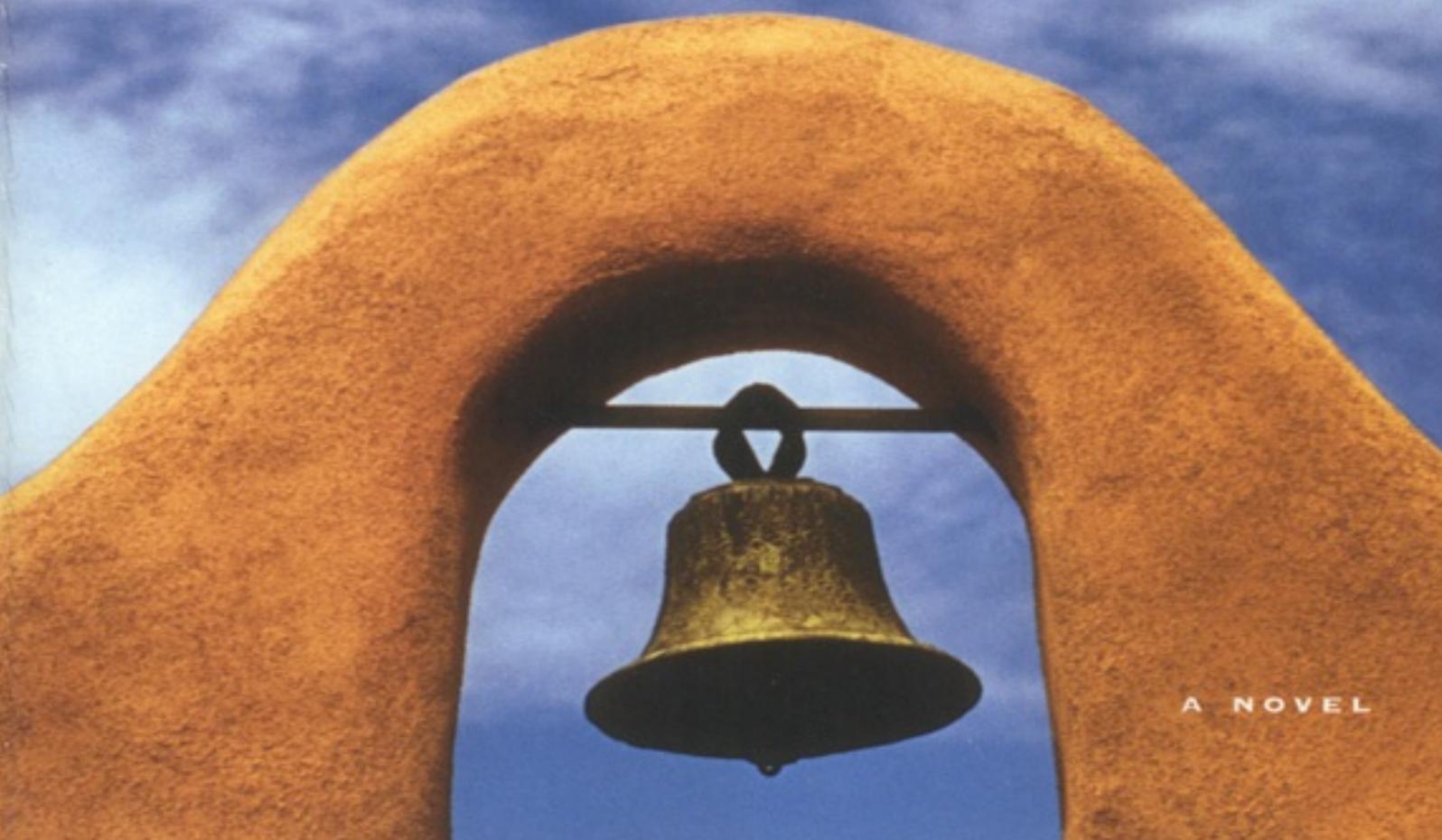


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**ANA CASTILLO**

**SO FAR FROM GOD**



A NOVEL



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Psst ... I Have Something to Tell You, Mi Amor

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*S o F a r  
f r o m  
G o d*



A N O V E L

*A n a  
C a s t i l l o*

W. W. Norton & Company

New York London



*To all the trees that gave their life to the telling of these stories*

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*A m'jito, Marcel, y a las siguientes siete generaciones*

1. An Account of the First Astonishing Occurrence in the Lives of a Woman Named Sofia and Her Four Fated Daughters; and the Equally Astonishing Return of Her Wayward Husband
2. On Caridad's Holy Restoration and Her Subsequent Clairvoyance: Both Phenomena Questioned by the Doubling *Tomases* of Tom
3. On the Subject of Doña Felicia's Remedios, Which in and of Themselves Are Worthless without Unwavering Faith; and a Brief Sampling of Common Ailments Along with Cures Which Have Earned Our Curandera Respect and Devotion throughout War and Peace
4. Of the Further Telling of Our Clairvoyant Caridad Who After Being Afflicted with the Pangs of Love Disappears and Upon Discovery Is Henceforth Known as *La Armita*
5. An Interlude: On Francisco el Penitente's First Becoming a Santero and Thereby Sealing His Fate
6. The Renewed Courtship of Loca's Mom and Dad and How in '49 Sofia Got Swept Off Her Feet by Don Domingo's Clark Gable Mustache, Despite Her Familia's Opinion of the Charlatan Act
7. Caridad Reluctantly Returns Home to Assume a Life as What Folks in "Fanta Se" Call a Channel
8. What Appears to Be a Deviation of Our Story but Wherein, with Some Patience, the Reader Will Discover That There Is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account
9. Sofia, Who Would Never Again Let Her Husband Have the Last Word, Announces to the Amazement of Her *Familia and Vecinos* Her Decision to Run for la Mayor of Tom
10. Wherein Sofia Discovers La Loca's Playmate by the Acequia Has an Uncanny Resemblance to the Legendary Llorona; the Ectoplasmic Return of Sofi's Eldest Daughter; Fe Falls in Love Again; and Some Culinary Advice from La Loca
11. The Marriage of Sofia's Faithful Daughter to her Cousin, Casimiro, Descendant of Shepherds and Promising Accountant, Who, by all Accounts, Was Her True Fated Love; and of Her Death, Which Lingers Among Us All Heavier than Air
12. Of the Hideous Crime of Francisco el Penitente, and His Pathetic Calls Heard Throughout the Countryside as His Body Dangled from a Piñon like a Crow-Picked Pear; and the End of Caridad and Her Beloved Emerald, Which We Nevertheless Will Refrain from Calling Tragic
13. The Final Farewell of Don Domingo, in a Big mitote; and an Encounter with un Doctor Invisible or Better Known in These Parts as a Psychic Surgeon, Who, in Any Case, Has No Cure for Death

