

VISIBLE SIGNS

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Un Alma tienes no más, si la pierdes ¿qué háras?
Hermano Pedro de San José Betancur

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SECTION I

THE WATCHERS

*You have searched me and known me.
You know me when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
You know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and You lay your hand on me.*

Psalm 139:1-5



Chapter 1 JAM AND JUSTICE

Sometimes, as she counted up her friends, massage clients and the members of the collective and all their current tribulations, Rosemary felt like a flustered shepherdess with a bad head for numbers. Someone was always wandering off bleating into the thickets, and Rosemary was always having to think who to send out to round them up again. Rosemary quite liked this image of herself—at least the staff, the sturdy shoes, the responsibility, the steep mountain slope, the view. At seventy-one, she thought happily, I may have at last found my true calling. One that was founded on humor and yearning and putting her autocratic nature to good use.

But sheep were such frightening creatures, really, with those strange eyes, so blank and quick simultaneously, and the way they seemed to become something more than themselves, less than themselves, whenever they started moving as one, like water. Why was it, she wondered, that we found it so difficult to believe, as Fra Lippo Lippi said in that poem by Robert Browning, that the world means, and it means intensely and it means good. Wasn't it that inability that drove us bleating, desperately singular, off into the thickets?

Actually, Rosemary thought, she was a herder of wild cats, who had a savage, unconscionable edge to their loneliness, a willingness to draw blood if their survival required it. It meant her strategies were different. One of them was just sipping coffee and appreciating their antics. The other was a little more cunning—scratching backs, but only when asked. Setting food out where it was readily visible. Looking the other way when necessary to lure

them closer.

Funny, all these metaphors—how they made her think a little differently about herself, and God. Of course, she'd die rather than say a word of this to Ginger—who would just use it as proof that all her years of proselytizing had finally born fruit. Maybe it had, but not in the way Ginger expected. Rosemary certainly wasn't going to deny that having found her calling made her feel like she had a special bond with God and could see more and more often through Her eyes. What she realized when this happened is what a keen sense of humor God had, and what a powerful yearning for love, closeness, loyalty—not to Her exactly but to that belief that we are put here on this earth to mean and mean intensely and mean good.

Rosemary looked happily around her bright, clean bedroom, savoring the new coat of yellow-gold paint and how it set off Walt's last two landscapes—not to mention the hot pink bougainvillea pouring off the patio roof and snaking around the pillars. She did wish he could be with her now, in this new placid but deeply interested place she had discovered or received. There was no one she knew who would have appreciated more what it meant to her after all those years of her forties and fifties when she was locked in such furious battle, wresting meaning from an indifferent universe, wresting it from that sea of despair that seemed her deepest and most abiding reality. When it wasn't her own life she was fighting for, she fought for the lives of the children they took in. Such struggles they had had just to reach the ages they were when they came to them: Alicia at eleven, Byron at fourteen, Nefertiti at sixteen with a baby on the way, Valerie at twelve, Will at seventeen, David at ten.

She only wanted adolescents, she told the incredulous case workers. Because then all the worst damage had been done, there was no point in grieving or feeling responsible for creating a new world for them. It was a question of damage control, playing as well as one could the hand fate had dealt you. She wasn't a game player herself, but it felt like a good image—that or looking at the sparse supplies in the pantry and figuring out how to make the most interesting dinner possible out of them. It wasn't like Walt looking at the colors on his piece of plexiglass, willfully restricting his choices. These restrictions were more arbitrary, but intractable—an addicted mother, a demented grandmother, a father who couldn't keep his hands to himself, an embittering poverty so rich in things that it would pass for wealth where she was living now. When she and Walt moved to Antigua, she'd asked them

who pulls the cart from the park every evening filled with everything my people have made and cannot sell, he's one of them too. There are more here, I know because this town has many communities, and we watchers are in all of them. I wonder if the wanderers among us watchers wander between communities as well.

Right now, my community is one person, my sister, Natividad, although I know soon there will be three of us. That is why I am looking for the other watchers. Natividad takes so much seeking, I know I will need help when the baby comes.



Chapter 3 STEALING

Mikela liked waking in the dark to the shuffling and murmuring of the older girls in the next room. She could recognize who they were by the tones of their voices. Antonia always woke first and would whisper her friend Analisa awake gently, like a mother. Together they would go off to the showers, Analisa swearing at the smell several steps before she reached the bathrooms. But it was better than home, Mikela thought. Better than the capital.

Her sister Natividad hadn't agreed with her, and only three months after the policeman had brought them here, Natividad had climbed up on Mikela's shoulders and slipped through the narrow opening in the window in the kitchen while the other girls were sleeping. Mikela had heard Natividad cry out as she landed on the ground, but Mikela didn't dare say anything. When Mikela met Natividad the next day on the way home from school as they had planned, she noticed her sister was limping badly. It was nothing, Natividad told her, compared to the yelling.

Mikela wished Natividad had had more patience. The new Mamí, once she had been there for several weeks, stopped screaming so loudly or so often. She never yelled at the younger girls like Mikela. It was the older girls, who were twelve or thirteen and eager to be women she was so angry at. But when she yelled at Natividad, she hadn't known what she was doing or what

rooms as well, leaving all the lights ablaze. She stood in the middle of the patio, her hands on her waist, arching back to look at the stars. She felt her anger dying down.

It's all yours, the voice said. *All this space. Why don't you use it? You've been holding yourself back for a long time.*

"I have not," Lourdes said.

Who do you think you're fooling?, the voice asked her with a sweetness that made Lourdes want to turn her cheek toward it, like a cat. *Who do you think can't bear the truth?* Didn't she sound like Annie then? And Ben. The conjunction was terrible. Lourdes knew better than to respond.

Leaving all the lights blazing, the doors ajar, she climbed back upstairs and locked herself into her small dark bedroom. She repeated, until she fell asleep, the chant from the yoga class, using her own voice to drown out everything around her, inside her, before and behind. And all the time she was speaking and all the time she was sleeping, someone she could not yet recognize watched and listened and felt, for her, compassion.



