Day. Usually the church choir or band will play it, but, on rare occasion, when money is good, the church will hire a mariachi group to surprise everyone. At the end of Mass, the priest will ask all the mothers in the church to stand, and the opening chords will play, and before long, most of the mothers, including my own, will be brought to tears. I’m not sure why they cry, as it’s not a sad song—quite the opposite, you’ll see.

I spend most of my time trying to understand many things about my mother, a curiosity founded upon immense and entirely unconditional love. But perhaps this is one of those mysteries best left alone until one day in the future when I hold a child in my arms.

Las Mañanitas

Estas son las mañanitas, que cantaba el Rey David,
Hoy por ser día de las madres, te las cantamos a tí.
Despierta, mi bien, despierta, mira que ya amaneció,
Ya los pajarillos cantan, la luna ya se metió.

Que linda está la mañana en que vengo a saludarte,
Venimos todos con gusto y placer a felicitarte,
El día en que tu naciste nacieron todas las flores
En la pila del bautismo, cantaron los ruiseñores
Ya viene amaneciendo, ya la luz del día nos dio,
Levántate de mañana, mira que ya amaneció.

Quisiera ser un San Juan, quisiera ser un San Pedro,
Para venirte a cantar con la música del cielo,

De las estrellas del cielo tengo que bajarte dos,
una para saludarte y otra para decirte adiós

Ya viene amaneciendo, ya la luz del día nos dio,
Levántate de mañana, mira que ya amaneció.

This is the morning song that King David sang
Because today is Mother's Day we're singing it for you.
Wake up, my dear, wake up, look it is already dawn,
The birds are already singing and the moon has set.

How lovely is the morning in which I come to greet you,
We all came with joy and pleasure to congratulate you,
The day you were born all the flowers were born
On the baptismal font the nightingales sang
The morning is coming now, the sun is giving us its light,
Get up in the morning, look it is already dawn.

I would like to be a St. John, I would like to be a St. Peter,
To sing to you with the music of heaven,

Of the stars in the sky I have to lower two for you,
One to greet you and the other to wish you goodbye

The morning is coming now, the sun is giving us its light,
Get up in the morning, look it is already dawn.

LAS MAÑANITAS

Isaac Escobar cuts my lawn every other Sunday. I pay him thirty dollars and I send him home with a disposable aluminum tray of pollo en móle for his father and his two sisters. I add peanut butter to the móle, which is why it tastes better than all the other shit that passes for móle in this town. At least, that's what everyone tells me. I even heard once that I'm the best cook in Flores, which is to say that I'm the best out of maybe ten other viejitas who have nothing better to do than cook chicken.

I don't feel like a viejita, but that's what you'd call me. That's what my mother called the old ladies who made móle for the church festival way back when, and now that's what I am.

I spent so much time thinking about what it would feel like to be old, but now that I am I hardly know what to think about anymore. Chores help, like dishes—there have always been dishes that needed washing, and as far as I can tell, there always will be. And my bougainvilleas are thirsty things, as all Texas bougainvilleas should be. I know it's crazy, but I'm grateful for how they need me.

Mostly, I'm just bored. So bored I could cry some days, but that's exactly what you'd expect a viejita to do. Cry and sob like the Virgin Mary. Like the viejitas when they wail Las Mañanitas at church for Mother's Day. Todas las viejitas—motherless mothers, all of us, all our

mothers long gone—singing sad songs for ourselves. And I wonder, when they do finally sing it for us, will we hear it?

I don't feel old in the ways I thought I would, in the ways most people expect. My body feels supple, not swollen. My mind clear and my memories sharp, as if seen through a telescope. My legs aren't much to look at anymore, and no one does, but *ni modo*, I'm not entering any beauty contests. These days, the only praise I can count on is for my cooking and, considering how things are going, I'll take it.

But, bless his heart, I don't feel so old around Isaac. He's the only person who talks to me like I'm actually in the room. He's a good boy with a good heart and for that reason life will be harder for him than it is for most. I've found, after all is said and done, that the less you expect, the better, especially when it comes to people.

Take the sisters who live next door. Twins, Rosemary and Elsa, viejita y viejita tambíen despite being younger than me, both of them sixties to my seventies. Isaac mows their lawn, too, and he calls all three of us Señora, but I like to think that he says it more sweetly when he says it to me.

The one with the thinner hair, Elsa, a real piece of work, mourning over a boyfriend who cheated on her years ago, telling poor Isaac never to treat a girl the way she was treated. Hijole, that woman can cry. Cries all the time: while I'm checking the mail, when I'm watering my bougainvilleas. I even hear it through my kitchen window, over the sputtering of onions, when I'm trying to watch T.V. It pains me, a woman her age crying about a boyfriend. Not even a true viejita yet, but already making mistakes that reflect poorly on our club of elders—wearing muumuus that drape her body like a couch slipcover and gelling the hair to her head in a ponytail

so tight her eyes are pulled up into slants. Like a kid's art project, her hair—like blades of grass glued with Elmer's to an ostrich egg.

I wish I could give women like Elsa a lesson on how to age in a way that doesn't make the rest of us look so foolish. Take care of yourself. Dress your figure. Don't cry so much. Curse more. Drive faster or not at all. When she was my age, my mother had a falling out with one of her closest friends about driving. My mother—the woman who, by her 70s, hadn't spent a single minute of her life behind a steering wheel—having opinions about the friends who drove her ass around. "You shouldn't be driving," she'd told her from the passenger seat, and in case her comadre's feelings were still intact, she took it one further—"Old women like us shouldn't be driving at all." My mother had a lot of nerve.

Elsa's sister, Rosemary, is a better representative of las perfumadas que juegan chalupa. Perhaps it's unfair to compare them, because even though they're twins, Rosemary was always more attractive—a body of long, elegant curves, and hardly any hair on her arms or legs. I've seen the pictures. Life was probably easier for Rosemary, as it often is for beautiful women. That's why Rosemary isn't guilty of what so many of us are, which is running around thinking about what the world owes us.

Six years ago, when her husband died suddenly, Rosemary planted jasmine along the fence that separates our houses. It was a commemoration of sorts since she couldn't very well bury her husband's body in the backyard like the family dog. But that stubborn vine never found its way along the fence and so it grew out furiously on both sides. Still, she can't bear to trim it. Me, I ask Isaac to cut a little on my side of the fence.

"But don't let her see you doing it," I tell him.