14. Doña Felicia Calls in the Troops Who Herein Reveal a Handful of Their Own Tried and Proven Remedios; and Some Mixed Medical Advice Is Offered to the Beloved Doctor Tolentin

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15. La Loca Santa Returns to the World via Albuquerque Before Her Transcendental Departure; and a Few Random Political Remarks from the Highly Opinionated Narrator

16. Sofia Founds and Becomes la First Presidenta of the Later-to-Become World-Renowned Organization M.O.M.A.S.; and a Rumor Regarding the Inevitability of Double Standards Is (With a Hint of Hope) Dispensed With

Further praise for *So Far from God*

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Muchos thank yous to my apreciado editor, Gerald Howard, and, as always, thanks Susan B.!





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## *An Account of the First Astonishing Occurrence in the Lives of Woman Named Sofia and Her Four Fated Daughters; and the Equally Astonishing Return of Her Wayward Husband*

La Loca was only three years old when she died. Her mother Soft woke at twelve midnight to the howling and neighing of the five dogs, six cats, and four horses, whose custom it was to go freely in and out of the house. Sofi got up and tiptoed out of her room. The animals were kicking and crying and running back and forth with their ears back and fur standing on end, but Sofi couldn't make out what their agitation was about.

She checked the bedroom with the three older girls: Esperanza, the eldest, had her arms wrapped around the two smaller ones, Fe and Caridad. They were sleeping strangely undisturbed by the excitement of the animals.

Sofi went back into her own room where her baby, the three-year-old, had slept ever since Soft's husband disappeared. Sofi put the baseball bat that she had taken with her when checking the house back under the bed—"just in case" she encountered some tonto who had gotten ideas about the woman who lived alone with her four little girls by the ditch at the end of the road.

It was then that she noticed the baby, although apparently asleep, jerking. Jerking, jerking, the little body possessed by something unknown that caused her to thrash about violently until finally she fell off the bed. Sofi ran around to pick her up, but she was so frightened by her little daughter's seizure she stopped short.

The baby continued to thrash about, banging her little arms and legs against the hard stone floor, white foam mixed with a little blood spilling from the corners of her mouth; and worst of all, her eyes were now opened, rolled all the way to the top of her head.

Sofi screamed and called out "Ave Maria Purisimas," and finally her three other precious children came running in. "Mom, Mom, what happened?" And then, everyone was screaming and moaning because the baby had stopped moving, lay perfectly still, and they knew she was dead.

It was the saddest velorio in Tome in years because it was so sad to bury a child. Fortunately no one had died since—well, if memory served right, doña Dolores's last son. Poor woman. Eleven children and one after the other passed on her until she was left with no one, except for her drunken four-mouthed husband. It seems all the babies were victims of a rare bone disease they inherited through the father's bloodline. What terrible misfortune for doña Dolores, suffering the pangs of labor through eleven births, all fated to die during infancy. Twelve years of marriage, eleven babies that did not survive, and to top it off, the husband drank up everything they owned.

A sad, sad story.

The day after the wake the neighbors all came out to accompany Sofi and the girls to the church in Tome, where Sofi wanted the little baby's Mass to be held before they lay her into the cold ground. Everyone Sofi knew was there: the baby's godparents, all of Sofi's comadres and compadres, her sister from Phoenix, everyone except, of course, the baby's father, since no one had seen him nor heard of him since he'd left Sofi and the girls.

That marriage had a black ribbon on its door from the beginning. Soft's grandfather had refused to give the young lovers his blessing, the father had forbidden Soft's querido to step foot in their house.

during their three-year courtship, and the local parish priest joined the opposition when he refused to marry the couple in church.

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Nobody believed that Domingo was good enough for little Sofi, not her sister, not her mother, not even her favorite teacher in high school, la Miss Hill, who had nothing but praise for Soft's common sense and intelligence. Nobody thought el Domingo would make a good husband because of the fact that he liked to gamble.

Gambling was in the man's blood. And gambling is what Sofi did when she ran off with him, sheltered by the dark night of a new moon, and came back a señora. And then, nobody could say anything about it but wait for the inevitable failure of Soft's marriage.

A month after he left, Sofi heard from her husband, a letter from El Paso with five ten-dollar bills and a promise to send more whenever he could. No return address. And no more news from Domingo ever again after that. After a year, Sofia was so mad, she forbade anyone to even mention his name in her presence.

It was 118 degrees the day of Soft's baby daughter's funeral and the two pallbearers, upon the instruction of Father Jerome, placed the small casket on the ground just in front of the church. No one was quite certain what Father Jerome had planned when he paused there in the hot sun. Maybe some last-minute prayers or instructions for the mourners before entering the House of God. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

In fact, he was a little concerned about the grieving mother, who at that point was showing signs of losing it, trembling and nearly collapsing between two others. Father Jerome thought it perhaps a good idea to advise them all on funeral decorum. "As devoted followers of Christ," he began, "we must not show our lack of faith in Him at these times and in His, our Father's fair judgment, Who alone knows why we are here on this earth and why He chooses to call us back home when He does."

Why? Why? That's exactly what Soft wanted to know at that moment—when all she had ever done was accept God's will. As if it hadn't been punishment enough to be abandoned by her husband, the —for no apparent reason and without warning, save the horrible commotion of the animals that night—her baby was taken away! Oh, why? Why? That's all she wanted to know. "Ayyyyyy!"

At that moment, while Soft threw herself on the ground, pounding it with her rough fists, her compadres crying alongside her, saying, "Please, please, comadre, get up, the Lord alone knows when He does! Listen to the padre," Esperanza let out a shriek, long and so high pitched it started some dogs barking in the distance. Sofi had stopped crying to see what was causing the girl's hysteria when suddenly the whole crowd began to scream and faint and move away from the priest, who finally stood alone next to the baby's coffin.

The lid had pushed all the way open and the little girl inside sat up, just as sweetly as if she had woken from a nap, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "¿Mami?" she called, looking around and squinting her eyes against the harsh light. Father Jerome got hold of himself and sprinkled holy water in the direction of the child, but for the moment was too stunned to utter so much as a word of prayer. Then, as if all this was not amazing enough, as Father Jerome moved toward the child she lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof. "Don't touch me, don't touch me!" she warned.