SECTION II IN AND OUT OF THE BODY

*Ask, and it shall be given; search and you shall find;
knock and the door shall be opened unto you.
For everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds;
and for everyone who knocks the door shall be opened.
For is there any mother among you, if her daughter
asks for a fish, will give her a snake instead of a fish?
Or if she asks for an egg, will give her a scorpion?*

Luke 11:9-12



SPIRITUAL LIFE

(Wilma)

Some days when I wake, I can barely make it to the kitchen, it is like moving through a waterfall the sound is so loud and so dense. Señora Rosemary hasn't the slightest inkling of the number of souls, corporeal and incorporeal, who watch her every move. Even if she did, it would not make her act more cautiously. Caution is not the Señora's way—and God blesses her for this, but from such a great distance, the angels and spirits of the crazy women from the past must come and surround her and keep her safe. She has no idea. For her, there is no one here but the ones she can see before her eyes—except, that is, for Señor Walter, with whom she has never stopped talking since the day they met. This is very good. It is through his sweet love that she knows what is waiting for her. Once you receive a deep love, even once, there is a space that God can enter and begin to expand into, slowly, very slowly, like a sweet sigh. It is this sigh that surrounds us when we die.

But Señora Rosemary does not always remember that what God promises her, he promises every other soul on earth too if they will only ask for it, open to it. Señora Rosemary sometimes acts as if she is God, that without her the world would surely go to the Devil. Señora Rosemary is acting very God-wild these days and she is shaking everyone up, living and dead.

The disturbance is everywhere in the house, there is no way to get away from it. There are the voices of the women in the Señora's collective and their jealous husbands and their children hungry for food and hope and dope. There is the voice of the Señora's friend, Señora Ginger, which is sometimes very clear and sometimes very faint as she slips back

and forth between this life and the life to come. When she returns she brings with her the voices of all the other people Señora Rosemary has lost in her life. There are all the voices that the foreigners who visit the Señora for their massages bring with them, not to mention their own real voices, and their secret thoughts as they get swept up in the Señora's life (no one can avoid this, the Señora is like a tornado, drawing everyone in). And now there is that girl Mikela and the voices she is bringing with her—not just the voice of the mute sister who sings inside her mind or the baby who wails like the wind as he realizes that his birth is irresistible. But strange voices, her parents, the girls at the home, and voices that go back through the centuries, voices that go to Europe, voices that go deep into the jungles.

I can't be expected to keep all these people straight. I can't be expected to make them all welcome. I have enough spirits of my own to contend with.

Señora Rosemary looks at me suspiciously on those days when I am so tired of all the bustle and bother that I set the dishes down on the table with a force that jars the plates and silverware. She thinks I want to go back to the quiet days when the two of us spent all our time tending to the needs of the speechless Señor. She is mistaken.

God save me from Señora Rosemary's undivided attention! It is like a tidal wave, her attention. Pure force that sweeps up all in its path and, if we're lucky, carries it far off to sea, but just as often, slams it, with shattering power, groundward.

"My," Señora Rosemary says then, looking at the wanton destruction. "Oh my." She is often surprised, but never penitent. In this she is like a young girl. She is, above everything, curious. It is a sensation more powerful in her than guilt. She is Eve's direct descendant. Knowledge is what makes even the greatest loss tolerable.

"Who would have thought he would stay so close to me, Wilma, even after all these years?" she asked me just this morning. I knew she was talking about Señor Walter. "It's not just wish fulfillment, you know. I really do feel he is here."

"Well, I hope he is putting in a word of caution," I said.

"No." She stretched her arms over her head, waggling her fingers at the sun. "He is simply enjoying me."

The Señora misses Señor Walter, I have no doubt about this. But she is also fascinated by this new knowledge of hers that his existence has not ended with death, just transformed. However, she does not feel the same sense of interest and casual comfort when she thinks of Señora Ginger dying. No, Señora Rosemary is determined that her friend will live, whatever Señora Ginger's own wishes in the matter. Her plan is to keep the Señora Ginger so busy she has no time to make her housing arrangements in the next life.

"I won't hear of it," Señora Rosemary said just this morning. "Get on that plane and come back. What is another diagnosis going to do? You think the next one is going to say it's all a big mistake? You think he's going to suggest aggressive treatment at

believing absolutely that story my grandmother told me about how I came to live with her? When I went to visit my mother and father and their four other children, I never wondered at my own situation. I was convinced I was special, chosen.

Who is to say my grandmother was lying—that her story was any less true than my mother and father's story? It was certainly more healing—and since when is it better to turn our backs on mercy? Perhaps I was made to enrich the days of my grandmother and grandfather, even if to do so meant that my mother needed, at seventeen, to become ill at the sight of me, to never be able to welcome me into the family she and my father began to build intentionally five years later, after they had finished their university careers. I was, and always will be, my mother's enormous error—and the sweetest surprise of my grandmother's life. Why would I choose to believe my mother's rationalizations over my grandmother's compassion? Why believe I was too difficult, sickly, willful—rather than that my mother so loved her mother she gave her a pearl without price? Given these experiences, why would I not embrace, always, the role of the outcast as the most privileged position, the most real, the one where God hums more continuously in our ears because we are sharper of hearing, more open of heart.

I love the girls in the home because they are more than survivors. They are God's wild legion. They know, through the fierceness of their hungers, that God has put them on this earth for a good reason, that he has need of each of them exactly as they are. He is never going to demean their suffering—or their hopes. When I feel, in my deepest heart, the joy of this reality, I know, down there where it will never leave me, that God is working the same miraculous transformation in my own life and I have what is almost a lust to be present, to see and appreciate what is happening all around me. To be, every day, more and more deeply surprised by life and God's great, good outwitting of that which maims, drains, damages and annihilates. I want to feel his hands on my shoulders, impelling me to step in sometime, somewhere, as he whispers check or checkmate. I want my whole body to ache with the knowledge that my existence is a gift, a good—just because it is a disruption, imposition, a shock to the intentions of those around me. I want my grandmother's world, the world of my children when they were small, the world of the wild girls in the home, to be the real ones—ones where I am, just as I am, a sweet surprise, a scandal.