Pobrecita, too young to be a widow, just like I had been. So, despite Elsa, I try to keep Rosemary close, keep her wise, keep her young.

Isaac calls the two of them las gallinas, clucking about, short and big-breasted, always pecking at each other. He'll take a break from mowing under the shade of my back patio and tell me stories about the hen house. They like to invite him inside, Elsa especially, ask him about school, offer him haircuts. Me, I keep Cokes in the fridge just for him, and he'll spew soda he laughs so hard while acting out fights between them.

"Señora, Rosemary had the worst gas. Like, it was BAD. But then Elsa was like, 'Quit farting, *cochina*. Take some Maalox already.' And then Rosemary was like,"—and he'll coo in a high pitched voice—"'Ay pos it's the enchiladas from Caro's.' And then Elsa was like 'Did you fart like that around Edgar? How are you ever going to get a boyfriend farting like that?' You know how Elsa is always pushing Rosemary around, right Señora?"

"Always," I say, clapping my hands together.

He goes on, "Well then Rosemary got pissed and was like 'Go to the other room if it bothers you so much. And who the hell says I need a boyfriend? I'm grieving.' And then Elsa—" his arms are waving around as if to brace himself and he can't get a breath in through the laughing—"Elsa, she says 'Mujer, I'm grieving over here in your farts.'"

And I'm bending forward, cackling, my head between my knees, and I swear having Isaac around adds years to my life.

God knows there isn't much else in Flores to keep a viejita entertained. And what there is, all of it, even the smells, just seems like noise. There are lawnmowers and car stereos and barking dogs. There are football games on Fridays and marching band practice in the evenings,

which I can hear a mile away. There are cats that circle dumpsters in the alley, tecuaches at night, ants in the kitchen, cockroaches in the bathtub and javelinas that snort along the outskirts of town. There's the smell of jalapenos at the end of the block, and the corn oil from the plant out near Primera Road, and if you go by the baseball fields in the park, corn nuts and the vinegary smell of pickles. I can see it, smell it, and hear it all from my little yard, while I watch that fluffy white dog from across the street chasing cars with that stupid look on its face, big tongue wagging. What a sap, that dog, thinking it's all so grand, but believe me, it's not as good as it sounds: I didn't mention the chicharras. Hundreds, no, thousands of chicharras living in the ash trees, making all kinds of invisible racket all day long.

The hen house and mine are one-story clapboards, as plain as Monopoly houses, except that my house is white and the hen house is the color of aguacate when it starts to go bad. Our houses aren't any smaller or shabbier than the other ones on our street, but they're also not any nicer, so it helps to have someone like Isaac who will keep our lawns looking respectable.

Isaac was thirteen when he started mowing my lawn. He was a skinny thing then, wrists like a girl's, and nails too long. I wondered how this princesa was going to push a lawnmower around for an hour but he more than managed. Maybe that's why I liked him from the beginning. I'll give anyone the time of day if they can surprise me. He probably wouldn't have lasted with us so long if not for his mother passing a few years ago. After it happened, he started hanging around here more, arriving early, lingering afterwards, chatting longer, asking if he could watch a little *CSI* with me.

His mother's name, Lupita Maria, is stenciled above a thorny rose on the back windshield of his truck. There are thorns on the stems and loops of the letters and I like to think

that it means something—that this Lupita Maria was a prickly mujer, a real bitch maybe, honking at anybody willy nilly, cussing out drive-thru attendants, making her children feel stupid. But people here get so damn sad about it and sinners become saints and people walk around wearing t-shirts with their family's faces spray painted on them and they ink their skin with names that, after a while, are just letters, no más.

Of course I never met the woman, or maybe just once early on when he first started working. But I don't remember her, so this is what I have to go off of. I could be wrong, but Isaac doesn't say much about her.

Anyway, I think it'd be a little funny, my face on a t-shirt like a rock star; only, I wouldn't have done a goddamn thing in my life but die. Then again, dying is a hard thing to do, I suppose, and can be some kind of accomplishment.

My mother, the most devout Catholic there ever was, the woman who talked to Mary like they were best friends catching up on the phone, que loca, was scared at the end of things. "I'm scared," she had said, always getting straight to the point.

It's no glamorous scene. With her, I remember the over-starched hospital sheets, how they crunched like wrapping paper, and the way she stank like eggs and pee. Eggs, eggs, always eggs. A dozen glasses of water under her hospital bed with egg yolks floating in them, like jars filled with creatures in formaldehyde. The Mexican nurses knew what they were, but they always scared the white nurses who thought my mother was bonkers.

"Is it like voodoo?" they would ask.

Might as well be for all the good it does, I remember thinking.

All the praying, the incantations, just to be scared at the end.

But the lessons come much later, snuck into the room like the smell of rotten eggs. And now I understand—the rosaries, the holy water in a vial by the bedside table, the Blessed Mother placed in different corners around the house, like mirrors in ancient Egypt scattering light across a tomb—distractions all of them, but good ones that make getting through each day, especially the horrible ones, a whole lot easier.

But now Isaac is really into this curandero voodoo crap, too. He knows better than to ask me, but he's always practicing the soul-cleansing barridas on Elsa and Rosemary. Elsa practically begs for them. She, more than the rest of us, took note of Isaac's growth over the years. He towers over the three of us now, a tree next to three shrubs. And his face with its feline features and lips like a doll's is more beautiful than most women I've seen.

"Ay mijo, estoy mal del estómago. Creo que mi ex novio me dio el ojo," Elsa will whine. Always something with her. If not a stomach ache, then something else. A headache, or itchy feet. And always from a jealous ex, like she's some kind of heartbreaker.

Isaac talks about going to Mexico after he graduates high school. His great uncle in Tamaulipas is a real good curandero, he says. I want to slap some sense into him sometimes, wasting his time on nonsense when he could be a handsome doctor, like on *General Hospital*.

"He'll teach me everything he knows, Señora. And then I'll come back and fix all of us."

Pobrecito—another motherless boy with these magic tricks in his head. But, it impresses me still, this kid who learned much sooner than he should have how hard things could get. For most people, that kind of thing would turn them off of the whole idea of something or someone on the other side making all of this worthwhile. But other people—other people really dig their feet in.

Sometimes, after he's done with both our lawns, Isaac will join me and las gallinas for a game of chalupa. We usually make him call the cards because, for one thing, we all feel uncomfortable about taking his money, but mainly because he calls them out with flair.

