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Santa Maria of the Head

by Wendy Fox



In fire times, life is different. Under a cloud of smoke without sunlight and clouds of dust without water, even the least devoted will pray, participate in a novena in honor of St. Isidore (patron of farmers and gardeners) or carry a replica of the skull of St. Maria (Isidore's wife) in procession for the relief of drought. The dirt as dry as bone rises among the shuffling feet.

Grant us rain, in due abundance, that, being sufficiently helped with temporal, we may the more confidently seek after eternal gifts.

The woman, Maria Torribia, was not popular, but she was strong. One day on his way back from the fields, Isidore jogged to catch up to her to help her carry her load of water, but, when he saw she had control and then some, he slowed his pace. She had a reputation as a strict woman and a hard worker. Her hair was coiled at a stern braid at her neck.

She had lived with her parents in Guadalajara. She was their oldest and only surviving child. Once on a hot day, she and her parents went to the river. Her mother had packed a modest picnic of cheese, tomatoes, and bread. None of them could swim, but they liked to sit along the bank and let the water cool their feet. When the mother's scarf was loosed by the wind and dropped just beyond her toes, she leaned forward to retrieve it and fell—the water was swift and deeper than it looked. In an instant, she was carried from them, her body swirling and helpless. The father plunged in, reaching for his wife, who was bobbing and gasping.

Maria thought for just a second before deciding to follow. She was screaming from the riverbank, but there was no help in sight, no barge ready to pluck them to safety. She took a running, headlong jump, aiming for a spot where the current foamed.

It was silent and submerged when she floated to the surface. Breath was impulse, but she pushed the air from her lungs and dipped her head again, yet the river righted her. No matter how she heaved and twisted, she was buoyed by the water

and her head stayed above, face pointed to the sun.

Then, she didn't think of having a gift. Then, she made her way back to the shore, packed up her mother's basket, and turned dripping toward home.

She tried to feel grateful.

When their bodies washed up a few days later, she buried them by her three younger brothers. Soon, the family home was sold at auction to pay her father's debts, and she slept on the scullery floor where she had found work as a daily girl.

She left word at the markets, and a message came back of a distant cousin whose father had disappeared in the wars but whose mother remained, and who was offering a pallet on the floor and honest work. Maria packed her modest belongings. It was a two-day journey on foot, not so far. When she arrived, she found them easily—it seemed all the men in Madrid knew her pretty cousin.

There, even in the thickest heat, when Maria pumped the well, she could easily fill both her buckets. When Maria watered the herb garden, the can was never emptied until she was finished. Her aunt began to request that only Maria bring the drinking jar because the water was always so cool and clear.

Maria worked in the same landowner's kitchen with her aunt and her cousin whose fields Isidore tilled. She took the hardest jobs in deference to her family, and they thanked her for this. Her cousin, Magda, had a slim figure and tender skin that bruised easily. She was younger and still had time to marry well. They washed her in milk and glossed her hair with olive oil and hoped she would find a husband who would take all three of them, but Maria promised to stay with her aunt no matter what happened.

She dreamed every night of the Virgin's cloak skimming water.



Sometimes Isidore's master would wonder why he was not at his labor; Isidore was not ashamed to say he had been at mass. He dared the landowner to compare him against the other hands; there was no fault. Isidore had come to work on the outskirts of Madrid province, fleeing the Iberian caliphate and taking his communion when and where he could. His hands were strong and calloused, and the muscles at his neck were like a chain. He went down with the other workers in their shared hut, and he prayed by candlelight. The other men joined him. Farming was hard; the land was overworked and had been trampled by armies—who were they to ignore a plea to God? Isidore was not greedy. Some rain, some sun, and some protection from the winds that sometimes carried their topsoil to Andalusia and beyond were all that was needed. When Isidore snuffed the candle and the bunkhouse went dark, some of the men went on in their prayers, prostrate on their stacked beds, until sleep took them or the morning began to push through the stars.

In his litany, from lightning and tempest, deliver us.