Chapter 7 LIES

When Mikela found Natividad, she was going to tell her sister that Señora Rosemary had let her go because she had caught her carrying away some of the Señora's dead husband's paints. She was going to tell Natividad that she couldn't be thieving for her anymore.

"To steal from the living is one thing," Señora Wilma scolded her. "To steal from the dead, Mikela—"

"Is better," Mikela said. "They will not miss it. You tell me what the señora is going to do with these paints, this paper with big stains of mold. You told her yourself they were worthless." Mikela had spoken so boldly because if she didn't, she would cry. She felt so ashamed having seen the look in Señora Rosemary's eyes when the old woman came up behind her and set her hand on Mikela's shoulder as Mikela was opening the door to leave.

"*Mi amor*," the old woman said. "Do you have something you want to tell me?"

"I'll be back on Friday," Mikela had said, turning quickly back to the door.

"Just tell her to open her bags, Señora Rosemary," Señora Wilma had said. "She will not confess. It is not our way, except, sometimes with the *sacerdote* in the confessional. But usually not there either."

Señora Wilma leaned down and took the plastic bag from Mikela's



Chapter 8 LUCID DREAMS AND ASTRAL TRAVEL

At first, Ginny thought she was in a bed, but then she felt the satin sides of the coffin against the back of her hands and arms, which were pressed down tightly against her sides. Will was leaning down over her.

“Boy, you really fucked up,” he said, smiling his large white charismatic smile. “You sure didn’t go halfway—not my Ginny-gin-gin. You should have taken some lessons from me.” Will laughed, his mouth opening wide, so Ginny was staring straight down his clean red throat.

“What the hell,” Ginny thought, waking abruptly, her heart racing. She heard her breath coming faster than it ever did when she was running and tried to bring it back under control. Her face was wet with sweat. She could still see the pain in Will’s eyes, but it didn’t change what she felt. She pulled the pillow up to her shoulders and leaned over and buried her face in it, letting her skin feel the soft caressing pressure, wiping the sweat from her forehead and under her eyes.

“Son of a bitch,” she kept muttering as she brushed her face back and forth across the pillow. “Lessons from you. Son of a *bitch*, Will.”

She quickly dressed in her running clothes, even though the sky wasn’t yet blue. She needed to pound the distress out of her. Will was dead. The distance between them was permanent.

“You set yourself up, Ginny.” Will had said to her. “Couldn’t you

have gotten it on with an engineer, my dear? Couldn’t you have done it with a closeted nun? Someone, anyone, with just a smidgeon of discretion? Seems like you wanted to punish yourself.”

“How would you know?” Ginny asked through gritted teeth as she pushed herself through that first wall of physical resistance.

She could smell the forced lilies in the cathedral in Chicago at Will’s funeral, even stronger than the incense billowing from the censers. She could see Marcella standing up there in the pulpit reading her eulogy for her husband, so proud and controlled even in her grief. He had died of pneumonia allied with lung cancer, the obituary said. Who was going to contradict her?

“He owes me this,” she had told Ginny. “I paid all our married life. Willingly, I’m not staying it wasn’t willingly. But that doesn’t make it any less of a debt.”

Ginny had taken back the copy of her own eulogy that she had given to Marcella for comments. All her newly discovered home truths about Will were marked through with a thick red marker. “The rest of this is fine,” Marcella said. “Those of us who experienced that side of Will, the complexity of his sexual nature, are the only ones in any position to speak of it. And out of respect for me, today no one will. Today we celebrate the man the world believed him to be, because he was that too. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly, Marcella.”

“I loved him, Ginny. Don’t lose sight of that. I knew him as well as anyone on this earth could—even you, my dear.” Marcella’s voice softened, and her brown hand rested gently on Ginny’s shoulder. “Whatever it might appear like today, I don’t simplify the man or the impact he had on my life or the lives of the other people who loved him and were loved by him. I sometimes think you paid the highest cost of all—and the saddest thing is you don’t seem to know it.”

But I do, Ginny thought, the sound of her feet colliding with the cobblestones echoed over and over again in the cool gray air. Lessons from you, Will! Lessons from you!

She spread her arms out like wings, just to be sure that the space was there, the empty air, for the feel of the satin sides of the coffin against the back of her hands was still so clear.

“I do not believe God has ever asked me to simplify my nature, rather to trust it and be true to it. I do not believe this disease is saying anything different,” Will said when he told Ginny of his diagnosis.

Gently, Rosemary kept rubbing her back while the baby mouthed at the dry nipple. "Either way, either way," she repeated. "*Todo arreglaré.*"

Mikela inched closer, slipping her hand under the baby's head so that its lips could close more tightly around Natividad's nipple.

For a moment, it seemed as if the room lifted and fell with the rhythm of Rosemary's breath, which was the rhythm of Natividad's and Mikela's, a silence broken only by the busy suckling of the baby.

You see, the voice said gently, so gently, you do have something left to give. And more than one person eager to receive it.

It shouldn't *be*, Rosemary thought crossly. None of this should be happening.

But it is, the voice said. Isn't that just the way of things. They're always defying our sense of justice, right and wrong, either way, todo arreglaré if we just open ourselves up to the ocean.

Poppycock, Rosemary thought, but she couldn't seem to mobilize any anger. The little girls kept, even now, that easy rhythm of breath she had established for them. They returned it to her as if it were their own creation.



