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Family Lore



A Novel

Elizabeth Acevedo

Winner of the National Book Award

Family Lore

A Novel

Elizabeth
Acevedo

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Dedication

For Orí.
Praise for how you guard & guide me.

Epigraph

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

—*“won't you celebrate with me,” Lucille Clifton*

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Table of Principal Persons

MAMÁ SILVIA: the long-dead Marte matriarch, seer (mainly of births), 1933–2009

PAPÁ SUSANO: the long-dead Marte patriarch and beleaguered husband, 1930–1975

SAMUEL: the first Marte child and only son, b. 1949

MATILDE: the eldest Marte sister, kindness incarnate, no affinities known, b. 1952

FLOR: the second Marte sister, seer (mainly of deaths), b. 1953

PASTORA: the third Marte sister, reader of people's truths, b. 1955

CAMILA: the youngest—and forgotten—Marte sister, an affinity for herbalism, b. 1969

ONA: Flor's daughter, possessing a magical alpha vagina, b. 1988

YADI: Pastora's daughter, heiress to a taste for limes, b. 1990

ANT: a neighborhood boy and Yadi's childhood sweetheart, b. 1989

JEREMIAH: Ona's life partner, a visual artist, b. 1987

RAFA: Matilde's husband and infamous philanderer, b. 1954

MANUELITO: Pastora's beloved, b. 1952

PEDRO: Flor's husband, a man with undisciplined soft spots, 1950–2017

WASHINGTON: Camila's husband, who was generous with both hands, 1968–2008

THE NUN AUNT: sister to Mamá Silvia, no affinities known, 1934–2015

LA VIEJA [REDACTED]: sister to Mamá Silvia, unkind, *perhaps* because she was mounted by a demon, 1936–2000

Six Weeks Before the Wake

Flor

had a tabulated ranking for the seasons, autumn being her least preferred of the climatic periods in North America. The dying season, for Flor, had always been worse than the dead.

She should have been taking her daily constitutional through Riverside Park—despite the rain, she knew the lukewarmth would soon yield to frostier days—but instead she found herself seated on the pink print couch, with the documentary.

She told it one way. The truth that was not *the* truth.

Flor often listened to her daughter speak of her research with one ear flapped closed. But the other ear, the other ear perked up anytime her daughter made an utterance in her direction. Flor wasn't entirely sure when she'd started looking to her child for approval, but these days she was forever finding herself trying to demonstrate relevance. Flor was not great at keeping track of all the rituals, myths, and performances humans had conducted from Mesopotamia del carajo to now, but Flor *was* great at worrying that only through sharing her daughter's anthropological interests would they ever become close.

"She teaches Dominican history at City College" was the answer Flor gave to people in the neighborhood regarding her girl's career.

(It was always hard for Mami to explain what I, Ona—with my three degrees, mind you—actually did for work. Mami learned that trying to explain that I studied sugarcane ruins and pre-Columbian trade routes, and everything having to do with Kiskeya between the early 1500s and the mid-twentieth century, to a bunch of unlearned imbeciles (her words, not mine) would lead to neighbors shaking their head: *My son has a job in bookkeeping, ja ja, easier than a job in books.*)

But there was a documentary that Ona hadn't stopped talking about the entire summer. And so, Flor called her sister Camila to help her set up the Netflix, and put the captions in Spanish, and with rain insulating Manhattan in water, she watched the screen.

Un mexicano from Arizona or Colorado, de por allá, sat in a wheelchair while a long line of his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren lined up to pedirle bendiciones and whisper they loved him. She rolled her eyes. Just like a man, about to kick the bucket and still making his descendants kiss his hand. And before he was even in a casket! Her father would have never. She was considering sneaking a peek at her siblings' group chat—currently heating up with a discussion about Matilde's latest substitute instructor for the salsa class she attended—when the man on-screen began to openly weep. His hands shook on his bastón when one of the littlest, *must be a great-grandchild*, stepped forward to press her little face against his knee.

Ah, Flor thought, *not only to kiss the ring, then.*

She finished the rest of the film without picking up her phone. Then she started it back from the top.

That night while she was parting her hair and pinning it up flat against her scalp, the bobby pin bit into her head with the same sharp prick as this new wondering. *No. She couldn't. Could she?* Flor sat up most of the night worrying the thought, the way a tongue will keep sliding against an inflamed canker sore, trying to soothe something unsootheable. What if *she* threw herself a living wake?