We usually play at the hen house since I don't like Elsa coming over to my place. All she'll do is tell me how dry my grass looks or how old the fence is getting. Isaac brings a folding card table out to the backyard, digging the legs into the grass so it won't wobble. We use dried pinto beans instead of coins to mark the squares on our cards. Sometimes, the chicharras are so loud we can hardly hear Isaac, which is why we like his charades: La Sirena is a hand on his hip, a hand on his head, ass out. La Sandía is two hands holding an invisible slice of watermelon in front of his mouth. El Borracho is him stumbling through the grass; and sometimes, he'll just fall over and let it play for a minute or so, which makes me fear for what the poor boy has seen. For La Dama, Elsa's favorite, he'll grab one of our hands and kiss it.

"Ay muchacho, you need a girlfriend," Elsa will say flirtatiously. "I'm too old for you."

I don't think Elsa and Rosemary know that Isaac is gay. You'd think a viejita like me would be old-fashioned about it but I watch T.V. and they all seem perfectly fine. Anyway, people are always getting bent out of shape for all kinds of stupid things. But I don't have time for that anymore.

When he told me, I was asking about a bruise on his arm. Es nada, he insisted, but there was no life in him that day, no Sirena. And I knew enough to ask again.

"I pray so hard, Señora. I pray all the time. I don't understand."

"There's nothing to be praying about, mijo."

“They say my uncle is powerful, Señora. He can cure anything.”

“You shut up about that. No more garbage out of that mouth,” and I held him as he trembled and said “Lo siento. Lo siento. God forgive me, I’m sorry.”

One evening, after he finishes the yard work, he asks if he can stay a little longer. He waits till the commercials to ask me.

“Help me, Señora.”

“Ay no. Not with this again. Please.” I stand up to go check on the móle simmering on the stove.

“I need to know if I have the gift.”

“The gift?” I roll my eyes. “Please. Go study. Stop wasting your time.”

“You’re the only one who can help me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“I can’t keep practicing on stomach aches and headaches. I need something big. I want to help you, Señora.”

“Now you’re offending me.”

“No, Señora.” He grabs my hand. “You helped me. Now let me return the favor. I see your sadness, your loneliness. My gift lets me see that.”

Dios mío, how I long to make this boy happy.

“If it’s nothing to you then what’s the harm?” he asks.

…

My mother swore by barridas. Thought they would solve every problem on earth.

“Believe me. Esta en el huevo,” she said to me the last time. She said that the egg drew it out, would end the storm, make the rain inside me go away.

And when it didn’t work the first time—“Es fuerte. It can take more than once when it’s stubborn like that.”

And again—“I’m sorry, mijita. But do you want that suffering to follow you the rest of your life?”

Many years before I was the viejita I am now, I was a happy wife. When we first married I could sense the emptying of myself and the filling with him. Once I realized it was happening, sure, I helped it along. It was good to hold grudges for his enemies and forget mine; to mind what he ate for lunch and ignore my own hunger; or to worry at night, as he snored next to me, about the mole on his neck and say never mind to the ache in my heel. Loving him, I admitted, was like caring for a plant—it was something that could go on and on without too much real work. But it got me off of thinking about me, which is where all the trouble came from if I ever managed to make time for it.

I met him when I was nineteen and taking night classes at the nursing school. During the day, I worked at a panaderia called Lara’s and he’d come in every morning at 8:30 sharp and buy a cup of coffee and a pink concha. It came to be something I expected, and I’d look forward to seeing him, his smile, his neatly ironed pants and his polished shoes. He was so put together, so reliable and I liked those things then.

“Marry me,” he said one day, “and you’ll never have to work a day for the rest of your life,” and even though I didn’t believe him, I liked that he had said it.

After we were married, he was always doing sweet things for me, calling me sweet names, like “my little concha.” We talked about having a baby and then we more than talked about it. He told me all the names he’d give our sons and I told him all the names I’d give our daughters, we guessed at all the nicknames their friends would give them, and then we settled on the names that only we would call them and that they’d call each other when we were all together at home. But they were never with us, because they never came. Not a one. And after a while we stopped expecting them, hoping that would make the difference, but even that was expecting something.

And then, one day a few years later, he was fetching breakfast for us when he was run over in a gas station parking lot. Some idiot was still drunk from the night before, needed gas, and that was that.

My mother had all kinds of explanations, thinking she knew something about God’s plan. “Everything happens for a reason,” she kept saying and maybe that’s what killed it for me. Not the many little deaths, or even the one big one. No, it was how desperately she tried to make excuses and how pathetic she looked when they weren’t enough.

•••

They have everything set up in Rosemary’s bedroom. Elsa had insisted that her room wasn’t as pure.

A black sheet has been laid on top of Rosemary’s sateen quilt, which I am told to lie on. There is a bowl with three eggs on the bedside table next to a wedding portrait of Rosemary and her husband. There is also a small carafe of holy water and a glass half full with tap water. I know the scene well.

Pointing to the eggs, I ask, “You need all three?”

“We will see,” says Isaac who walks into the bedroom very seriously, his fingers interlocked in front of him. “Elsa will be helping me today, if that’s alright, Señora. Elsa, the towel?” She seems pleased, a smug expression on her face, but she doesn’t dare look in my direction.

Isaac is wearing the clothes he normally mows the lawn in—brown jeans and an undershirt—but over them he is wearing a doctor’s white lab coat and I wonder if it’s real or something he picked up for Halloween one year.

He takes the eggs out of the bowl and slips them into his jacket pocket. Then, he pours the holy water into the bowl and submerges the corner of a hand towel into the water until it is soaked through. He uses the wet corner to wipe the egg, looking for cracks.

“Breathe deep,” he whispers to me as he does this. I close my eyes and wonder if I could get away with a short nap. But then he touches my shoulder and says it again, this time more firmly.

“Yes sir,” I say. I fill my lungs and he nods.

He begins to recite the Apostles Creed. Holding the egg in his left hand, gently between his fingertips, he touches it to my forehead and traces a cross. His other hand cradles my head like I’m an infant. Then, in small sweeping movements, he waves the egg over me in circles, first in a halo around the top of me, then down to my neck, my shoulders, leaving more crosses on my chest, my palms, on the cracked soles of my feet. My body is a simple machine these days, an old calculator with buttons missing. Lying here, breathing deeply, I do not feel like an altar; there

is no magic that can happen on this viejita's body. But he sweeps anyway, repeating the prayer many times.