SECTION III

THE ONLY SEAT IN THE ROOM

True, it is an interruption of our ordinary tasks; we do lay down our work as though it were a day of rest when the penitent is alone before you in self-accusation. This is indeed an interruption. But it is an interruption that searches back into its very beginnings that it might bind up anew that which sin has separated, that in its grief it might atone for lost time, that in its anxiety it might bring to completion that which lies before it.

S. Kierkegaard



IT ISN'T WHAT IT SEEMS

(Ben)

The question now is not trying to regain what we lost—but trying to go forward. That's why I encouraged Lourdes to take the grant. Why I've insisted Gwen come down to visit as well. Now that Cristina is dead, Lourdes and I are all Gwen has.

Gwen and Lourdes would both correct me if they could. I am all that Gwen has, they would both tell me. But I just can't seem to accept that. I see them as having so much to give each other. We don't have to call it a family. I look into my daughter's eyes and I see something back there that sends a jolt of anguish right through me. Something similar sits in the back of Lourdes' gaze as well. I could never name it. All I know is that it waits, and it has a purity and a weight and a sorrow and a joy to it that makes me feel I am in the presence of something truly terrible and desirable. Something a believing man would call Holy. I'm a secular Jew, a chemist—and a believer. I know the Holy when I feel myself held in its unremitting gaze. I would not necessarily call it loving, but irresistibly compelling.

"She needs me," I told Gwen when I let her know I was going down earlier than I had originally planned to see Lourdes.

"Why shouldn't she?" Gwen, who alternates between a terrified girl of thirteen and a world-weary woman of fifty, asked me. She was setting the table. I noticed how she removed her knife and fork and spoon and realigned them. How she held the spoon in front of her and then blew on it and rubbed some imperceptible tarnish from it. "Wives need their husbands."

Gwen has never forgiven me for leaving Cristina. Leaving her, my brother and sister try to correct me. But they're wrong. Gwen can't forgive me for leaving Cristina to her care. She's told me that again and again in the past few months.

"I didn't know enough," she will say. "If I'd known more, maybe I could have gotten her more involved—gotten her out of the house more."

I had no idea what a recluse Cristina had become. Her phone calls—which never let up even with the divorce—were always raucous and argumentative, as if she'd just come in from a heavy evening at the local bar. Of course, I worried about Gwen, but I knew I'd never be able to get custody. If I did, that would mean sacrificing Gwen's relationship with her mother because Cristina would never have stood for so much disloyalty. Gwen seemed like such a balanced young teenager, mature above her years.

"What did you know," she yells at me now. "You just packed your bags and cleared your mind and it's as if she never was."

"It's not that simple," I tell her. "It's never that simple. You're a smart girl. You know that."

"I know how long it took her to die," Gwen said.

Cristina had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Treatable breast cancer, Gwen likes to remind me. But she stockpiled her four prescriptions for xanax and her three prescriptions for valium and took them both with a quart of Wild Turkey one evening when Gwen had stayed late at college to study. Or so Gwen still claims—although there is a young man who calls here regularly, and who she refuses to speak to at all. He may have had some small role in her absence. I'm not accusing my daughter. I think she's blameless in the matter of her mother's death. I think I am too. Gwen doesn't share my views.

"She started dying the day the moving men came to ship your things to North Carolina and take ours over to that little condo," Gwen said. "Nine years is a long time to take to die."

"Or live," I tell her. "Your mother had lots of opportunities to get over me." Even while I was still in the picture, goddamnit, I want to say—but thank God still have not. Suffering silently or alone was not Cristina's way. Not, Gwen will be quick to remind me, until the very end. I don't believe in such last minute transformations in character. I believe she died expecting Gwen to be there weeping uncontrollably at the end. And I hate her for it. Forgive me, I hate her for it.

"She was the one who asked me to leave, Gwen."

I look at my angry, unfamiliar daughter and wonder if her presence really is what has ended my marriage to Lourdes? I feel very disloyal when I think this. Gwen was, for thirteen years, the miracle glue in my marriage to her mother. It was Gwen I came home to, not Cristina. And Cristina never, for a second, missed that—or forgave me for it.



Chapter 12 FOSTER CARE

What *was* holding her back? Rosemary wondered. The voice had asked her the same thing, and it seemed like they were coming to some resolution—and then everything blew up in their faces. But there had been a few weeks there, just like with the collective, where Rosemary could feel this wonderful communal will being harnessed and bringing them all into a new and glorious place. And then, just as with the collective, it collapsed. First there was Lourdes calling up and asking her to take Natividad and Mikela and the baby in without a second's notice and Wilma getting uppity and speaking up from the second phone and announcing they would before Rosemary had a chance to say anything—and then Ginger came back and it didn't seem that it was going to work having her stay in the house even though Rosemary had insisted that she come and live with them. But Ginger kept acting like there was nothing that could be done about her condition, like Rosemary had invited herself to her friend's deathbed vigil. If that was her intention, Rosemary would have waited later—Ginger was far too chipper to be so focused on her departure. Rosemary wasn't going to talk about death for months on end. It was morbid. Ginger said she had no sense of her own mortality—or she didn't trust in an afterlife. Of course Rosemary did, that's why she talked with Walter so frequently, but that didn't mean that she thought either of their times had come. Ginger would just look at her

with this disgustingly holier-than-thou expression whenever Rosemary said this—like she and God had a private understanding the rest of the world wasn't privileged enough to understand. Rosemary had certainly not invited Ginger to stay with them in order to be condescended to.

And then Ginny Fox started meeting with the collective because Rosemary was feeling a little fragmented (and face it, frustrated with all the projects that didn't get off the ground) and now all the women could do was tell Rosemary about all the suggestions Ginny was making to them, even though Rosemary had made the same ones over the years and they hadn't even blinked. But now they were all praise, and, what was worse, they seemed to be willing to test some of them out. Now that they had heard them out of Ginny's mouth.

