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The Night of Santa Ines

by Ana Nascimento

Sometimes I woke up nodding gently on my pillow to the beat of the sewing machine. It was not unusual for my mother to be sewing in the middle of the night. In a night like this especially when the air was humid and a handful of breath would weigh a ton, my mother got up and worked on all the mending there was to do. Her room was the hottest one in the house, and I think it was hard to endure all the heat and pressure in there. Plus, there was always so much mending to be done. It seemed like the more she worked, the more torn pants and shirts my father would bring home. She reminded him of his carelessness:

“You’d think a grown man like you would know how to move around without tearing his clothes.”

“You say it as if I did it with my own hands. These rips bring your bread home.”

My father was a fisherman who worked from dawn to evening, and occasionally spent a week or two away fishing at another beach. When he brought home a bag of fish for us, he advised:

“Hold the bottom of the bag because some are broken in half, and tell your mother to do what she can with them.” My brother and I ran hitting the bag against our bony knees, disregarding any advice as to how to handle them. We figured since they were broken, it shouldn’t make a difference. He walked slowly behind us, smelling of sea.

The sound of the old machine was like a long prayer, a whole rosary maybe, without pause between the Our father and the Hail Mary beads. I sat up in bed and looked over at the altar of Santa Ines in my room. The shades from the palm tree outside made her porcelain face look scarred and blemished, as if she had suffered a severe disease. I grinned half amused and half convicted of the absurdity that saints could suffer. The heat of that mid July night reminded me of the night I saw her in a dream. I was in bed with a strong fever from an infected cut on my foot, even though my mother had been treating it patiently for weeks. The Santa came out from behind the door, and I remember squinting to see her face. But her hair kept growing and growing beautifully until it covered her body, curled on the floor and covered the walls of my room like a vine.

“Blessed Santa!” I managed to groan breaking free from my mother’s wet rags on my forehead. Her blue dress was thin and she was very fair, not like the dark Our Lady of the Appearing that hung over my parents bed with a broken crown. My mother said I was put under her protection because Santa Ines understood things. She had died while being forced (I never knew any other term) by a Roman soldier, and appeared to him later in a dream to forgive and convert him. That night I saw her too. I was one of the only two people that had seen her: her offender and me. I thought of

that when I looked at her standing in the middle of the room with a breeze of her own to blow back her brown hair. Looking around I saw how dim and still everything else was. The more I looked at her, alive and moving, the more I merged with the room, until there was no difference. But I had not dreamt of her like she came. I had dreamt of her on the road, slowly appearing as a dim light, her feet supported by angels with their wings tangled in an evening cloud. I looked over at her altar, mostly to see if it was empty. But her image was still there, and the shadows from outside had moved, now laying their patterns on me. I was not ready for her, so bright and cold in my room smelling of ointments and burning candles. There was something glorious yet less than perfect about her that made it seem like she didn't belong among the saints. I leaned back against my mother and looked at her until she left and all the light in my room left with her, leaving only a fresh breeze in the air. For the rest of the night I wondered if she knew how different she was.

My mother was sitting at the machine looking exceptionally sweaty and distant, as if she had not slept at all, but spent the night laboring endlessly. She never looked up at me.

“To hot in your room, Ma?”

“Remembered I had to mend these. Why are you up?”

“Get a cup of water.” The warm tile on the floor gave no relief to feet. I turned my back to my mother and lifted the clay pot of water to my lips, in case she would scold me from drinking straight from the jar. That still and lukewarm water made me wish for a saltless ocean to drink from. I wished for pieces of waves that would still be moving in my mouth, cold, loud and alive, but swallowed big what slid out of the jar.

“Andre squeezed my arm yesterday. I have a bruise for each of his fingers” My mother looked up from her work.

“Don't play like a boy. You know how bruises show up on you.”

I pinched off a fat piece of bread that was on the table and rubbed it on the plate where the guava jam had been.

“Don't curl up here, seniorita, go back to sleep”

“What is this?” I reached for a piece of blue material that had been folded on her machine for weeks. I had seen her working on it before. She widened her eyes and slapped my hand.

“Don't touch it or I'll have to wash it before it is done!”

“What is it?” I asked licking the guava jam off my fingers.

“It's a dress. Go to bed.”

“For whom?”