This was only the beginning of the child's long life's phobia of people. She wasn't one of those afflicted with an exaggerated fear of germs and contagion. For the rest of her life, however, she was to be repulsed by the smell of humans. She claimed that all humans bore an odor akin to that which she had smelled in the places she had passed through when she was dead. Where she had gone she revealed from the rooftop that day within the limited ability of a three-year-old's vocabulary, in Spanish and English. Meanwhile everyone below was either genuflecting or paralyzed, and crossing

themselves over and over as she spoke.

“¡Hija, hija!” Father Jerome called up to her, hands clenched in the air. “Is this an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you up to the roof like a bird? Are you the devil’s messenger or a winged angel?”

At that point Soft, despite her shock, rose from the ground, unable to tolerate the mere suggestion by Father Jerome that her daughter, her blessed, sweet baby, could by any means be the devil’s own. “Don’t you dare!” she screamed at Father Jerome, charging at him and beating him with her fists. “Don’t you dare start this about *my* baby! If our Lord in His heaven has sent my child back to me, don’t you dare start this backward thinking against her; the devil doesn’t produce miracles! And *this* is a miracle, an answer to the prayers of a brokenhearted mother, ¡hombre necio, pendejo ...!”

“Ay, watch what you say, comadre!” one of Soft’s friends whispered, pulling Soft from the priest who had staved off her attack with his arms over his head. “Oh, my God!” others uttered, crossing themselves at hearing Sofi call the priest a pendejo, which was a blasphemy, crossing themselves all the more because although the verdict was still open as to whether they were witnessing a true miracle or a mirage of the devil, Sofi’s behavior was giving way to the latter—after all, calling the holy priest a pendejo and hitting him!

The crowd settled down, some still on their knees, palms together, all looking up at the little girl like the glittering angel placed at the top of a Christmas tree. She seemed serene and, though a little flushed, quite like she always did when she was alive. Well, the fact was that she *was* alive, but no one at the moment seemed sure.

“Listen,” she announced calmly to the crowd, “on my long trip I went to three places: hell . . . Someone let out a loud scream at this. “To *purgatorio* and to heaven. God sent me back to help you all to pray for you all, o si no, o si no ...”

“O si no, ¿qué, hija?” Father Jerome begged.

“O si no, you, and others who doubt just like you, will never see our Father in heaven!”

The audience gasped in unison. Someone whispered, “That’s the devil,” but refrained from continuing when Sofi turned to see who it was.

“Come down, come down,” the priest called to the child. “We’ll all go in and pray for you. Yes, yes, maybe all this is really true. Maybe you did die, maybe you did see our Lord in His heaven, maybe He did send you back to give us guidance. Let’s just go in together, we’ll all pray for you.”

With the delicate and effortless motion of a monarch butterfly the child brought herself back to the ground, landing gently on her bare feet, her ruffled chiffon nightdress, bought for the occasion of her burial, fluttering softly in the air. “No, Padre,” she corrected him. “Remember, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*.” With that stated, she went into the church and those with faith followed.

Once the baby was able to receive medical attention (although Soft took her child this time to a hospital in Albuquerque rather than to rely on the young doctor at the Valencia County clinic who had so rashly declared her child dead), it was diagnosed that she was in all probability an epileptic.

Epilepsy notwithstanding, there was much left unexplained and for this reason Sofi’s baby grew up at home, away from strangers who might be witnesses to her astonishing behavior, and she eventually earned the name around the Rio Abajo region and beyond, of La Loca Santa.

For a brief period after her resurrection, people came from all over the state in hopes of receiving her blessing or of her performing of some miracle for them. But because she was so averse to being close to anyone, the best that strangers could expect was to get a glimpse of her from outside the gate. So “Santa” was dropped from her name and she was soon forgotten by strangers.

She became known simply as La Loca. The funny thing was (but perhaps not so funny since it

the way of la gente to call a spade a spade, and she was called “La Loca” straight out), even La Loca mother and sisters called her that because her behavior was so peculiar. Moreover, La Loca herself responded to that name and by the time she was twenty-one no one remembered her Christian name.

Her sisters, all born exactly three years apart from each other, had each gone out into the world and had all eventually returned to their mother’s home. Esperanza had been the only one to graduate through college. She had gotten her B.A. in Chicano Studies. During that time, she had lived with her boyfriend, Rubén (who, during the height of his Chicano cosmic consciousness, renamed himself Cuauhtemoc). This, despite her mother’s opposition, who said of her eldest daughter’s nonsanctified union: “Why should a man buy the cow when he can have the milk for free?” “I am not a cow,” Esperanza responded, but despite this, right after graduation Cuauhtemoc dumped her for a middle-class gabacha with a Corvette; they bought a house in the Northeast Heights in Albuquerque right after their wedding.

Esperanza always had a lot of “spunk,” as they say, but she did have a bad year after Cuauhtemoc who was Rubén again before she recovered and decided to go back to the university for an M.A. in communications. Upon receiving her degree, she landed a job at the local T.V. station as a news broadcaster. These were transitional years where she felt like a woman with brains was as good as dead for all the happiness it brought her in the love department.

Caridad tried a year of college, but school was not for her and never had been, for that matter. She was the sister of the porcelain complexion, not meaning white, but as smooth as glazed clay. She had perfect teeth and round, apple-shaped breasts. Unlike the rest of the women in her family who, despite her grandmother’s insistence that they were *Spanish*, descendants of pure Spanish blood, all shared the flat butt of the Pueblo blood undeniably circulating through their veins, Caridad had a somewhat pronounced ass that men were inclined to show their unappreciated appreciation for everywhere she went.

She fell in love with Memo, her high school sweetheart, got pregnant, and they married the day after graduation. But two weeks had not passed before Caridad got wind that Memo was still seeing his ex-girlfriend, Domitila, who lived in Belen; and Caridad went back home.

All in all, Caridad had three abortions. La Loca had performed each one. Their mother had only known about the first. They didn’t tell anyone else about it but said to Memo and his family that Caridad had miscarried from being so upset about Memo’s cheating on her. It was agreed by all that the marriage be annulled. It would have been a terrible thing to let anyone find out that La Loca had “cured” her sister of her pregnancy, a cause for excommunication for both, not to mention that someone would have surely had La Loca arrested. A crime against man if not a sin against God.

The occasions when La Loca let people get close to her, when she permitted human contact at all, were few. Only her mother and the animals were ever unconditionally allowed to touch her. But without exception, healing her sisters from the traumas and injustices they were dealt by society—society she herself never experienced firsthand—was never questioned.