Then there was Gwen, Lourdes' step-daughter, who had taken a shine to Rosemary and the girls when they showed up at Lourdes' apartment to use it for their lessons while Lourdes was out of town with her husband and the collective was meeting at Rosemary's. How was Rosemary to know that Gwen had come unexpectedly? Or to stop Gwen from befriending the girls her step-mother had just evicted? Rosemary tried to tell Gwen that the girls were staying with her because they were just redistributing the responsibility. Lourdes had already done her part. But Gwen had a look as knowing as Ginger's when Rosemary said this, so Rosemary gave up. She had no idea what Gwen was up to, and she didn't want to alienate Lourdes now that Lourdes was back. For one thing, she needed her help, or would, if Ginger took a turn for the worse and she had to ask Lourdes to take the girls back until Rosemary could locate a permanent placement for them.

How quickly it all had collapsed—this vision she had had of connection. There were days now she really didn't want to get out of bed in the morning, and other days when she took a siesta, without explanation or apology. No one noticed. In this crowded house no one noticed when the dueña was sleeping. It was too much for Rosemary. It made her want to shake them up a little.

The knock on her door was vigorous and gave Rosemary a little shock. *Ginger*, she thought immediately.

But it was not. Mikela, it seemed, had stolen the baby. That was what Natividad and Gwen were claiming, but Rosemary was sure they were mistaken. She felt oddly protective of Mikela, even though the stubborn little girl was proving to be the bane of her existence.

have a cousin who can read your thoughts. Sometimes it is just efficient.

I take Wilma's beautiful hands in mine. I look deep into her eyes. "If there's anyone in there who would like to have a word with me, cousin, I am ready to listen."

But she just looks at me, her big eyes filling with tears, her face looking just as peaked as little Mikela's. She looks very young at that moment, and in great pain. They are like sisters, Mikela and Wilma, with this pressure building and building inside their heads.

It hurts me to do nothing, but I know it is better than any of the alternatives right now. Any of the other alternatives.



Chapter 13 FORETHOUGHT

Mikela tried a lot of other things before she decided to steal the baby. But when she heard Señora Rosemary talking to her friends on the phone and realized the word she was using in English was just the same as the one in Spanish and that Señora Rosemary was trying to give Miguel away, even though she had promised Mikela she would never do that, Mikela knew she had no choice.

But she was wise about it. She didn't act like she was upset or suspicious. She didn't act like she understood English. She just wrapped Miguel up more tightly in the *rebozo*. Natividad was eager to give him to Mikela. She was helping Señora Wilma. She was waxing floors and the weight of the baby on her back made her tired, she said. Mikela didn't understand how Natividad could say this because Natividad had never complained when they carried their brothers. She and Natividad had been even younger and smaller then. Mikela herself felt a powerful energy pour through her every time she tied Miguel to her. She knew then he was safe and she didn't feel so frightened and tired, like she did all day at school worrying what Natividad might do or what Señora Rosemary was plotting.

Mikela bided her time, but it was easier to do if Miguel was drawn up so close to her no one could come between them. Just his touch made Mikela feel safer than she ever had in her life. She was never, ever going to give that



CREATING A GOD GINNY CAN WORSHIP (Simon)

She's off in Esquipulas now having her own personal tête à tête with the Black Christ like the good liberation theologian she is. Putting her own small personal tragedy in perspective. What is it, she will ask me when she comes back, in comparison to the agonies inflicted during the Conquest, or the horrors of the slave ships and the tortures that came after. Or the recent civil war and genocide here. Or poverty that knows no beginning or end. It's everything you are, I want to say. Everything you were, everything you ever wanted for yourself. There's nothing, for any of us, bigger than that. She'll look at me as if I'm taking away the last vestiges of hope. But I know I'm giving them back.

I guess I should take a lesson from David's debacle, or as they say here, fracaso. He tried to show the world where he saw God, in Ginny's lovely taboo body, in my dying. But in the process he created a living hell for her. Stripped her bare for all to see, even her congregation. They didn't see beauty, they saw bare-naked. So did the bishop.

David got a gallery in New York and a solo show at the Soho Guggenheim. Ginny got, as far as she can see now, pure catastrophe. It hurts me to see what David destroyed. Not because I saw these qualities as permanent, invincible—but because I saw them as precarious, delicately poised, even if Ginny herself didn't know it. Such a fine line they gave her, such a narrow path to reach God. She needed to leave her body behind. She needed to leave her heart—because our hearts can't exist without our bodies. She needed to leave behind hopes of true community, ones where we know our predicament, however painful, is shared. There she was, my cool transvestite, pure male in her imagination, mind

meeting Mind.

So, where, I ask myself, was the real mind fuck? What David did or the situation she was in? The answer is both. The situation she was in was a mind fuck and also the greatest freedom possible to her. It was her path, the only one she knew, to the ultimate. What David did exposed the mind fuck for what it was. He must have known what would follow. But I think he imagined his own path could be Ginny's too, that if she could see what he saw, she would find another, larger path by which to reach God. One that made room for her as a vibrant, desired, fully sexual woman. But Ginny's God, like the bishop and the rancorous church warden, just saw bare-naked.

So, any God I give Ginny will wear ten bras and seven slips. She'll be fat and foul-mouthed and smoke cigars just like San Simón. She'll want a steady supply of rum—not to mention chocolates and marshmallows and Coke. She'll read the National Enquirer, especially stories about extra-terrestrial possession and babies with four legs or two hearts or children whose bodies age at the speed of light so by the time they're six, they're wizened and wise. Ginny's God will always wear a headset, and watch soap operas on a miniature television strapped to her wrist. She'll shit shamelessly in the gutters. She'll have six small kids, each with a different equally feckless father. She'll ignore them, all tugging imperiously at her skirts, as she talks to her friends, complaining about the selfish, sodden ways of men. She'll have a store in the front room of her house where she sells candles and incense and cigars and chocolates and rum and pictures of herself to the faithful.