“You don't know her. Since you are so awake why don't you open the window so we can have some air?” She let go of her mending, wiping her forehead vertically with the tip of her fingers. I uncurled from the chair at once and hit my thigh right at the edge of the machine, immediately shutting my eyes tightly and covering the spot with my hands.

“This damned thing! Why do you have to mend in the middle of the way!”

“ Don’t curse like that! It’s always been here. I don’t know why you keep running into it. It’s so big!”

“ That’s one more bruise, look...”

“ Put some cold water on it. And don’t talk so loud, your brother is asleep.”

I opened the window and plodded back to my room. As I passed the altar, I bent my knee slightly and covered my mouth with four fingers in repentance for swearing. I heard my mother rise from her stool and looked out from a thin slice of space on my door and saw her holding that blue dress by the shoulders, close to her body. She stroked it slowly, and at the sound of the door to her room opening, she folded it and put it back down, calmly and deliberately.

My father walked out of the room taking large breaths and raising his shoulders. When he passed by my mother in the hallway, she did not look at him, as if he had been there all along, or if this brushing of shoulders had been set to happen for a long time. I knew then they had not slept because they were not strangers to each other as two people are in the morning. They had seen their faces flowing in and out of different expressions all night in a long, arduous labor, like the prayer of the machine. I remembered having awakened to them talking before, and fallen asleep, and awakened again, repeatedly as they continued all night.

My father stopped in the hallway. His back against the wall, looking for a small space through which to pass. Very lightly, he pushed a pile of clothes that was in the way with his foot. My mother turned around violently and looked at him with a fury I did not know was hers.

“These are all clean clothes to mend, would you not step on them!”

“I can’t go by. There is always a pile of some kind in the middle of the hallway.”

“You know, I could’ve fixed that. But as usual you just go ahead and do things! I have to guess what you are thinking.”

“I never asked you to guess what I’m thinking...”

“You never asked me anything!” There was a solid pause. I felt as if a hand was claspng my stomach tightly and began to pray that someone would say something soon. Maybe because I had met that silence before and had seen it was far too dangerous.

“You didn’t even ask me to marry you.” She mingled that with a groan she let out while bending to pick up the clothes with her bad back. My father who was already out the door stepped back in.

“What do you want Grace?” I heard my mother’s name all the time, but whenever it was dressed in my father’s voice it was always full of compassion. But my mother would not yield.

“You just took me... no questions... I never knew what you were thinking, not a clue...”

“Why have you been embattled with this all night? It’s been eleven years!”

“You knew what happened! The whole village knew what happened! For months the women were locked at home and wouldn’t go to the beach because they were

afraid of being forced too. And you took me pregnant and married me!"

"And what sin is that?"

"The sin gets up every morning, washes her face and looks after her brother while I mend!"

"God forgive you, she is your own blood!" He grabbed my mother by both wrists and held them tightly close to him, breaking her silver bracelet in two pieces. She picked it up and tried to put it together again with trembling hands.

"And how can I forget that?" She was crying. "You treat her like all the other children..."

"She is like the other children!"

At this shout my brother mumbled something and rolled to the edge of the bed. I ran to his side and embraced his sweaty head. It seemed like a summer storm was coming because the heat and humidity had increased, but I was too afraid to leave him and go shut the window. My father spoke after a sigh.

"That child is not a curse, Grace. I didn't question you because I don't judge you."

"Yes you do!" My mother screamed with the voice of a young girl. "Yes you do! You've been doing for years... just thinking, thinking, thinking!" She was crying very hard and her brown hair had freed itself from the careless bun and was now over her face. In one quick movement she snatched the half finished dress from the machine and ran out the door into the street. My father passed by my room in calm, compassionate steps, like the ones he took when he walked home from the beach. And saw my head sticking out from behind the door. When he stopped to look at me, his face always so red with defined traits dimmed slowly, leaving only a yellow, dry mass, like an old piece of paper. I suddenly wanted terribly to have been in bed, asleep. Watching his dark eyes fall deep into him I saw that he wished it too. I felt sorry for him, but it was passed time to help for the two of us.

"Stay here with Andre" He said not removing his sunken eyes from me, and I nodded with mine.

I did not see my mother after that. But I remember waking up late in the day and walking barefoot out to the hall. Her sewing machine was set in a corner of the room with all the clothes and materials folded and stacked neatly on top. I looked outside. It must have rained earlier because a cool breeze was coming in though the open window.