Caridad kept up with Memo for several years until he finally made his choice. It was not Domitila of Belen and it wasn’t Caridad of Tome. It was the Marines. And off he went to be all that he never knew he was. For while it was said that the Army made men, the Marines’ motto, he was told, was that they only took men.

Three abortions later and with her weakness for shots of Royal Crown with beer chasers after work at the hospital where she was an orderly, Caridad no longer discriminated between giving her love to Memo and only to Memo whenever he wanted it and loving anyone she met at the bars who vaguely resembled Memo. At about the time that her sister, who was definitely not prettier than her but for

sure had more brains, was on the ten o'clock nightly news, you could bet that Caridad was making it a pickup off a dark road with some guy whose name the next day would be as meaningless to her as yesterday's headlines were to Esperanza la newscaster.

Fe, the third of Sofi's daughters, was fine. That is, twenty-four, with a steady job at the bank, and a hard-working boyfriend whom she had known forever; she had just announced their engagement. With the same job since high school graduation, she was a reliable friend to the "girls" at work. Fe was beyond reproach. She maintained her image above all—from the organized desk at work to weekly manicured fingernails and a neat coiffure.

She and Thomas, "Tom," Torres were the ideal couple in their social circle, if one could call a social circle a group of three or four couples who got together on weekends to watch football on wide screen television at Sadie's, or to go to a Lobos game at the university, or rent videos or once in a while got all dressed up and went to Garduño's for dinner.

Tom ran one of those mini-mart filling stations, sometimes working double shifts. He did not drink or even smoke cigarettes. They were putting their money away for their wedding, a small wedding, just for family and a few close friends, because they were going to use their savings for their first house.

As it was, while Fe had a little something to talk to Esperanza about, she kept away from her other sisters, her mother, and the animals, because she just didn't understand how they could all be so self-defeating, so unambitious. Although, by anyone's standards it was unfair to call her mother unambitious, since Sofi single-handedly ran the Carne Buena Carnecería she inherited from her parents. She raised most of the livestock that she herself (with the help of La Loca) butchered for the store, managed all its finances, and ran the house on her own to boot.

But as for Fe's antisocial sister, sometimes, when she came home from her job at the bank and saw La Loca outside the stalls with the horses, always in the same dirty pair of jeans and never wearing shoes, even in winter, she was filled with deep compassion for what she saw as a soulless creature.

She had only been six years old when La Loca had had her first epileptic seizure and her mother and community (out of ignorance, she was sure) had pronounced the child dead. She did not remember "El Milagro," as her mother referred to La Loca's resurrection that day in front of the church, and highly suspected that such a thing as her little sister flying up to the church rooftop had never happened.

Usually, Fe did not feel compassion for La Loca, however, but simply disappointment and disgust for her sister's obvious "mental illness," the fact that her mother had encouraged it with her own superstitions, and finally, fear that it was, like her own Indian flat butt, hereditary, despite everyone's protest to the contrary.

Fe couldn't wait until she got out—of her mother's home as well as Tome—but she would get out properly, with a little more style and class than the women in her family had. Except for Esperanza these days, whose being on television every night was lending some prestige to Fe at the bank. Although when Esperanza was in college, being a radical and living with that crazy Chicano who was always speeding on peyote or something, Fe hadn't known what to make of her older sister and certainly had no desire to copy Esperanza's La Raza politics.

Fe had just come back from Bernadette's Bridal Gowns, where she had had herself fitted for her dress, and the three gabachas (my term, not Fe's) she had chosen from the bank as her bridesmaids instead of her sisters, had met that Saturday to have their pink-and-orchid chiffon gowns fitted to them when La Loca, sweeping the living room, pointed with her chin to the mail as soon as Fe came in.

"What? A letter for me?" Fe said cheerfully, recognizing Tom's neat, small printing on the square

envelope. She smiled and took it to the bathroom to get a little privacy. La Loca had that look like she was going to stick close to her. Sometimes she did that. She had this sixth sense when she suspected something was amiss in the house and wouldn't let up until she uncovered it.

*Dear Honey*, it began, a short note on yellow paper from a legal pad. This was a little unusual since Tom always sent cards, cards with lovers kissing, with irises and roses, with beautiful little sayings that rhymed to which he simply signed, "Your Tom." *Dear Honey*. Fe stopped. She heard a faint rap on the door. "Go away, Loca," she said. She heard her sister move away from the door. Fe read on: *I have been thinking about this for a long time, but I didn't have the nerve to tell you a person. It's not that I don't love you. I do. I always will. But I just don't think I'm ready to get married. Like I said, I thought about this a long time. Please don't call to try to change my mind. I hope you find happiness with someone who deserves you and can make you happy. Tom.*

When La Loca and Sofi—along with the help of Fred and Wilma, the two Irish setters that immediately joined in the commotion of the women's breaking down the bathroom door, and Fe screaming and tearing the tiny bathroom apart—finally got to Fe, she was wrapped up in the shower curtain in the tub. "You're gonna suffocate, 'jita, get outa there!" Soft called and with La Loca's help unwrapped the plastic from around Fe, who in her ravings had inadvertently made herself into a human tamale—all the while letting out one loud continuous scream that could have woken the dead.

Sofi shook her daughter hard, but when that didn't silence Fe, she gave her a good slap as she had seen people do on T.V. lots of times whenever anyone got like that. But Fe didn't quiet down. In fact Fe did not stop screaming even when Sofi announced ten days later that she was going to get Tom. Sofi decided to go personally to Tom's house when he did not return her calls.

"I got a daughter who won't stop screaming," she told Tom's mother, Mrs. Torres.

"I got a son who's got *susto*," Mrs. Torres replied.

"¿*Susto*? ¿*Susto*?" Sofi shouted. "You think that cowardly son of yours without pelos on his maracas has *susto*? I'll show you *susto*! My daughter has been screaming at the top of her lungs for ten days and nights. She spent hundreds, maybe even a thousand dollars already on their wedding plans. She has people at work that she can't even face no more. And let me tell you something, Mrs. Torres, don't think that I don't know that your son had her on the pill for a long time."

"Wait, just a minute, señora," Mrs. Torres cut in, holding up her hand. The two mothers, believe or not, had never met before. Fe had been too ashamed of her family to bring Mrs. Torres over to her house. "My son ... my son is a good boy. He hasn't eaten for days, he's just so upset about the breakup. But he said he had to do the honorable thing. He hasn't cost your daughter nothing he himself hasn't lost as well. What's money when in the long run he spared her from an unhappy marriage? I don't know why he changed his mind about marrying her. I keep out of my son's business. Just be glad he left your daughter when he did. You know how men are ..."