My mother used to think that more contact with egg draws more of the bad out. She always touched the egg to my skin as she swept my body.

See, just like the body is a vessel for bad things—mean thoughts, jealousies, fears, sadness, tummy aches—the egg is also a vessel. It sucks it out. Un Dirt Devil. Mira, zshooooooo. When las enfermedades leave the body, they've got to go somewhere, right? Even evil has a home, mijita. No tengas miedo. Zshooooooo, like a Hoover.

This is how my mother explained it to me when I was a girl. When I was nervous or scared, she said to pray, and when that didn't work it was this. Maybe it's enough for some people, people who want to believe and so they do.

Isaac turns me over and my panza gurgles as it sinks into the bed as he continues to pray.

"Señora, lay still," he says. He makes several small crosses across the back of my neck, and then some more along my spine. The egg is still cold from the refrigerator.

He is saying the prayer faster now. I feel him whipping the air around my hands. He is sweeping furiously. I start to feel something strange, like something has been placed in my hand, but when I try to curl my fingers around it they are empty. My fingertips are tingling.

Zshooooooo.

"Lay still, Señora." I'm having a heart attack, I think. I'll wake up in a hospital or not at all. My heart is beating faster. My chest is a block of cement. Isaac's chanting fills the room.

"Lay still, Señora," he says again. I'm feeling heavy on this bed, like I might fall through it. This bed is swallowing me, I think. I can't breathe! I'm going to die! Somebody help me.

Rosemary, call 911. Elsa, do something. Stop crying. Somebody get me out of this bed. I'm scared! I'm scared, alright? Help me! *Zshooooooooo.*

And then, peace. Like my veins are filling with warm milk. Like I am being carried like a child. My body shudders and the feeling is the same as when my mother brushed my hair when I was a girl. I can even feel the comb's teeth dragging softly along my scalp and my body trembles, my feet curl. Her fingers graze my neck as she gathers my hair at the ends. I can feel the strands twist gently as she braids them. She is humming.

"Don't stop, mama," I say, but all I hear is the chicharras outside.

I lift my head and look around me. Isaac is kneeling beside the bed, close to my face.

"Señora, are you alright?"

Elsa and Rosemary are standing in the doorway crying and making the sign of the cross.

I sit up at the edge of the bed. Isaac sits next to me and reaches across me for the glass of water from the nightstand. He puts it in my hands. Then he takes the egg and taps it against the rim of the glass until the shell breaks. The egg runs down the side and sinks into the water.

"You see here," and I try to see something. He holds the glass up to my face and points to a dark orange speck in the yolk. "Mira, Señora. I think we got it!" He looks desperate, like a little boy. It's the same look my mother gave me then. How young they look when they're scared, begging me to believe, but for who? Me? No, not for me.

"Sí, mijo." I grab his shoulders and bring him close. "I see it."

LIVING ARCHAEOLOGY

How typical, Tina thought, that her arrival in Rome was greeted by several days of pouring rain. It had crossed her mind that it was a sign, that maybe it had been a bad idea to come without her husband. But after the rain, the city was reborn, rebooted, the newest old city in the world. The trees dripped bright green, the damp asphalt looked blacker as if freshly poured, and everywhere it smelled of wet cobblestone and the floral pungence of spring. Having been cooped up in their hotels for days, the tourists were grateful and ebullient, content to stand in lines—and in Rome, there were many—so long as the sun was out.

Tina, too, basked in the good weather as she watched the crowd at Trajan's Column, which was the first stop on the walking route she was following in her guidebook. A group of German tourists standing near the base of the column strained to hear their Italian tour guide who spoke to them in English about the Emperor who was buried there. He made a corny little joke in the middle of his monologue but no one in the group laughed or even offered a polite chuckle and, feeling bad for the guide, Tina decided then and there that maybe she didn't care for Germans. She was having to do a lot of this lately, making her mind up about the parts of the world she was meeting for the first time.

As the group dispersed, she referred to the description of the Column in her guide. It was the Emperor's ashes, not the Emperor himself, who was buried there, but it made no difference.

Her husband, for example, was buried in Brownsville, Texas, where they'd married, worked, lived, and raised their daughter. Everything had happened there and nowhere else, although Tina tried not to think of that as a bad thing. At her daughter's insistence, she was practicing positivity. But it was true—she had never even left the country before, except for trips just across the border to buy her husband's medication. Now, here she was in Rome, while her husband's body dried and wrinkled in its coffin, like a piece of old fruit. It was strange to think of that body with such indifference when, for years, it had been the focus of her thoughts.

It seemed stupid now that it all began with a blister. He had been in bed for a week with a broken ankle when they noticed it on his heel. It was only a little red spot, not yet the squishy pustule like the one now forming on the knuckle of Tina's big toe. She had bought new sandals for all the walking she'd be doing in Rome and today was the first day they had gotten any real use. As she felt the sandal strap chafe with each step, she thought of Robert's blister. She couldn't pick out her own hands in a lineup, but she could picture that blister now, thirty years later. Of course, thirty years ago she didn't know that on a Diabetic's foot, blisters aren't the harmless little things that they are on everyone else's. Sure they burst and drain of clear fluid just the same. But then, they fester. The poor circulation keeps the skin from healing. Tina's Roman blister would be gone in a day or two. Robert's became infected, started to smell. And that's how he lost the foot.

Tina took a receipt out of her purse and wedged the silky paper between her foot and the sandal to ease the rubbing. She tugged her thoughts away from all that. His body was somewhere, safe and sound. Rome still hummed all around her and she had never been happier, she told herself. He wasn't going to ruin Rome for her.

She had read somewhere that a lifetime wasn't enough for Rome. To do what, she wondered. Explore it? Understand it? Feel at home? In any case, the phrase struck her as pessimistic, a warning to those with big plans—you'll never have enough time, so why bother? She had read the phrase, no doubt, in one of the many guidebooks her daughter had purchased for her. They were an apology, sent along once she had realized she wouldn't be able to come along with Tina. Christie had bookmarked one of the pages of the guidebook with a photo of Tina and Robert on their wedding day. *It'll be like he's there with you*, she had written on the back of it. In it, Tina looked delirious, happily perched on Robert's lap, when it was still strong and firm, before the muscles in his thighs atrophied and his body slowly wasted away. The pages Christie had marked with Post-It notes were so numerous that they ceased to be helpful. The excitement was no surprise to Tina. Several months after her husband had died, when she had shared the idea of a Rome trip with her, Christie had cried.