"First come, first served," she'll tell her worshippers. "The more you give me, the more I'll give you. Buy up. Pray on. But remember the higher you climb, the harder you'll fall—and I'll push you if I have to, you can count on that. Don't talk back. Give me a little room, don't squeeze up to me like that. I've got my own needs to tend to just like you. What makes you think you're so special anyway? Sure, I don't mind your bringing more worshippers. What kind of commission you thinking about? Fifty percent—you've got to be kidding. The Catholics and the evangelicals only take a tithe. You're a greedy little bugger aren't you! But we're talking business here, none of that non-profit stuff. Self-interest is what made the universe. I'll give you twenty percent."

I want Ginny to have a God who will not say that what happened to her was inevitable, just. I know she'll have to find Her inside herself—but what, I'd like to know, gives her the tiniest starting place, that still point from which she can begin to move the world? For Ginny's God loves most deeply, most completely, everything she is not. So it is hard as hell to find that God in yourself when you are all that you have left.

I should know, shouldn't I?

Ben Silver, laughing, fell back on his heels. They could hear horses clattering across the cobblestones.

“The judgment is coming,” Mikela said.

A group of men dressed as Roman centurions clattered into view. They were caped and wore armored breastplates, sported red broom heads as plumes on their helmets, and leather sandals that laced to their knees. They carefully kept to the side of the road so as not to disturb the people making carpets in the middle of the street. His mount dancing backward, one of the soldiers unrolled a scroll and began to read aloud.

“Even if you don’t believe a word of it,” David murmured into Ginny’s ear, “there’s no doubt something magical is going on here.”

That magic, the voice said, is in you, Ginny. Where it belongs. Always.

“I have not had a day of peace since I last saw you, Ginny,” David said. “I’m not asking, I’m pleading for another chance.”

“But I,” Ginny answered softly, “have run out of second chances.”

The centurion rolled up the scroll and tucked it into his breastplate, then drew his horse around in a large capering circle and thundered off.

“Fine,” David said. “That means this time we’ll have to get it right.”



THE CHILD WITH BLUE EYES (Mikela)

When my sister draws, she calls the world, and with it her soul. She draws the moment just before her soul left her. She invites it back. You might not know it as a story. But I do. The one I tell you now, unlike the story of our mother, has not ended yet. Natividad has a drawing of a camera on a table set beside a window. You see, first, the signs outside the window, how carefully she has drawn the folds in the curtains, the bars outside the window, how the light from the neon signs fall on the table, like puddles and long fingers. Only if you look very carefully can you see, inside the blind eye of the camera, the bed on the far side of the room, the two figures tangled together, so still, like bodies in our villages after the soldiers left.

One of those bodies is my sister’s. The other is the body of the tall white man from Germany who put inside her the seed of the baby my sister now feeds. He put it there without asking, just like the soldiers did with my mother. When Miguel, her son, looks up at Natividad, she sees his father’s blue eyes and something in her gets as cold and still and hopeless as she felt lying on the bed in the hotel room, watching, from a great distance, in the blind eye of the camera, exactly what was happening to her body until her soul closed its eyes and left completely.

When she gets like that, I take Miguel from her breast, but she doesn’t notice. I talk with him. I make him smile. I see me in his eyes and I feel as if I am swimming in a cool blue lake. It makes me laugh, I feel so light—as if something is lifting me. I lift him from side to side, side to side, always holding myself in view.



SECTION IV GOD IN THE ROUND

You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You have only loved us first but a single time, rather than without ceasing. You have loved us first many times and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul toward you—you are the first—you have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and in the same second turn my soul toward you in prayer, you are there ahead of me, you have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward you, you are the first and forever. And yet we always speak ungratefully, as if you have loved us first only once.

S. Kierkegaard



THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION (Wilma)

Our religion teaches us that the wounds of Christ are our salvation, that they opened to us the infinite love of God, that it pours, more tumultuous and abundant than blood, out of those ruptures in his skin, his integrity. The whole spirit world, as I know it, pours through those wounds.

Concepción, when she saw the pressure building, took me to see the Black Christ. I had responsibilities I told her. To Señora Rosemary, Señora Ginger. And to those girls whose fates are being tossed about like juggling balls between all these well-intentioned women from abroad. They do not see that they are nailed, the three of them, to the cross that is our history. They see those children as free. Separate. Untouched. They keep talking about adoption as if it were something purifying, abstract. They don't understand that, should they, alone or together, adopt the girls, they are choosing to be nailed themselves to the cross of our history. Who, in their right mind, would choose that if they could escape it?

They are not as strong, these grown women, as the girls who are not yet afraid to live inside their wounds.

"And you," Señor Walter tells me. "You have that courage too, Wilma. You can live inside your wounds."

My cousin Concepción wanted us to go see the Black Christ so I could see how much grace poured out from the wounds made by our history. It was here, in the eighties, that the presidents of all the war-torn countries in the area gathered to pray for peace. It

was here the pilgrims came after our peace accords were signed four years ago. But peace does not seal a wound. Didn't our resurrected Lord wander around with his wounds still bright, still oozing?

"Let us know your wounds, Wilma," Señor Walter says to me. "We on the other side can make you real inside them. Free inside them. We are not afraid to live there with you."

I have never asked anything of the dead in all these years of visitations. I make a space, a large, clean, resounding space inside me for them and for those who seek them. But I keep myself separate. From them and from the ones they wish to reach. I don't know how I would survive otherwise.

"To live inside the wound is to live inside God's womb," Señor Walter tells me. "It is to be touched, held, rocked by the deepest waters. It is peace."

He's wrong, of course. God has no womb. Only the Virgin does, and it only once proved safe harbor for the divine, but don't tell me it was untroubled.

I know what it means to live inside the wound and I don't know why Señor Walter keeps inviting me to die. I, who tended him so faithfully in those last years when he could not move or speak.

"Because you did," he tells me. "You helped me live into my death and I, I am inviting you to live into your life again, Wilma."