"Ay!" Sofi moaned, because she knew full well that *that* last remark was meant to hit below the belt regarding her own marriage, and thanks to Fe, she knew next to nothing about Mrs. Torres. She would come back with a good rejoinder. But finally Tom came out of his room and she convinced him to come over so that he might make Fe stop screaming.

"What's that?" he asked, obviously spooked by Fe's shrill cries that were heard from outside the house. "Is that La Loca?" He had heard of her, but had never met Fe's so-called retarded sister. "Are you crazy?" Sofi said, unlocking the door. "That's *your* girlfriend! Why do you think I brought you here? If I know Fe, she'll snap out of it—maybe by you talking to her. We'll see."

But Tom stopped at the threshold. "I can't go in," he said. He looked nauseated. "I'm sorry, I just can't." And before Sofi could think of something to say to stop him, Tom was back in his car, smoking

down the road. Damn, Sofi thought, seeing him speed away, maybe he *does* have susto.

Unfortunately, ~~nothing and no one could quiet Fe down. She wanted her Tom back. And even when~~ Caridad managed to get some tranquilizers from her hospital friends, Fe would only shut up for an hour or two at a time when she slept. She even screamed while she was being fed (because now it was Sofi and her daughters who took turns feeding, cleaning, and dressing poor Fe, who was truly a mess and who—if she were in any way capable of realizing it—would have been horrified at that thought).

Meanwhile, La Loca did what she could. She sewed a padded headband for Fe so that when she banged her head against the wall, as she increasingly did while she screamed, she wouldn't hurt herself as bad. She also prayed for her, since that was La Loca's principal reason for being alive, and both her mother and she well knew.

Above all, however, she prayed for Tom, because like so many hispanos, nuevo mexicano whatever he wanted to call himself, something about giving himself over to a woman was worse than having lunch with the devil. Yes, he had susto. But no tea and no incantations by the curandera his mother brought over to relieve him of it would ever cure him. The mere mention of Fe was enough to set him off into a cold sweat. So La Loca prayed for him because in a few years he would probably look for a new novia to marry while no one, not even Mrs. Torres, not even he himself, would know that he was still suffering from the inability to open his heart.

Fe and her bloodcurdling wail became part of the household's routine so that the animals didn't even jump or howl no more whenever Fe, after a brief intermission when she dozed off, woke up abruptly and put her good lungs to full use. But it was Caridad who, being selfless would never have thought of becoming the center of attention, ultimately caused the entire household, including the animals, to forget Fe when she came home one night as mangled as a stray cat, having been left for dead by the side of the road.

There was too much blood to see at the time, but after Caridad had been taken by ambulance to the hospital, treated and saved (just barely), Soft was told that her daughter's nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat.

For those with charity in their hearts, the mutilation of the lovely young woman was akin to martyrdom. Masses were said for her recovery. A novena was devoted to her at the local parish. And although Soft didn't know who they all were, a dozen old women in black came each night to Caridad's hospital room to say the rosary, to wail, to pray.

But there are still those for whom there is no kindness in their hearts for a young woman who had enjoyed life, so to speak. Among them were the sheriff's deputies and the local police department, therefore Caridad's attacker or attackers were never found. No one was even ever detained as a suspect. And as the months went by, little by little, the scandal and shock of Caridad's assault were forgotten, by the news media, the police, neighbors, and the church people. She was left in the hands of her family, a nightmare incarnated.

When Esperanza finally managed to get her mother to come home to try to rest a bit, they found her dozing off in her room and La Loca nowhere around. They didn't find her in the roperos, under the beds, not out in the stalls with the horses. The dogs would not reveal where she was, staring blankly at Sofi when she asked them about La Loca's whereabouts. Esperanza suggested calling the police. La Loca never left the house except to go out in the stalls, or walk down to the ditch, and though she rode she never went out at night. Surely, the two women thought, after their having been gone for more than twelve hours, the two women thought, La Loca must have wandered off, not knowing what else to do.

But just as Esperanza was dialing the emergency number she heard a distinct clunk sound from inside the wood-burning stove in the living room. Soft and the dogs heard it too and they all rushed once to pull La Loca out. “Mom, is Caridad dead?” La Loca asked, soot-covered, arms around her mother’s shoulders. She was crying. “No, ’jita, your sister is not dead. Gracias a Dios.”

Just then Fe woke up and the walls began to vibrate with her screaming and since everyone including the dogs and cats had been concentrating on La Loca for a moment, they gave a start, in unison. La Loca began to cry harder and Sofi, who couldn’t take no more the reality of a permanently traumatized daughter, another who was more ghost than of this world, and a third who was the most beautiful child she had given birth to and who had been cruelly mutilated, let herself sink into the couch and began to sob.

“Mom. Mom. Please, don’t give up,” Esperanza called out, but she did not come to put her arm around her mother’s hunched shoulders. “Aw!” Esperanza said, clearly trying not to give in to it all herself. Although this was far from the right moment to spring her news on her family, she found herself announcing, “I’ve just been offered a job in Houston. I don’t know for sure if I should take ...”

No one heard her anyway. Being the eldest, she was used to her mother’s preoccupation with her younger sisters. Caridad, because she was too beautiful; Fe, because her compulsions wound her up too tight; and the baby, La Loca, because she was kind of ... well, *loca*. Esperanza threw her hands up in the air and went to bed.

The next day, Esperanza went straight to her boss and gave her notice. The staff was pretty excited for her since the job in Houston was definitely a step up and things were looking good for Esperanza in the way of career opportunities.

As it turned out, she got a message before the end of that week from a certain Rubén out of her past. *Lunch tomorrow?* the message read. Sure, why not? Esperanza thought. Enough time had passed so that she could almost say she bore no hard feelings against her college sweetheart. She was doing all right for herself and she was certain he had seen her on the nightly news, so he knew it, too. Soon she would be getting out of New Mexico, broadening her horizons, freeing herself from the provincialism of her upbringing, and Rubén with his blond wife and their three-bedroom house, coyote kid, dog, and minivan could just live happily ever after as far as she was concerned.

But as it turned out there was no more house in the Northeast Heights and no more minivan. Rubén was driving an old clunker, and Donna had split with their kid to *Houston*. (Apparently she too was intent on starting a new life, broadening her horizons, freeing herself from her provincial upbringing, and so on.)