"It's just that I've wanted this for you for so long," she said at the time. "I'm just sorry that Daddy can't go, too."

"Do you think it's wrong of me?" asked Tina. It was the first of many times she would feel guilty about this trip.

Christie grabbed Tina's shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. "You've earned this," she said, and the forcefulness of her manner made Tina feel like a child again. Then, Christie's tone lightened, "You should treat yourself!" she said, bouncing her shoulders.

Recently, people everywhere had been saying this—*treat yourself*. Her daughter especially: when she allowed herself dessert after dinner; or an extra glass of wine; or a manicure at the end of the work week. Every little indulgence celebrated, defended. A generational

philosophy, no doubt. She wouldn't have dared walk around exclaiming what she deserved at that age. She could barely bring herself to do it now.

In the end, Tina took only two books with her. One was an Italian-English dictionary, and the other was a book of walking tours she had bought at a thrift store for two dollars. *Walking Rome*, it was called, and included detailed maps with illustrated aerial views, something that seemed to distinguish it from the many other books like it. Of the five themed walks laid out by the guide, the previous owner had apparently only liked one of them, a route called "Living Archaeology." Those pages alone had been dog-eared, and the small snapshots on them starred, double-starred, and triple-starred in blue ink, ranked by the owner who seemed to have a taste for the ruins more than the churches. It was unclear from the book, however, if that person had actually made it to Rome and, like Tina now, stood in the Piazza Madonna di Loreto. Tina imagined that there must be people out there who bought books like these and never went. They only underlined the names of places and memorized picturesque views so that they would have something to think about when they fell asleep, or when they were in the shower, or when they drove to work. How depressing, she thought, to plan a trip that would never happen. Better to put those hopes somewhere you'd forget about them, as if you'd never had them to begin with.

But here she was, having never dreamt of Rome, yet breathing it in as she ascended the steps across from the Column onto Via Quatre Novembre towards the Roman Forum. She knew it was silly to be surprised by it, but everything was so old! One building five hundred years old, and the one next to it, a thousand. She wondered how they were still standing after so long, how the stone and brick didn't soften and crumble like bleu cheese. Something like that was bound to happen to her knees at some point, which had started to wobble and ache in the last few years.

Any day now she half expected to suddenly disassemble, for screws to come loose and parts to fall off, the way Robert's body had broken, piece by piece. Had he been a car, they would have long ago scrapped it for metal. But like these buildings here in Rome, which carried on in mid-topple, her husband's body stubbornly persisted.

The walking route led her to a crossroads. A church rose up to her left, the Largo Angelicum. It was a compact but highly ornate structure built in what looked like more of that white Italian marble she had earlier heard the tour guide go on about. Sitting at the top of many stairs, it loomed over the street, celebrating itself in all its stateliness. *See how grand I am?* she heard it say. Not even the religious buildings were modest here.

On the stairs, a bride and groom were having their photographs taken. Every single church she passed, it seemed, was booked for weddings. The bride was a blonde with that sharp Roman nose she had seen everywhere, wearing what Tina thought was a surprisingly low-cut dress given how shy she seemed. Her poses were stiff and awkward-looking, her face sullen. The groom tried to coax a smile out of her by hamming it up for the camera. He took off his jacket and tossed it over his shoulder, or played with his suspenders, slipping one off suggestively with his thumbs. Each time she let slip a smile or a giggle, the photographer snapped away, saying something in Italian that sounded encouraging. It was hardly a bother for either the groom or the photographer, certainly nothing that would give the groom pause. But what would life hold for them? How often would he have to be the clown for her? Or would it be something else? Could he see it now, how things would go? Tina often wondered if she had seen it.

She stopped for only a moment to watch the scene, silently wished them well, and then continued along the Via Quatre Novembre until it turned into Tor del Conti. All the streets on the

path were paved in uneven cobblestone. As Tina stepped carefully she thought to herself, Robert could never have done this.

For years, not a word about Rome. Then, all of sudden, it was all he could talk about. Of course, he waited until after the first stroke, suddenly spooked by his own mortality into caring about taking her anywhere. Even with months of rehab, he still couldn't move his right arm, could barely straighten his right leg enough to stand, and when he walked, his gait leaned and lumbered, despite the help of a cane.

"Once I get the arm back," he'd say.

At first, she'd humor him, and maybe part of her hoped, allowing some optimism through. But as the years passed, it struck her as delusional. Of course, by then, Christie had joined in.

"They have so many services these days, Mom." She was smart enough to know she had to convince Tina and not her father. "They have disability transportation, so you don't have to worry about getting around. We'll find you an accessible hotel. I mean it, I'll do all the planning. You'll see, it'll be so easy for you."

Tina tried not to be angry with her daughter when she said stupid things like this, because thinking any of it could be easy was exactly what you'd expect from someone who had Googled for five minutes. After years of sponge baths, or picking him up off the ground when he had fallen, or helping him stand to pee, and then, finally, just helping him pee—after all of it, it was hard to picture easy.

So instead, when Christie added, "They even have tour groups just for people in wheelchairs," Tina couldn't help herself.

"Your father will hate that," she said, and it didn't matter if it was true or not. She was deciding for the both of them.

She continued up the hill on Tor del Conti, which opened onto Largo Corrado Ricci, a manicured island of sidewalk with benches in the shade under a canopy of giant, leggy pine trees. She stopped for lunch at an outdoor café where she could watch the crowds gathered along the railings overlooking the Roman Forum. The waiters at the café spoke English, which she knew her daughter would say was a mark of its inauthenticity. Still, she wrote down the name, Pucciami, in the margins of the guidebook and ordered a lunch portion of the pasta Bolognese. The noodles were firmer than she was used to. She had come all the way from South Texas for uncooked pasta, she thought. But the sauce was rich and tasty, and if she had been braver, more willing to treat herself, she might have asked for a bowl of it to eat as a soup.

Two women passed in front of Tina's table as she chewed the last of her noodles. They looked about Christie's age, had the slender, supple bodies of youth that were made for tight jeans. Tina hadn't worn jeans in ages, and didn't miss them actually, though she did ache for the skin of her twenties, still firm and smooth, and all those glorious tans she had gotten, which made her look so good in white dresses. She hadn't pictured her younger self in a long time and the vision of beauty lost suddenly filled her with an unfamiliar longing.