It was ridiculous, she knew. What would be the point of gathering her siblings, and nieces and nephews and distant cousins? To say what to them? There was no diagnosis to create

urgency. No persistent cough to make them anxious. It would be selfish to gather her family for an end they could not perceive. She went to bed with this new adumbration that the film had inspired absurd and implausible notions.

She woke up the next morning musing. And the morning after that. For over a week, Flor ground her teeth in sleep. When she caught herself layering her fantasies about a living wake into a pastelón de plátano, she stopped, her hands full of sticky sweet maduros, and left the casserole half assembled on the kitchen counter.

Flor had always carried the mark of death. It was known from the moment she was born and wouldn't stop crying that she had not been fully wrenched from the Before. It was the cry of a colicky baby, but one that could not be soothed by valeriana con flor de tilo. Only when dreaming did the baby version of Flor cease fretting, and then the child was even more frightening; she slept with her left eye halfway open, the iris flickering as if she viewed some silent film from it, drifting so almost nothing but the whites showed. Sometimes Baby Flor would wake with a start, a night-splitting scream torn from her throat. Some days she woke on a whimper. Eventually Matilde, the eldest sister, figured out that if the child was being held before she fully came to, she would settle down more easily into the realm of the wakeful living. Matilde volunteered herself to sleep with the baby tucked into her side, one finger held in the little one's fist.

The first time Flor had declared someone would die was rather matter-of-fact.

They'd been at the breakfast table, and Flor, precocious at five years old, had been serving rolls of pan de agua to the family. Her parents were talking in hushed tones about traveling three towns over to visit one of the great-aunts.

"It's too late. Your tía died."

Movement around the table stilled, everyone but Flor. Mamá Silvia did the sign of the cross, shooting a glance at her superstitious husband, who looked to have stopped breathing at his end of the table.

"¿Qué fue, niña? No hables de lo que no sabes," Mamá Silvia scolded. She scuttled her fingers along the gold chain links enshrining her neck.

"Se murió. Hace cinco días." Balancing the tray of bread in one hand, she wiggled all five fingers of the other. She'd recently begun working on her numbers and was quite proud of how good she'd gotten. "She wants her rosary back." Flor stopped the wiggling, her good eye landing on her mother's fingers.

The girl edged around to her father's end of the table, approaching to offer a bun, and she pretended not to notice as he slid his knee just enough to avoid her skirts brushing against him.

At the other end of the table Mamá Silvia beckoned the girl. Flor was not a grasping child; in fact, she largely let things fall through her fingers: dishes, ribbons, aspirations to be anyone's favorite. Mamá Silvia brought the little girl close until their faces were inches from each other's. No one knew about the gold rosary. It was a secret between Mamá Silvia and her tía.

"¿Como tú lo sabes?" her mother whispered.

"I dreamt my teeth shattered. But it didn't hurt. They just crumbled, and I tried to pick them up from the floor, but they were dust, piles of dust. And then a very, very old lady pointed to her neck. And she told me when you mentioned her, to tell you she wants it back."

Mamá Silvia packed that same day, mounted a wagon that would take her as far as two towns over, where she would be able to hop on a burro. The babe in her belly kicked incessantly. The doctor had told her not to have any more children. She'd lost three before this one; each time Flor would have a nightmare, and the next morning Mamá Silvia would wake to find blood trickling down her leg.

She'd been convinced her third child had been born cursed. They'd brought the priest over to the house. He came with his swinging canister of incense and intoned the devil be removed from Flor's body and the house. The girl's violent dreams had stopped during Mamá Silvia's pregnancy with Pastora, but then began again soon after. She'd lost every pregnancy since. Now Mamá Silvia suspected the child was a warning bell from diosito.

Mamá Silvia, when she arrived at the big house where her aunt lived, found the windows covered in black. Tía had indeed died five days before, just as Flor had said. Flor was the kind of child who was afraid of very little. She knew by age six she wanted a calm and altruistic future. She let her family know she wanted a life in the convent like her nun aunt, and it was generally agreed on by her parents and siblings that her eccentricities made her the perfect candidate for a life of piteous enclosure.