“I have thought of calling you for a long time, Esperanza,” Rubén told her. “I have gone back to the Native-American Church and everytime I go pray at a meeting at one of the pueblos or go to the sweat lodge, I think of us, and how it coulda been.” He had put on a few pounds, well, more than a few, but to Esperanza, he still had that kind of animal magnetism she always felt toward him.

“You remember, vieja, when we used to go to the peyote meetings together, when we sweated together at the lodge back in the days when we were in college?” he asked, giving her a nudge with his elbow. He was holding a mug of beer in his hand, and she saw as he waved his arms with great animation that he didn’t spill any of it, but instead chugged it right down and grinned at her. No, he wasn’t drunk, just feeling good. It was good to see him again, to be back together, and she ordered herself another beer too.

Esperanza didn’t go back to work that day, but they ended up picking up where they left off, and to make a long story short, she didn’t get to Houston that year, either. Every two weeks she was right

there with Rubén, at the teepee meetings of the Native-American Church, Rubén singing and drumming, keeping the fire, watching the “door,” teaching her the dos and don’ts of his interpretation of lodge “etiquette” and the role of women and the role of men and how they were not to be questioned. And she concluded as she had during their early days, why not?

After all, there was Rubén with his Native and Chicano male friends always joking among themselves, always siding with each other, and always agreeing about the order and reason of the universe, and since Esperanza had no Native women friends to verify any of what was being told to her by Rubén about the woman’s role in what they were doing, she did not venture to contradict him.

At this time a virtual miracle occurred in Esperanza’s house and which eventually caused her to decide about her relationship with Rubén. Well, actually she had been thinking about it for a while. Every time they went to a meeting, which was maybe once every two or three weeks, everything was good between them. They went to the meeting. Sometimes they also did a sweat. Afterward, they went home and made love all day. The problem was that then she would not hear from Rubén again until the next time there was a meeting. She was beginning to feel like part of a ritual in which she herself participated as an unsuspecting symbol, like a staff or a rattle or medicine.

As the months went on, their separation between meetings and sweats had become unsettling. It completely closed her off from her other life, the life which Rubén referred to derogatorily as “careerist.” She felt just plain sad and lonely about it. She wanted to share with him that part of her life. She needed to bring it all together, to consolidate the spiritual with the practical side of things. But whenever she suggested to Rubén that they have lunch again like they did that first time or to go out on a regular date in between meetings, he simply declined with no apologies, regrets, or explanations.

What was left of Caridad had been brought home after three months in the hospital. In addition to caring for Fe la Gritona (as her mother had begun to refer to her, although never to her face), it was Soft’s main job to care for Caridad, or as stated more accurately above, what was left of her.

It was La Loca who took care of the horses and the other animals as well as helped her mother with preparing meals for her sisters. One evening, right after one of La Loca’s infrequent seizures, the miracle that Esperanza witnessed occurred. Soft was tending to La Loca, who was on the living room floor, the tray with Fe’s carne adovada and green chili all over her, Esperanza standing nearby, and of course, all the animals that had given their perfunctory warnings just beforehand stood nervous around as well. Then movement in the adjacent dining room caught their eyes at once. Dogs, cats, and women, twenty-eight eyes in all, saw *Caridad* walking soundlessly, without seeming to be aware of them, across that room. Before anyone could react she was out of sight. Furthermore, it wasn’t the Caridad that had been brought back from the hospital, but a whole and once again beautiful Caridad, what furthermore appeared to be Fe’s wedding gown.

“Mom?” Esperanza said, hesitating, but eyes still fixed on the empty space where Caridad had passed.

“Dios mío,” Sofi gasped. “Caridad.”

“Mom,” La Loca whispered, still on the floor, “I prayed for Caridad.”

“I know you did, ’jita, I know,” Sofi said, trembling, afraid to pull herself up, to go to the room where she suspected Caridad’s corpse was now waiting to be taken care of.

“I prayed real hard,” La Loca added and started to cry.

The dogs and cats whimpered.

The three women huddled together went to the bedroom where Caridad was. Sofi stepped back when she saw, not what had been left of her daughter, half repaired by modern medical technology.

tubes through her throat, bandages over skin that was gone, surgery piecing together flesh that was once her daughter's breasts, but Caridad as she was before.

Furthermore, a calm Fe was holding her sister, rocking her, stroking her forehead, humming softly to her. Caridad was whole. There was nothing, nothing that anyone could see wrong with her, except for the fact that she was feverish. Her eyes were closed while she moved her head back and forth, not violently but softly, as was Caridad's nature, mumbling unintelligibly all the while.

"Fe?" said Esperanza—who was equally taken aback by Fe's transformation. She had stopped screaming.

Sofi, sobbing, rushed over to embrace her two daughters.

"I prayed for you," La Loca told Fe. "Thank you, Loca," Fe said, almost smiling.

"Loca." Esperanza reached over to place her hand on La Loca's shoulder. "Don't touch me!" La Loca said, moving away from her sister as she always did from anyone when she was not the one to initiate the contact.

Esperanza took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She had spent her whole life trying to figure out why she was the way she was. In high school, although a rebel, she was Catholic heart and soul. In college, she had a romance with Marxism, but was still Catholic. In graduate school, she was atheist and, in general, a cynic. Lately, she prayed to Grandmother Earth and Grandfather Sky. For good measure, however, she had been reading a flurry of self-help books. She read everything she could find on dysfunctional families, certain now that some of her personal sense of displacement in society had to do with her upbringing.

But nowhere did she find anything near to the description of her family. And now, Caridad's and Fe's spontaneous recoveries were beyond all rhyme and reason for anyone, even for an ace reporter like Esperanza. It was time to get away, Esperanza decided, far away.

"I'm going to call Rubén," Esperanza announced, but at that moment her mother was too overwhelmed by her two daughters' return to the living that she didn't hear Esperanza either.

"Rubén?" Esperanza said, when Rubén answered his phone.

"Yeah? Hey, how's it goin', kid?" he asked with his usual condescending manner, adding a little chuckle. Esperanza paused. He talked to her on the phone like she was a casual friend. A casual friend whom he prayed with and whom he made love with, but whom he could not call to ask on a given day how she was doing. When it was her moon-time the estrangement between them widened since she was not permitted to go to the meeting or to sweat, nor did he like to make love to her. A casual friend who accepted her gifts of groceries, the rides in *her* car with *her* gas, all up and down the Southwest to attend meetings, who called her collect the month he left on a "pilgrimage" to visit the Mayan ruins throughout southern Mexico, where she had not been invited to join him, who always let her pick up the tab whenever they stopped someplace for a few beers and burritos just before she left him—after the meetings, sweats, lovemaking, to go home so she could get herself ready for that job which he suspected her so much of selling out to white society for but which paid for all the food, gas, telephone calls, and even, let's admit it, the tens and twenties she discreetly left on his bedroom dresser whenever she went over, knowing he could use it and would take it, although he would never have asked her directly for it.