Then, Isidore worried more for the dust choking the ox and the parched fields hostile to seed. If lightning came, it could strike anywhere. There was nothing to burn.

A flame licks its way up the hillside, and Maria diverts the river. Smoke like lace weaves through the treetops, but wet clouds follow her and open on command. Embers, like hail fall on the thatched-roof villages, but she brings fog so thick the coals turn to ash pure enough to mark the foreheads of the faithful.

Maria, always in front, wielding a trident.

Isidore surprised them all when he asked for Maria's hand. He worked up all his courage to consult a father, a grizzled uncle, or a wall of brothers, but there was only the old stooping aunt, who answered his knock with her modest, covered hair and her ragged smile. He blushed at the ladies' mending laid out over the back of a chair.

He didn't know of Maria's holy dreams. He had spoken only a few words to her.

"Your load looks heavy."

"There are heavier."

"The sun is strong today."

"I pray for the crops."

He didn't know that his candle, wedged into the dirt floor of the men's sleeping space, was a beacon that led the devout to the devout.

The marriage of Maria and Isidore was simple, and the evening of their troth they stayed at the local inn. They were expected at their posts by first light, but they had a whole, delicious night without the clamor of the men at the bunkhouse or Maria's aunt and cousin. It was the first time they had been alone together. He

worried about where they would live. The family home had been sold; he wanted to find a place they could work, that, even if not their own, afforded them some privacy. Maria thought his expectations high. For now, they could go on living apart. Isidore reluctantly agreed; then silence fell on their room, and he reached for Maria. Her skin was so clean. She had flowers woven into her braids, and her hands were nearly as rough as his. His bride.

At dawn, Maria rose before her husband and dressed then woke him. She sent him to the bunkhouse to change into his work clothes and went to the central well. He had said that the innkeeper would not care if the sheet had been marked with the sign of virginity, and she knew this to be true, but the help would, so Maria scrubbed at the spot until it rinsed clean in the dim morning light.

When she hung the sheet out the windowsill to dry, she saw Isidore, in the distance, the ox on his plow and the shine of sweat already dappling his skin. She felt changed. Consummating the marriage had been more like a fumble, and she realized she had sent her husband away with no breakfast. She had a piece of dry bread in her apron but had forgotten it.

Through the open shutter, there was also smoke, just a thread, but Maria grabbed her wash bucket and ran. Her aunt was standing outside, crying, and shouting that she didn't know how it had happened; she was always so careful with the cooking fire. Maria flung the dirty wash water toward the flames, and when the water hit, steam sizzled from the thatch. Then there was Isidore, handing her another bucket and the men from the fields making a line from the creek, a human aqueduct, until the little house was drenched and cold.

The fire burned part the roof so that it swayed at an angle, but Isidore believed it could be repaired, and he kissed his wife in full view of everyone. The hands followed him back to their perches on the plows. He kept them late so they would not be behind for their workday—he was worried the women might be punished in the kitchen.

That night, Maria and her cousin worked at scrubbing the house. The fire had run directly up the wall, so it did less damage than they feared. There were bits of streaked soot in everything. The old aunt followed them around hollering apologies until they were able to put her to bed. When Maria finally tried to get a few hours of rest, the dawn came through the hole above her, and she watched the stars dissolve into the blue light of morning. She was tired, but sleep would not come. Then, she felt the smallest catch in her belly. It was far too soon for the quickening, but she was sure of it. Her aunt would be happy, and Maria hoped some good news would calm her. Isidore had promised to bring his pack of men at the first chance, and the skies were clear of rain. She lay on her back and looked to the sky, opening to heaven.