They appeared to have just come from grocery shopping, carrying mesh sacks filled with vegetables, and were chatting energetically in Italian. How mundane their props, Tina thought, and still they moved their bodies like sex. And the men, too, with sex on the brain, but they stood and declared it, as if the city and all the women in it were their very own to proposition, like

objects on a conveyer belt that they could select at will. Tina had never observed more catcalling than she had in Rome. How indiscriminate it was, too—every plain face, *bellissima*; every woman, an American movie star.

At the table next to hers, a man a little younger than Tina but certainly not young, early fifties maybe, ogled the two Italian girls as they passed. He openly adored them from top to bottom, and as she watched him she was surprised not to feel the usual protectiveness she felt towards young women, especially women her daughter's age. Instead, it was as if there was a great shadow that had divided this Roman intersection, casting her in it and leaving youth and beauty and the hope they carried around in their vegetable sacks in the warm light. Still, she tried not to think about it. It made her tired to ponder herself so much.

But she couldn't help but notice that he was handsome in an elegant, gentlemanly sort of way, barrel-chested, with closely cropped grey hair and a jet-black goatee, which was the only part of him that looked a little ridiculous. When he caught Tina looking, he grinned and touched the brim of his hat to acknowledge her. Mortified, she quickly looked away. He apparently found this very funny and laughed. She looked around for her server to pay the check but he was busy presenting a bottle of wine to a large party at another table. She could hear the handsome ogler trying to get her attention in Italian and rather than wait for the server to return, she threw down enough money to cover the bill twice over, and hurried out of the restaurant.

She walked across the square and fought through the crowds up to the railing where she could get a good look at the ruins of the Roman Forum. Stubs of stone pillars were scattered among toppled layers of wall and piles of brick. Tina looked at her guidebook. It told her that she was looking at a thousand years of history, that Rome was in the habit of building on top of

itself—"out with the old, in with the new" on a grand scale. She couldn't decide if it was cruel, a disregard for what came before, or, somehow respectful, a tribute to the triumphs and ravages of time.

She remembered a night, a few years after Robert's stroke, a few before he died, when they were in bed together watching television. She had just come out of the shower, already changed into her pajamas, having long since stopped dressing in front of him. She sat on the bed next to where he lay and combed the tangles out of her wet hair. A few strands had fallen on Robert and he had picked one up and held it out, as if to return it.

"You're going bald!" he said in fake astonishment.

"Hmm…am I?" Tina said, too tired to humor him.

"And look at the color," he said and held it up to the light. It looked like a silver thread of spider silk. "You're finally catching up to me. Now we're both old fogies."

"Good, maybe you can start taking care of me for a change," she said and immediately regretted it, but he was kind and said nothing of it.

"I left one of my pills in the bathroom. Would you be able to get it for me before you settle in?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Can I finish brushing my hair, at least?"

"Of course. Take your time," he said, and put his hand, the good one, on her lower back. She had heard him mumble something else, but she pretended to hear nothing and continued brushing out her tangles, yanking hard at the end of each pass, wincing as she mercilessly tore through her knots.

"Your skin, I thought you were Italian," said someone next to her, admiring the same view of the ruins. It was the man from the restaurant.

"Did you follow me here?" She tried to inch away, but the crowds behind them had pushed them close.

"Not really. It was my plan to come here after lunch. It's Saturday."

Tina smiled politely and pretended to read her guidebook.

"It's my day to visit the ruins," he added.

"And people watch," she muttered.

He cowered slightly, caught, and it unnerved Tina to see how her irritation amused him.

"Yes, I like to look. Is that wrong?" he asked.

"That's your business, not mine," she said.

"Or, perhaps you are jealous I was not looking at you?"

"Oh," she blushed. "That's not what I meant. I—"

"I noticed you when you sat down," he said, reassuringly. "You have beautiful legs."

Tina felt her pulse quicken and she mistook the feeling for fear at first. She removed her hand from the railing and slid it in her jacket pocket, clutching her American passport.

"I am a dirty old man, what can I say?" he shrugged.

"You're not so old," she said, embarrassed when it came out more flirtatious than she had intended.

"Neither are you, *Signora*." He drew a deep, satisfied breath and sighed theatrically. He leaned against the railing and carried on. "So how do you like Italy so far?"

"It's my first time here," she said, trying to rein in any suggestiveness in her voice.

"Well first impressions count, too." His voice lowered. "They can say a lot, in fact."

"Isn't this a place for tourists?" she asked, ignoring his provocative tone.

"And why should it only be for you Americans?" he asked, suddenly cheerful, unfazed by her rejection.

"I just mean, isn't this boring to you by now? I imagine you've seen it plenty of times."

"Of course. But then if you keep coming back, you start to see new things, and it's not so boring."

"And what do you see that I don't?"

"It's not that I see more than you. It depends on where your day is. If you're feeling old, sometimes this place makes you feel older. Some days, younger. Or, if you are feeling big, this place will make you feel very small. For example, where are you today?"

It was a funny way to ask the question. She was in Rome, of course, at least that's where you would find her body if this man ended up murdering her and stashing her body in some ornate Italian chest he kept as a decorative piece in his palatial Roman apartment. But she did not feel very much in her own body on this trip. It was almost as if she was the one buried in Brownsville, and the woman roaming the narrow streets of Rome was her ghost, carrying out her unfinished business, living a life that she hadn't even allowed herself to want. She gazed at a piece of wall in the distance, sad and dilapidated, guarding nothing. And then one word came to her, as if suddenly made audible through the din.

"Useless," she said, desperately. "Today I feel useless."

Now he looked embarrassed. He smiled, wincing a little, and seemed to change his mind about something.

"Ah, there, you see?" he said too brightly. "And maybe tomorrow, you feel something else. That is Rome." He took a small sketchbook out of his pocket and started to work on a pencil drawing of the ruins he must have begun some Saturday before.

"What else am I supposed to do?" she asked, and he told her to go to the Colosseum.

"It's a good place for tourists. Too morbid for my taste," he said.

She crossed the Largo Corrado Ricci and continued down the Via dei Fori Imperiali, half a mile of tree-lined avenue with the Colosseum squatting directly ahead in the distance. She made her way quickly now, wanting badly for this walk to be over but feeling obliged to carry it out until its designated end in the book. A stranger called out to her, "Where is she going so fast, pretty lady?" but she ignored him and continued on.