"It's my sisters," she started to say, but already something else was on her mind more pertinent than the recent recuperation of Fe and Caridad.

"Yeah, your sisters," Rubén said. "You got your hands full, huh, woman?"

"No," Esperanza responded with sudden aloofness. "As a matter of fact, they're taking good care of themselves. I just wanted to tell you that I'm accepting an offer in Washington. And that I think it

better if we just don't see each other anymore, Rubén."

"Well, uh ..." Rubén was groping for a response that would reinstate the pride just demolished by Esperanza's abrupt rejection, when he was cut short by a *click*. Esperanza didn't mean to simply hang up on him but she had just caught sight of a man peering in through the kitchen window. What made it really eerie was that instead of barking the dogs were waving their tails. Just then the man opened the door and stepped in. She recognized him right away since she was already going on twelve when he had left. "Dad?"

Yes. It was their father, Sofi's husband, who had returned "after all those years" as they would say around Tome for a long time to come. Some say, *that* was the true miracle of that night. All kinds of stories circulated as to what had happened to him "all those years." Most of the rumors he would start himself, and when he would get tired of hearing them played back always with some new variation or detail of exaggeration added to them which did not quite suit his taste, he pretended to get angry about them, stopped them, and started a new story all over again.

For example, the favorite chisme that went around about him was that he had been living down in Silver City, running a gambling operation and living the high life. After the story circulated awhile the gambling operation became part of a house of ill-repute. Domingo found this addition to the story amusing, even something to boast about with his friends down at Toby's Package Liquors, or after Mass in the church courtyard. But when people started to say that Domingo had married the woman who owned and ran the brothel, Domingo got angry. He was many things, but a bigamist, *nunca*.

With regards to his own adventures, he quickly realized he had considerable competition with La Loca's life, which she herself didn't relate but which he invariably heard about from everyone else. When he tried to get her to fly to the roof or stick herself in the wood-burning stove, she simply stared at him as if such suggestions were absurd. However, the one thing she did confirm was her repulsion for human contact when ever he came close to her, unless she was the one who initiated it, which she believed it or not, once in a while she did.

She would approach him when he was eating or watching television and sniff him. Since he didn't want to scare her off, he'd remain still and pretend he didn't notice what she was doing.

"Jita," Sofi asked her daughter one day when they were alone, "what is it that you smell when you smell your father?"

"Mom," La Loca said, "I smell my dad. And he was in hell, too."

"Hell?" Sofi said, thinking her daughter, who didn't have any sense of humor at all, was trying to make a joke.

But instead La Loca replied quite soberly, "Mom, I been to hell. You never forget that smell. And my dad ... he was there, too."

"So you think I should forgive your dad for leaving me, for leaving us all those years?" Sofi asked.

"Here we don't forgive, Mom," La Loca told her. And there was no question at that point in Sofi's mind that La Loca had no sense of humor. La Loca's voice empathized. "Only in hell do we learn to forgive and you got to die first," La Loca said. "That's when we get to pluck out all the devils from our hearts that were put there when we were *here*. That's where we get rid of all the lies told to us. That's where we go and cry like rain. Mom, hell is where you go to see yourself. This dad, out there sitting watching T.V., he was in hell a long time. He's like an onion, we will never know all of him—but he ain't afraid no more."

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## ***On Caridad's Holy Restoration and Her Subsequent Clairvoyance Both Phenomena Questioned by the Doubting Tomases of Tome***

After Caridad's "Holy Restoration"—as her mother referred to her phenomenal recovery—she moved out with her Corazón. It was all very sudden and no one could really explain it, not even Caridad, but she was beginning to say and do a lot of things that could not be explained since her Holy Restoration, so Sofia did not protest the move too much.

Caridad insisted on finding her own place without asking no one, so it was no surprise to anyone neither that she took the first place she found without considering that there was no stall to keep her mare. Her new home was in a trailer complex which lay in the heart of the South Valley in Albuquerque. Some neighbors had horses and other assorted farm animals, so Caridad's Corazón and of itself did not stand out. Except when it got loose it pretty much wandered about on its own. There was no corral for her and at night, she simply came close to Caridad's kitchen window and stuck her head in through an open window.

Caridad's landlady, doña Felicia, looked like she was at least ninety years old. Sofia suspected that the old woman was much older than that—as hard as that was to believe, she was so agile and self-sufficient—but her vivid memories of fighting in the Mexican Civil War with her first husband, Juan, meant that she *must* be over a hundred! Sofia finally decided that doña Felicia must have picked up the memories of her own mother and incorporated them into her storytelling.

How could she possibly be a hundred years old and still put on her red "*lipistick*" to go to Market every morning and walk a mile to the market for her own groceries? When you stopped in at her own little traila, she was busy embroidering with perfect eyesight a beautiful mantel for a bride-to-be, keeping up with her favorite telenovelas on Spanish cable T.V. in between "patients," and ready with a pot of coffee and plate of beans to make you feel right at home.

Sofia entrusted her daughter, whom she referred to as *una inocente*—despite her lively history at every cowboy bar in el Rio Abajo—to the centennial old woman, and doña Felicia graciously assured the preoccupied mother that she would keep an eye on Caridad, adding that she did not see nothing too unusual about Caridad insisting on keeping her young mare with her, with or without a stall.

Corazón had become Caridad's only companion. "Los animales entienden más que la gente a veces," doña Felicia said to Sofia. Sofia was more concerned for Caridad's Corazón, who had never been away from their home in Tome, than for her daughter, who had shown an uncanny ability to survive anything. Caridad's Corazón, however, was easily frightened by strangers, the revving up of car engines and other loud sudden noises, even the playful shrieks of small children.

"Just make sure she remembers to keep her Corazón tied up, so it don't take off," Sofia asked doña Felicia, who nodded and gestured with liver-spotted hands that Sofia could count on her.

After Caridad's physical recuperation, she had run a fever for many weeks. Loca and Sofia spoon-fed her and took care of all her needs until Caridad was strong enough to get up and do things on her own. During her convalescence Caridad rarely spoke, but they knew that she understood all that was said to her because she responded with little nods and shakes of the head.