The pregnancy was an easy one. Her back was strong from sleeping on her pallet, and her body was broad and muscled from her work. In the kitchen, the women

slipped her mugs of milk thick with cream and ladles of soup heavy with meat, just enough that no one would notice, and they prayed over her. After Isidore covered the hole in the roof, the aunt insisted that he come to live with them. It was a blessing for the old woman to have a man in the home again and a child coming. Cousin Magda had fallen in love with one of the other hands, and the aunt purred over them both: her daughter, glowing from love; her niece, hair glossy and eyes shining. Sometimes at night, she cried over her good fortune. She lit candles for the Virgin and gave thanks.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

The night of the fire, the aunt's husband had come to her in a dream. He had died chopping wood in the forest. His axe bit the tree trunk, then in one awful moment of miscalculation, the timber fell toward him and crashed in a clutter of birds and hornets' nests across his middle. The last time she saw him, his body was bisected, and his face was not the face of the man she had married; he was swollen and his lips were pinched. Then, she had wanted to go with him, but their daughter was so young. She was glad she stayed, glad to be breathing for these moments with Isidore and Maria, and her own daughter, a great beauty—neither the aunt nor her husband had been handsome—who, it seemed, would marry for love, choosing the same hard life with too many people in a few rickety rooms. Though the aunt had hoped her daughter's looks could carry her to a higher class that would spare her lousy bedclothes and the constant reek of half-spoiled food and wood smoke, she also wanted her only child to know the joy of waking up to the face she had picked, to know the feeling of being sure. She had enjoyed this with her husband, and even with so many years gone, when he appeared to her on the night of the fire, whole and strong, she lived the day when they had been new and snuck to the stables together, stripping down on the hay with the heat of the horses around them, where they had made their daughter from simple desire. Then, she was already old and thought she would always be alone.

He was a gift to her, and this was how she knew God—when her patience was answered.

Sometimes, she still expected him to walk through the doorway, which he had built, to take off his shoes and come to her.

In the dream, the horses stamped and snorted, and their commotion covered any suspicious sounds. She didn't know if it had really been like that. She only remembered him, his skin sun-browned and his hands hot. In the dream, she saw herself from a long way off as if she were looking over a valley from a high place.

Her life had been harder without him. She remembered their every day—the way he smelled of clover and wax and the way their two lives were ordinary toil until they were joined.

So long ago, so close.



Isidore was a good husband. He complimented Maria, and he spoke to her gently. He chopped her firewood, splintering the quarters into different-sized pieces so she had both timbers for kindling and cooking. In the mornings, Isidore leaned into her, her buttocks hot against his sex, the front of his legs against the back of hers.

When Maria asked if she could keep a bee box, he nodded and came home to her with planks knitted into stacked squares.

She knew where a hive nested and watched it. She waited for a swarm, when part of the colony would light out with a new queen, and scouts would be sent to find a home. She put the boxes in the garden, flanked by the most pollen-heavy plants, and waited until the bees came. It was a few at first, then in billows. They filled the boxes to the brim with bees, their number so many that the stalks of her surrounding flowers were bent and their stamens dry.

As Maria grew, Isidore wanted her out of the kitchen. He had been many nights with Magda's young man and a bottle of wine, and they had made a plan. Adrian had come to Madrid province as a traveler, and he stopped for some work when he needed it. Perhaps, he was fated to Magda, he said. His godfather always had a place for him, and he would go home, taking Magda and the aunt. Isidore did not doubt the young man loved his wife's cousin, and he did not doubt he would take care of the aunt, but he insisted they were married properly before they left.

The wedding was delayed when Adrian's family sent word that they would come to Madrid as witnesses. Their caravan took almost two weeks to arrive, and they filled

the same tiny chapel where Isidore and Maria had said their vows to the ceilings. The old aunt was beside herself. So many women in colorful clothes and bangles counted the beads with her and sang. They spent the night, their wagons parked ramshackle around the house and fires blazing. They had brought with them wine and cooking pots and a few chickens, and they praised the aunt's hospitality when she volunteered to kill and pluck the birds they offered for the wedding meal.

That afternoon, when she had seen the crowd of Adrian's family, Maria had picked the garden nearly clean in a cloud of bees. By nightfall, there were already new buds. She wrapped a rack of honeycomb in cloth and presented it to Magda's mother-in-law as a gift, and the woman thanked her and took a piece immediately to chew for a sore in her mouth.