She held tightly onto the guide as she walked. Did he hold it, too, the man who owned it before her? She had assumed he was a man. Would they have taken this walk together, she and this stranger? Yes, he would have walked. No wheelchairs. No shower chairs or portable commodes. And they could have slept in a bed without hospital railings. She thought about making love, which she'd scarcely allowed herself to do anymore. She thought of the Italian man she had spoken to, how closely they had stood. They could have left together, gone back to her hotel. *Treat yourself*, she'd whisper to herself as he unclasped her bra, held her breasts.

Christie had asked her once if she had ever thought about what her life would be like if she hadn't married her father. She wondered now, in the midst of her fantasy about another man, why her daughter had asked her this. It had been a time when all of it, the hospital visits and the

sleepless nights wondering if he'd be awake in the morning, had began to take a toll on all three of them.

"Sure, I think about it," Tina had said too callously. "Don't rush into anything," she told her daughter. "Marriage is hard work."

"But you love Dad? Even after all this, I mean, you still love him, right?"

At this question, Tina had hesitated. She regretted it now: Christie would think the hesitation meant that maybe Tina didn't love Robert, but that was never the case. She had loved him ever since the moment he showed up at her doorstep, clean-shaven and smiling after Tina had refused to go out with him unless he shaved his beard. She had loved him through all of it, every single horrible moment. But if she had said yes unflinchingly, then Christie might think that it somehow made everything better, and it hadn't. Love had made it harder, not easier.

As she drew nearer to the Colosseum, a stone arch became visible, elaborate yet demure beside its neighbor. She ventured towards it, the Arch of Constantine. It was surrounded by a tall, iron fence, preserving what the label explained was a "singular example of its kind from the fourth century." These dates had started to blur together. Sylvia couldn't tell the difference between the fourth century and the third and had begun skimming the centuries written in her guide.

Her own life had taken on a similar quality, forsaking individual years for chapters: before the stroke, after the stroke; before Christie, after Christie; before marriage, after marriage—each milestone signifying something gained and something lost. Now, the most recent, the most obvious: after Robert. She had started to realize that even before he died her life

had already begun to enter that chapter. And had there been a point in time when she had ceased to be? Was she now living in the time after Tina? Or was this her golden age?

She looked up at the Arch, which towered over her like everything in Rome seemed to. There were only a few tourists who paid any attention to it, drawn instead to the Colosseum next door. A few tired children sat on the ground along the fence, playing games on their parents' phones. She stood alone with the label display, which called the Arch "triumphal." It was a trophy of sorts, commissioned by the Roman Senate to honor Constantine's victory in battle. It seemed more likely, given the egos of Ancient Rome, that Constantine had really commissioned it for himself. But what about the soldiers? Surely, it was their blood and their lives that had won the battle. What Arch commemorated them?

If Robert had been there with her, she might have asked him this and it would have turned into an argument because he never liked to talk about why she might be feeling tired, or irritable, or unappreciated, maybe because he didn't like feeling like a burden. But it didn't matter because now she was here without him in a city that he had only seen once when he was a teenager, still a handsome, lanky boy who ran track and field. There are beautiful pictures of him in front of the Colosseum, she remembered.

"I'm happy," he had said. The thing he had mumbled to her. And she had ignored him, kept brushing her hair because she was angry, as usual. Years and years of being pissed off.

But he had been happy. Despite all the pain he had suffered and all the ways that his body had failed him, she had managed to make him happy. And, for a while, that had been enough for her, that he was happy.

But now, she thought, with the sun on her back and Rome all around her, *I can be, too.*

EPILOGUE

"I expect you will be wondering, Mother, where all this is supposed to be leading, for so far I have not given you anything that looks much like my life story—but you did tell me to write quite freely whatever came into my head! So you will not find my actual life in these pages, so much as my thoughts on the graces Our Lord has given me…

Remember, I am writing for you alone the story of the *little flower* gathered by Jesus, and so I can speak unreservedly, not bothering about the style, nor about the digressions I shall make; a mother's heart always understands, even when her child can do no more than lisp, so I am quite sure that you, who prepared my heart and offered it to Jesus, will certainly do so."

--St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*

BORDER STORY: A KIND OF FICTION

On June 12, 1953, a woman named Ernestina Godinez married a man named John W. Birkes. That's right, a Mexican and a Gringo. Can't you tell? Godinez and Birkes? Their last names are important to some people, but not all people, and the people who minded didn't make it to the ceremony anyway. They had plenty of good reasons to miss. Unbelievably good—people tend to get creative when they know they should be ashamed of themselves. One cousin said that she had accidentally run over her own dog and was too distraught to sit through a whole Mass, much less a reception. Everyone told her that they believed her, but no one actually did. Now that I think about it, I suppose the story could have been true. Nobody went to check if the dog was for-real dead. That would have been a ridiculous thing to do. Besides, people back then weren't as eager to prove their grievances, and no one really cared whether they—the cousin or the dog—were absent.

Fortunately, you only need a few people to get married proper in a church, and so the ceremony went on as planned. Extra-long grain rice rained down on them afterwards, the kind that I know to use when I'm making Ernestina's Mexican rice, at least I think, because she never showed me how and I never asked, and everything now is only an approximation of what it was then. They also had a lemon sheet cake with white buttercream frosting and shredded coconut on top. It was ordered special from a bakery called Imelda's, which I'm told was the best bakery in

Laredo, Texas, at least, until Imelda died of breast cancer sometime in the early 90s. Her daughter was never the baker that Imelda was, and so the lot was eventually sold, the building demolished, and replaced with a Popeye's Chicken. There's a similar story floating around about a burger shack called Glass Kitchen. More than half of the tour into town will become what *used to be* there, but that doesn't distinguish Laredo from anywhere else.

Ernestina and John had two daughters, Mary Pat and Linda, and together they lived in an aqua-colored house on Aldama Street, less than a mile from the International Bridge that crossed the Rio Grande River into Mexico. The town on the other side was called Nuevo Laredo, but the Laredo on their side was technically the newer, younger Laredo, which is eventually why so many were hell-bent on getting there, as you've heard, though back then it wasn't the big deal that it is now.