However, they also knew that she had changed in an even bigger way when, on four distinct occasions before she left home, she drifted off into a trancelike state and took on an otherworldly

expression. Each time, both Sofia and Loca were witnesses.

~~The first time, Sofia was feeding Caridad her usual breakfast of blue corn atole and one huev~~  
tibio and suddenly, her mouth still open, Caridad seemed to go paralyzed. Loca was sitting nearby  
combing Bringraj hair oil through Caridad's chestnut brown locks, which had gone brittle from a year  
of being bedridden. She couldn't see Caridad's hypnotized expression, but suspected immediately that  
something was wrong. "Mom?" Loca said when Caridad abruptly "went away" (as Loca called  
later), and Sofia started to gently shake Caridad by the shoulder, but she did not respond.

"Domingo! Domingo!" Sofia called her husband, who was in the living room watching a football  
game on television. He came medio asustao because he knew by his Sofia's tone that something had  
her frightened.

None of their attempts to revive Caridad worked. Instead, slowly on her own she broke out of the  
trance. And when she looked around, as if wondering what these people with frowns on their faces  
were concerned about, she announced, "Esperanza is here ..."

Esperanza had blown the job offer in Houston back when she first got together with Rubén. Maybe  
that had been for the better since as it had turned out that was where his ex-wife and child had gone  
start their new lives; and Esperanza was the kind of woman who felt that no town was big enough for  
the two exes of one man. But come to think of it, Esperanza was the kind of woman that no town was  
big enough for no matter what category one might put her in.

That's why, when another big-time opportunity came along not long after for Esperanza, local sports  
reporter, that time she did take it. By then, aside from it being a great career break, it was pretty clear  
to her that there was no need of her on the homefront. Her sisters had recovered. And with the  
reappearance of her father a likely resurrection of her parents' marriage seemed forthcoming, which  
was one more reason why Esperanza thought that her mother might not need her around no more.  
Finally, after playing out the renewed romance with her ex-love, Rubén, she concluded that fatality for  
them as a couple was only inevitable. They had one last sweat up at Taos Pueblo and parted at dawn with  
amigos. With little left to keep her locally, Esperanza had left for Washington, D.C., a month before  
take a post as an anchorwoman with a major television station and had not been back since.

"Esperanza is going far away ... and she's afraid ...," Caridad continued. "We should keep her  
home, Mama ...," Caridad finished, her voice drifting off as she fell into a sound sleep.

Don Domingo scratched his head of thick salt-and-pepper hair, relieved that his daughter was back  
to normal, and without comment went back to his Lazy Boy chair in the living room. But Sofia and  
Loca stared at each other and waited.

Momentarily they heard don Domingo call from the living room, "Jesus Christ!" The screen door  
opened and closed with a little squeak. Esperanza's mother and sister went to the door to greet her and  
with artificial levity she told them that she had just decided to see them all because she was homesick.  
"I just got to thinking how much I missed everybody, so I got on a plane and here I am!"

"Who got you at the airport, 'jita, Rubén?" Sofia asked.

"No, I didn't tell him I was coming either. But I am going to call him ..." Esperanza's voice  
trailed off. She hadn't seen Rubén since they broke up, but she wasn't surprised at Sofia's question  
because mother and daughter had always been that way, anticipating each other's words. The truth was  
that she hadn't come home just because she missed everyone and all during the flight to Albuquerque  
she had thought of calling Rubén because no kind of white woman's self-help book and no matter how  
many rosaries she prayed, would result in giving her spirit the courage she got from the sweat lodge  
and which she surely needed now more than ever.

"Where are they sending you?" Sofia asked. Don Domingo stopped watching television and stared

at his wife, who he realized had taken Caridad's mutterings seriously.

"Saudi Arabia ...," Esperanza answered. She smiled nervously as if she wanted it to sound like Paris or London or even Los Angeles but there was no way that this faraway and frightening place could be made to sound inviting. She looked at her mother, then at her father, then at La Loca, and she saw in their eyes that despite their naïveté about the things that happened in the world, they were well aware of what that assignment meant. So many men and women throughout the state had been shipped off in the last months because of the imminent global crisis.

Don Domingo, who had barely got past high school himself, was proud of his college-educated career-oriented daughter, but what had the world come to when a daughter also went off to the frontlines of a war as part of her "career"? What business did she have there and what right did her bosses have to send someone so obviously unprepared to defend herself?

While Domingo was still away from his family, imagining his four daughters growing up without him, he was actually glad he hadn't had no sons. When he was drafted for Korea, he had claimed mental instability and was made exempt. In his youth he belonged to a theater company and it was easy to improvise a performance for the draft board that sent him home rather than to war although he had to undergo a week's testing in the hospital first. Call him a pacifist or a chicken, Domingo did not believe in war, which he felt only benefited los ricos.

It had not occurred to him that a daughter could be as enticed by the idea of serving the military as a son. In any event, when he went back home, he was happy to find them all there, pretty much minding their own private lives. So what kind of trick of fate was this now to send his only college-educated civilian daughter off to war?

"Well, they don't send reporters out to where there's fighting or real danger or nothing, do they, honey?" don Domingo asked.

"Sometimes they do, Dad. That's the whole point of being a journalist," Esperanza said quietly.

"Well, how come they're sending you? You just got started. How come they don't send someone with more experience, like la Diana Sawyer ...!"

"Papi, it's part of my job ... I'm leaving Tuesday."

And that was that.

Sofi prepared Esperanza's favorite foods that weekend, like posole and sopa and lots of chili because feeding is the beginning and end of what a mother knows to do for her offspring, even when she doesn't know what to say. Esperanza did go and spend the night with Rubén, but no one asked how it went between them nor did she say, and Monday morning she went back to Washington.

Caridad's second prediction had to do with don Domingo; well, it didn't have nothing directly to do with Caridad's father, but after the success of her first prediction, don Domingo made it his business to pay special attention to Caridad's don, this faculty of prophecy that even don Domingo could not have imagined having in his wildest dreams. After Caridad's second trance, Caridad told of a spectacular dream she had. She saw her horse Corazón leading a herd of one hundred and thirteen horses along a creek. There was some snow on the ground and the horses were all at a gallop, happy and free. "It was magnificent," she said, stroking Corazón's dark mane. "I felt like I was one with them."

Don Domingo, who was never one to miss a cue where he might have an opportunity to make a profit, called his brother in Chicago to play the state lottery for him. "Put a buck on 113 today, will you?" That night, don Domingo's brother called him to tell him that he had won eighty dollars on the daily number.

Needless to say, for the next few days it was don Domingo who insisted on feeding his daughter.

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