The celebration went on through the night, but in the morning, they packed and set out again for the coast. The aunt had never seen the sea. She had not known that when she left Madrid her final home would be with travelers. She had not known they would carry her on a makeshift litter, the first few miles, an elder, a temporary queen; she missed her husband then, with the curls that framed his face and now cascaded down Magda's back.

Maria and Isidore would take her home and raise their child. She turned back to them, and Maria waved to her and the bridal party; Maria's face shone with tears. Her other daughter, almost. The aunt could not cry then. She felt her husband's hand at her neck. She knew she had only a few years left and that the time would go fast. The hours with sadness are long; with joy, they are like a flame on dry tinder. When the caravan was outside of Madrid, they broke the procession down some to economize and offered the aunt a place in the back of a donkey cart with soft pillows and a gourd of wine.

She rode in the cart until night began to fall. As the dark deepened, she could see Magda by torchlight, and she motioned for one of the men to help her down. The dry foliage of the road was brittle on her sandals. Such a journey was coming late in her life, like everything else, and she wanted to walk and feel the earth and the scrub brush at her feet. The wheels of the many carts made a clattering sound that cut through the air like a rhythmic incantation. Though the ground was rough, she quickened her pace. When she caught up, her heart was pounding, and she reached for her daughter's hand. The new husband dismounted and lifted the old woman to the rump of the horse, and she rode there, cradling her daughter until the first light broke across the horizon, just as she had done when Magda was a child.

In the house at Madrid, there were two rooms, plus the open space that circled the chimney like a half moon.

Maria's pregnancy progressed, and when she became very large, she quit her work at the kitchen as Isidore requested. She didn't mind. She rose in the morning to make his breakfast and feed her aunt's chickens, which were her chickens now.

On the day of the child's birth, Maria woke to sunlight; she had overslept, not

even waking when Isidore did. She felt her belly move. It was a beautiful day to be born, so she did not blame the child, but she did not want to be alone. There was a midwife, but Maria was not sure if she could walk so far to her. She took long, deep breaths. She lit a fire and heated water. At the noon hour, the pot was at a raging boil, and she was streaked with her own sweat.

She prayed.

The sun began to slink down, which meant Isidore would return soon. She remembered the births of her brothers. She thought of water, the way even the tiniest creeks find their paths, the way rivers cut a course to the sea. The fire was growing hotter. She missed her aunt and her mother, who would know what to do. She missed the ladies from the kitchen.

When Isidore opened the door, their child was crowning. He knelt in front of Maria, dirty from the fields but exhaustion melting. Then, it wasn't long.

The child of Isidore and Maria was a son.

She was relieved to be done with it, relieved nothing had gone wrong.

Isidore cut the baby from her and washed his wife, then helped her to bed with the nuzzling infant. He felt proud of Maria and proud to be a father, and if this pride was a sin, he accepted it.

When Isidore was at the fields, with the baby swaddled at her back, Maria cleared more and more land around their home. Their son was a worker like his father. He liked the motion of her axe at the small trees and her sickle at the tall grass and rarely fussed. She did not know where the boundaries of her aunt's property were, nor did she know if her aunt had any legitimate claim to the house. Maria had never seen a deed, but she had already decided that if anyone asked, she would say it had burned in the fire.

The installation of the bees only helped her garden, and Maria walked the ever-extending line of arable dirt barefoot, the outline of her toes crumbling into mud. She collected rocks and piled them in a border around her herbs and flowers. The child on her back got heavier, and she grew even stronger with his weight. They baptized him at home.

On the day the child fell into an old, unused well, Isidore asked to be released from his master. The space Maria had cleared was claimed by the landowner, but in a moment of benevolence and thanks for Isidore's service, he agreed that they could work it, under his watch.

By this time, the child toddled.

In the dusty hole, he screamed, and with nothing left to do but appeal to God, they prostrated themselves.

The well rose; he was lifted on a spout like the spray from a whale.