In the backyard, Ernestina planted a row of orange trees along the chain link fence so that she wouldn't have to look at the freight trains that rumbled past only a dozen or so yards from their back door. These trains that hauled the dislocated pieces of cars and cranes from Mexico will, decades later, be the same trains that carry men and women who hitchhike as cargo. *Los atravesados*—northward phantoms, whispered about but never seen because they will use the cover of night. Border Patrol headlights will become a common intrusion during sleeping hours, and, by morning, the memory of those lights will be the only trace of *them*, the boogeymen who have crept in the bushes while you were sleeping and plucked oranges from your grandmother's tree.

But, not yet. There were no shadows on trains when the Birkes were children. And why would there be? The going and coming was very easy. One day a year even, on George

Washington's birthday, they opened the bridge so people could attend the parade. This happened in early spring. Of course, these same people weren't invited to the Colonial Pageant and Ball hosted by the Society of Martha Washington, which was only for the city's elite. And only their elite daughters wore the custom Colonial dresses, some of which were made for no less than $10,000, which wasn't so enormous a sum if you considered the pounds of velvet and silk that were beaded, embroidered and trimmed with lace. But the parade was for everyone, and Ernestina always took Mary Pat and Linda to see the dresses. The marching bands, yes, and the parade floats, too. But mostly, the dresses. She packed bacon and egg sandwiches in foil (which you'd know was a treat if, like the Birkes children, you were tired of egg tacos in the morning), and they were out of the house by sunrise to get the good bleacher seats close to the mayor and the Marthas' families. Most girls will never see dresses as beautiful as the ones Ernestina and her daughters saw at those parades, and, without them knowing as much, there was a lesson hidden among the many layers of fabric about the distracting nature of beauty: no one asked if George Washington had ever been to Laredo, and to have done so was another odd and pointless gesture (I did only recently and I can tell you that he hasn't).

John Birkes never went to the parades. Nevertheless, he could've gotten the whole thing in summary afterward. It was gossip about dresses that the girls brought to the kitchen table, and while it never bothered John to hear his daughters swoon over silks and ribbons like ninnies in a Jane Austen novel, he was less forgiving when, in the throes of girly ecstasy, the gossip escaped from their mouths in Spanish. Maybe John didn't mind Spanish-speaking altogether, but he certainly didn't like it happening in his house, a place where he should have been able to control things that outside of his house he couldn't. Or, perhaps he felt excluded: they could have been

speaking German or Japanese or Korean; what mattered was that he couldn't understand it even if he wanted to. Or maybe he just hated the way it sounded, a pet peeve both indiscriminate and primal, like hating the sound of someone eating an apple.

These are my best guesses, because it was another thing I never asked about. When I was told, "Daddy hated when we spoke in Spanish," it was just in passing, and what seemed most important at the time was how sweetly she said the word "Daddy." Later the memory would be picked through, like crows pecking at roadkill, until all the sweetness was forgotten. That's what writers do.

All I can say with certainty about John W. Birkes is that I remember only three things about him: When he wasn't wearing his dentures, no one alive was funnier unless they could manage to gum-mash their words in an East Texas drawl like he did; he was territorial about his peanut butter; and, he loved to watch NASCAR. Whatever I think I understand is contextualized by this information. Everything else is speculative or secondhand. The people I love loved him. Shouldn't that be enough?

Anyway, speaking in Spanish wasn't only forbidden at home. The Birkes daughters attended Ursuline Academy where the Sisters oversaw their education with all the sour milk-sternness that one has come to associate with Catholic nuns of that era. Getting caught with Spanish words in your mouth meant the principal's office. At other schools, children were sent outside to pick rocks. Between home and school, there were few places where children were allowed to speak Spanish, even fewer where it was encouraged. The language became something to put away in a drawer, to hide under a mound of socks. And eventually, all things in drawers are forgotten, until they are remembered, or found by a snooping child.

The older daughter, Mary Pat, had a daughter of her own—her porcelain doll, she used to call her. Like her mother, this little girl had dark hair and fair skin, and for this she would never hear the word *mojado* and need to ask, "Who me?"

She had nannies from across, women named Paulita who spoke to her in Spanish, and through them she learned enough for conversation (or so she's been told, for while adults can forget languages they once knew, children can forget that they ever knew them). There's a family video of her singing "La Bamba," and she knows all the words, but even this doesn't prove anything. After all, you get to be a crossover artist like Ritchie Valens when even the gringos know your name.

But a girl doesn't keep having nannies forever. After a while, women like Paulita only came around to wash and iron clothes, and her language, the one in which she used to sing "Sana, Sana" while she crossed the porcelain doll's cuts and bruises with her wrinkly fingertips—this language became less like a mother's and more like a servant's.

In case it wasn't clear enough to her, more than once she'd heard her mother snort indignantly at the mall cashiers who spoke to her in Spanish. "I'm American," she'd say. "You can speak to me in English."

Years later, when the porcelain doll thought that she had realized something important about these moments, that she had *figured something out* about her mother, she asked what had become of Paulita.

"Who?" her mother asked, and when the porcelain doll explained with that smug mouth of hers, her mother corrected her. "Her name wasn't Paulita. You think you know everything."

The porcelain doll learned many things from her mother.

In grade school, she closed her ears when the other girls sang Selena. She even said she hated Selena (although now she'll deny it). In middle school, she dated her first white boy, and when she went to his house, she saw the magazines his parents kept on coffee tables, so that by high school she understood that of the possibilities for her life, the ones she liked best were the ones in *New Yorker* and *Vogue*.

Later, it would become the thing to create a character for yourself, one that was uniquely qualified, or just unique. "Diverse" is another word people like to use. The porcelain doll had become a writer—no, she wanted to become a writer, so she became a historian of sorts, mining a lifetime of lifetimes, extracting minerals from deep inside the anecdotes of her mother's memories. I'm not sure if this makes her nostalgic, digging through the past rather than longing for it. I suppose once you turn a thing over, again and again, it starts to lose its charm, which is why most don't bother doing it at all. Somehow, it's preferable to dwell on the painful and inscrutable way an absence ages, how years stack indifferently like bricks and build a wall between then and now—that way you only lose a thing and never have to learn that you never had it.

"Why do you want to know all of this?" her mother asks on the phone.

"Why do you need to ask?" the porcelain doll asks back.

"What is there to tell?"

“Didn’t you ever wonder why he said it? Why he said ‘I don’t want to hear that gibberish coming out of your mouth anymore?’

“He was my daddy,” she says again, and now I’m old enough to see how cruel I’ve been, that a *historian* might want to make a villain out of their mother’s father, and that society at large may approve, but a child doesn’t always need to understand their parents. They only need to love them.