"To what end?" I ask him. It is a cry from my deepest heart, but even I cannot hear it as anything but a convulsive pressure, as if this torrent of voices inside me is determined to tear me open from the inside, pour out.

"Lucas," Señor Walter said. "Tell me about Lucas."

At first I am furious, for no one, no one, has dared speak the name of my son to me for many many years.

When Lucas comes to see me, he has not gained or lost a single month of his life. He is always nineteen, the same age I was when I gave birth to him. He tells me these days that with the peace accords everything is arreglado, put back in place. He was always credulous, my son. He could not believe that the world couldn't be changed, that deaths, any death, including his, could take place without reason, without redemption flowing from them just as they did from Christ's own sacrifice. I blame the priests for this. Not him, never Lucas. Not even now.

My son is perfect in my eyes. He always was. He always will be. His credulousness makes me ache with protectiveness. I would draw him back into my womb when I see that



THE LOOK (Gwen)

When she held my eyes there, outside the church, after the Christ statue stared into each of our eyes with that look that Concepción said ensured our living in a state of grace for yet another year, I felt something quite similar. Something I was completely unprepared for. Why on earth should I feel forgiveness coming from Lourdes? What, in the first place, does she have to forgive me for? And why would I want forgiveness from her? Who is she to me, after all?

It wasn't an illusion—because in that terrifying hour that followed, our eyes locked more than once, and beneath all the other expressions, that forgiveness was still there. As if I cared! But I did. That is the strangest thing of all. I cared enormously. I did not want to be given up on—and by her of all people. I felt it just a week ago over Ginger's grave as well. And I had the same response—why should I care, but I did. I really did. Whatever happened, I didn't want her to turn away first.

My father tried to talk me out of staying. At first he did it circumspectly—talking about how I should be thinking of getting myself enrolled, somewhere, anywhere, for the fall semester. I only lack eight credits to graduate. He's already talked to the university and they'll accept credits from almost anywhere, given the circumstances. But when that approach didn't seem to work, he talked about how important this fellowship was for Lourdes and how, with Mikela and Natividad, her time was being stolen from her right and left. I told him that I didn't see her complaining. She seems to like all the companionship.

"I want her back," he said finally. "Gwen, I want her back. I don't want you doing anything, anything at all that would alienate her."

"Anything more, you mean?"

"We should have discussed it, all of us together, when you came down in October. I shouldn't have expected her to just fall in with your plans, even if I was willing to."

"Why not?" I asked. "It's not as if I planned Cristina's death, is it?" And why, I thought, didn't Lourdes tell you she was planning to leave the country. For all we know, she may have been planning that before I ever arrived.

"You're free to come and stay with me until Lourdes returns," my father said. "No one expected Cristina's death. But it isn't Lourdes' responsibility."

"She knew you had a daughter."

"Who was twenty-one when we married, a junior in college, and lived with her mother. We never thought we were making a family of our grown children. Not her sons. Not you. It's too late for all that, Gwen."

"You're saying I have no right to expect anything of you?"

"Of course not," he exploded. His face got all red, it looked striking against his white hair. He looked both younger and older than his fifty-nine years. I could tell how afraid he was of losing her. How afraid, that meant, he was of me, his only child.

If you'd asked me before I came down here what I wanted from my father, I think I would have said I wanted exactly that look. I wanted to have an effect on him that was as great as the effect he had on me when I was thirteen and he drove away in his gray car following the moving van that was taking all his belongings to North Carolina and leaving me alone with Cristina. But now that he was looking at me in just that way, I realized I didn't want that at all—and maybe, if wanting that look had been a little behind my wanting to stay on in Antigua, that motivation disappeared completely at that moment. It didn't mean I didn't want to stay on—just that my relationship with my father wasn't part of it anymore.

I haven't stayed on because I wanted to see some similar look on Lourdes' face either. No. The minute I saw that look on my dad's face, that was it. I knew I was really and truly on my own. I know my dad doesn't believe that and that he had a long talk with Lourdes about it. But that was after the Good Friday procession, after that look that passed between Lourdes and me the one I suppose Concepción wanted me to feel from the Jesus statue itself. And I knew Lourdes had experienced the strangeness of it when she told my dad not to worry about it, that I could stay downstairs until she left.

I couldn't tell from her voice if she plans to go back to live with him when this is all over. I don't think she knows herself. Of course, I hope so, for his sake. He isn't young, my dad. I don't think he's going to meet a woman he likes more than her. He didn't in the



Chapter 21 THE VISITATION

“It’s one of the requirements of the fellowship,” Lourdes said. “An exhibition in the country you’re living in. They give you funds to rent a space. But I couldn’t possibly show my work here. I’d be lynched.”

Lourdes looked miserable. There was a pinched whiteness around her eyes that bespoke a tension much deeper than her gentle, self-mocking voice conveyed.

“But it is not just you who is on the stage, no?” Marie asked. “You will use the sculptures, yes? We will all be there, not only in spirit, but in the intricacies of the flesh turned to stone—or *yeso*, plaster. You are not in this alone.”

“I *like* my work,” Lourdes said softly, so softly that her voice was almost inaudible in the midst of the plashings of the fountains. She and Marie had met Ginny at the cafe off the plaza after their morning life-drawing class. Simon, who had modeled, would be along momentarily with Rosemary. Daring anyone, with his gentle but commanding look, to mention the considerable weight that he had lost in the last two months.

“It makes me sick to turn on it. To feel it is something I need to hide. Feels worse than being lynched, really. I’ve felt so sure of myself while I was working. Maybe it was all the positive feedback I was receiving from all of you—and everyone participating in the body castings. Rosemary suggesting them in the first place. Now, all I can think about is how I need to cover all those bodies, change the titles. Mother of God. . . I didn’t think a thing of

it while I was making them. Or if I did, what I felt was honest and trusting. Trusting!”