With the spirits guiding his plow, Isidore could do the work of three, and where the feet of his wife touched, the land was damp and irrigated, and new shoots broke against the heat-cracked dirt. Where their heads lay, dry creek stream became lush rivers. Once, when Maria stopped behind a scragged tree to pee, the limbs fractured and bloomed.

Life was easier for them, at first. Maria kept the boy strapped to her back, and they worked their plot as a family. They grew crops for themselves and some that they could sell at the markets, and some they paid in tax to the landowner.

At night, they prayed and gave thanks they had enough.

She left word for her cousin and her aunt at the stalls, and she heard they were happy and prosperous. Her cousin was with child and growing fat. Then news came that Magda had given birth to twin girls, and Maria hoped they would be true sisters, like she and Magda would have been if they had more time together.

When the fever came, Maria made a compress of yarrow and elderberry, but the heat did not stop. She called for a priest, and she kneeled in front of him while he said his words. She took the boy to the creek that had saved the house, stripped him, and held his body where the chill water crashed through the rocks, but the fever would not break.

She had envied Magda before for having her mother, and now she envied her again for having two children at once.

When they buried him, Isidore's face was like ash.

They worked hard at procreation, but she never again felt the catch in her abdomen, the pressure at her belly and the tender breast. She came to forget it. She did not regret the child, but when the girls from town came to her, firm-bellied and shamed, she led them to the herb plot, which was, even in winter, flush with cures.

The garden went on; the harvest came and came again and again. They built a bunkhouse and hired a few hands of their own. Isidore was with them some evenings when the work was done and lead them in prayer. Maria fed them from her cooking pot, which never seemed to empty, and she mended their clothes. When one or the other was occasionally sick, she held them back with the request for help in the garden and then returned them to bed. When they married, she said good-bye with a jug of honey and a packet of seeds.

The boy who came to her, face flushed and shirt torn, was a child the age her own might be.

Isidore had tried to catch a startled ox and got caught underneath.

Their life had been simple. And, for a time, lucky.

They had lived with the child, at first, and then without him.

They had come from nothing and made a place for themselves.

When they buried Isidore, Maria thought of her parents, next to her brothers. And now her husband, next to her son. She envied them, together always.

She felt foolish to have believed she could have kept them.

Maria gave the men a few days, then paid them their final wage. A few argued they should bring the autumn harvest in, but Maria sent them away and tore the bunkhouse down herself, board by board. She hitched up the ox that had trampled her husband and dragged the lumber to the chapel. It took several trips and most of a day, and when she was finished, she left the beast, his plow, and the boards there by the stone steps.

She was tired when she got back to the fields, but she walked them carefully until the water came up and the earth was ankle-deep mud.

She split the bee boxes and cut down the garden.

It had been years since she had heard news of her cousin. The aunt had probably passed.

She still dreamed of the Virgin, and sometimes she dreamed of Isidore and his endless tilling. Each day, she retraced her path in the fields until they were swamp. A tree sprung from the place of Isidore and her son's rest, polished with moss.

The house grew tufts of green from every corner, leaked, and moaned. She was cold frequently and damp. Her hair would not dry; the braid was like iron, gray and heavy. Her cooking pot creaked with rust, and her skin was clammy.

A visitor came once and when he knocked at the door, it crumbled under his fist. Through the soggy hole, Maria saw her cousin's face in his features, but she slipped out of sight like an eel.

Deign, we pray, to instill into our hearts a horror of sin and a love of prayer, so that working the soil in the sweat of our brow, we may enjoy eternal happiness.

She visited the gravesite often, picking her way along a path of boulders that barely peeked above the murk. The tree had grown tall and strong, and its roots coiled around what might be left of the simple boxes. When her bare feet touched the water, tiny fish darted around her toes.

Sometimes she saw peasants through the drape of witches hair, filling their buckets at the pool that had formed where the creek used to run.

She knew that when it was her time to die, she would come to this same spot and let the water finally take her like she had wanted that day at the river, and without her constant circling, the land would dry again, the creek returning to a trickle except for in spring. When the mist cleared and she was found, she would be beneath the tree, peaceful, her body gone except for her head, glinting silver and scaled.