“If they lynch you, they will lynch all of us,” Marie said. “For I know not about you, Genie, but I must attend this showing to see if anyone can make the association between these beautiful bodies and the women who lives within them. For sure, when I look at the woman in the wonderful sculpture, *The Mother Who Sings for Herself*, I see a stranger. An enticing stranger.”

“That’s what I feel all the time when I draw,” Lourdes said. “I know it came out of my hands, but I don’t *know* the image that is before me. It’s like I have to explore it as something completely distinct from me before I can feel any sense of personal connection again. Up until now, I’ve loved that exploring, especially with these body castings. It’s felt very exciting and intimate and more open and social than anything I’ve ever done. I *know* this is how I want to proceed in my art. But when I think about a show—all that assurance caves in. I just want to cover them up, hide them.”

“You want to protect them because they are your doorway,” Ginny said. “You want to protect what they open up to you.”

“You must leave that to us,” Marie said, waving at Simon and Rosemary who stood over by the waiters’ station scanning the room. “We are the armed muses, ready to protect the artist we have inspired. We have swords, just like Mikela’s archangel.”

As Simon and Rosemary settled in, Marie explained the situation to them.

“You must hold the show in Ginger’s house,” Rosemary said promptly. “It’s all cleaned out now. We won’t put it on the market until after your show. I don’t see the problem. It’s on a cul de sac. Only gringos for blocks all around. No one who has settled here is a stick in the mud, Lourdes. Surely you know that. And you have more than enough work to show. What’s holding you back?”

“The desire to appease,” Simon said. “A filthy side to all of us. But it can’t be repressed, that just makes it fierce. It must be elevated. Just like our need to see—and speak—the truth. That’s what you’ve been doing all these months here, Lourdes, discovering your own truth. Now you’re wondering if you’re brave enough to live it out—and whether there is any place for it in the world that inspired it.”

“Why didn’t you stop me?” Lourdes looked with amusement and true distress at Rosemary. “Why didn’t you make me think of scale. Weight. How on earth am I ever going to ship these back to the States?”



FINDING THE HOME THAT WON'T GO (Natividad)

For seven nights the extranjeritas sang for me. For seven nights they kept watch over my bed. Like mothers, they sat there, night after night, one at each corner of my bed until I fell asleep. They kept watch over me, not Mikela, not Miguel, just me. Natividad.

Mikela did not trust them, of course, and lay with Miguel on the floor outside the door to the bedroom in Señora Lourdes' house that they used for this ceremony. They wouldn't let Mikela any closer to me.

"She must dream her own dreams," Señora Marie told my sister. "She must die her own death. Live into her own resurrection." She made me sound like I was Jesús!

They would not let Señorita Gwen sit with them. They told her that she, like Mikela, wanted to fill me with her own will, her own longings. The one who told Señorita Gwen this was her step-mother, Señora Lourdes, but Señora Lourdes spoke with such love, such gentleness, I could see that she did not want to hurt Señorita Gwen.

Señorita Gwen wants my baby, Miguelito. I know this. And if she can't have my baby, she would like to have me love the baby as she would. My sister Mikela would have me love my son as deeply as she does, as deeply as she once loved me. The extranjeritas are right. The wishes of my sister and Señorita Gwen fill me until there is no home there for my own soul. They know my soul is missing, we all do, but they hope with their wishing, to make a new soul for me. One that is very like their own. But our bodies can be a true home to only one soul. When your soul leaves your body, no other soul can truly fill it—whether it is the soul of an evil or a good spirit.

I know this. Mikela and Gwen, much as they wish otherwise, know this too. I believe they are afraid of my true soul. Afraid that if it returns they will not be able to love me.

But these extranjeritas are not afraid. Each night, they sat there on each corner of the bed, Señora Lourdes and Señora Ginny and Señora Marie and Señora Wilma—or sometimes Señora Rosemary or Mamí Concepción. This was after the asusto ceremony. After we had all watched the light dancing in the still water in the big blue bowl. After everyone had called around us the spirits of the house we were sitting in, of the city, of the volcanoes, of the Vía Láctea, of the home I was born in, of the river where my mother drowned my afterbirth, of the broom that spun me round and round, of the cries of the men in the city who relieved themselves in me, of the bodies in the lens of the camera, of my drawings, all my drawings, of the glue. Each night, one by one, they called all these spirits into being. And then we waited, we all waited, a song without sound and without words filling our chests to bursting. There was such a happiness in that moment I didn't know what to do—and then I sank into it, as if it were the glue, and became very still. And the flames danced on the water. I breathed in the dance of the flames on the water. And then, from one or another of the women, just at that point where I felt safest, most lifted, a cry—so deep, so terrible, and someone would dash their fingers against the water and I was empty. So empty. All the spirits that came in to replace my own soul ran away. They just escaped. And I was empty. Completely empty. Just as I am now. Just as I may always be.

All night the extranjeritas kept watch over that emptiness of mine. They made it deeper, cooler, wider. At first, I ached with the emptiness, it was so great. I felt I would explode with it. And then I had this feeling, so sweet, as if I was inside God's head, that this emptiness is God's own emptiness, that there is a wisdom and light to it that can fill every part of that emptiness—with more emptiness!

I can't explain really. I talk as if this happened but it happens again every time I imagine in my mind's eye the four women sitting silently at the corners of my bed, waiting with me. Waiting without any fear. Waiting with me in that emptiness. Waiting with me. For that emptiness.

I feel very big inside at this moment. And still. Perfectly still. Nothing is pushing in. Nothing is pushing out. If my soul never returns, it will be all right because God is this emptiness. In my emptiness I am in God.

Every night, in my mind, these women sit on each corner of my bed watching over me like mothers. They are watching over my emptiness. They are opening themselves to this emptiness as well. I can feel that. They know this emptiness. They are not afraid, any of them, of what will come to fill it. They know, whatever it is, it will have a face they recognize, one that is like their own—a woman's. They know that it is, whatever it says,