Life washed over her, but the alarm system that most folk have that trips one into fight or flight was muted in Flor. She simply knew too much about where either choice led. It's what made the few fears she had so distinct. She hated lightning, the way it disrupted a night's sleep with its illumination and claps. Her disdain for killing any living thing was well known. While her sisters kept flowers in milk jugs, or tried to train the canal frogs into pets, she never kept a single living plant—to see it yellow, or wilt, or God forbid, *die* on her watch would have had her making the sign of the cross and asking dry stalks for forgiveness. And once, when she was seven, she'd woken in the middle of the night needing to use the outhouse. She lit a lantern and sleepily made her way to the hole in a bench outside. The scream she'd emitted had everyone run from inside the house to circle around where she'd been using the bathroom. A snake hidden in their human waste had risen up, biting her in the apex where her thigh met her crotch. She'd needed a sibling to join her for any nightly bathroom visits thereafter.

These fears were so singular in an already odd child that they were brushed aside. It didn't seem to matter where her place in this wide world would be; whether convent or wherever, since her place in what came after didn't scare her in the least.

Now, in her more mature years, and despite having been both a wife and a mother, her relationship to death was still the most intimate one she'd ever known. So when, at seventy years old, her synapses were sparked by the living-wake documentary, she'd known it would create a revolú in the larger family, not only because it was un-Catholic but also because she was the second-eldest girl, the middle sibling. If her brother and sisters didn't laugh their heads off, or admonish her into rethinking the whole thing, they would have an opinion on the fact that if they were going to begin having living wakes, they should go in chronological order. Or they would worry at what she might have seen.

The first thing she did was call the hall on Grand Concourse where a neighbor's daughter had been married. She already knew it was large enough for their family. To her utter delight, the coordinator told her that there had just been a cancellation five weeks from Saturday and he could provide a discount if she booked it immediately. Flor recited her credit card information and put down a deposit.

She called her niece Yadi next, shooing away the guilt that whispered her daughter, Ona, was deserving of the first ring. Ona was at a conference in Washington, DC, so Flor reasoned it didn't make sense to bother her, especially since it was her first big career event since returning back to work post-leave. It also helped that Yadi was the quietest of her nieces and nephews, a girl who asked sharp but not prying questions. All Yadi's years in therapy had taught her to probe gently. She was also someone good with computers, who reluctantly agreed to make Flor a graphic she could forward in the family group chat.

"Make sure it has roses on it, mi'ja." There were clicks that Flor thought were the girl tapping on the computer.

"Tía, don't you think roses are going to look too festive? Or romantic? I don't know if we're going for the right tone here."

Flor let her pause act as punctuation. Then, "Yadi, my name is Flor. Bright red petals, now. Not pink. Or white. And no carnations! I'm not dead yet."

Yadi texted her the graphic by noon, and Flor put it into the chat without explanation. By

dinnertime Flor had had to turn off her cell phone because the thing was nonstop dinging with vainas from the siblings. Ona called the house phone that evening, letting it ring ceaselessly until Flor finally picked up.

“What are you thinking? What is going on? I’m supposed to be at a dinner giving a speech, but how could I speak in public when my mother is apparently inviting people to her own funeral?”

Flor believed Ona’s concern because the girl kept reverting back to English despite knowing Flor would only catch every other word. *Ay, mi pobre niña, she always did feel too much in Spanish.*

Flor found herself fantasizing about the things people might say: Matilde was the sweetest of the sisters and would probably write her a poem of sorts. Her sister Pastora would get right to the heart of things, making Flor uncomfortable. Ona would weep.

She’d done right by her family, Flor thought. They would say kind goodbyes.

She picked out the exact photograph she wanted enlarged so it was the first thing all the attendees would see when they walked into the hall. It was the one of her when she’d first gotten to New York City. She’d been photographed wearing a faux-leopard cape, her hair in loose roller curls, the discolored photo that muffled the colors unable to mute the sparkle in her eye or the shimmering on the Hudson behind her. Everything had been possible then, here.

A few days after spreading the event graphic far and wide, she wandered the floors of Macy’s searching for an outfit. She would have shopped at the store where Pastora worked retail, but she didn’t want to make this occasion a family orchestration. This was her living wake, and the details of how she would appear were hers alone. She bought Ona a dress for the occasion too.

Next, she considered the run of show. Maybe let people come in and linger? Then she could get the emcee to give a short speech before opening the floor for people to come up to her and pay their respects. Into the microphone, of course.

Flor’d never had a baby shower, but it was baby showers she circled back to when she considered the grand events she’d attended throughout her life; she was most moved by the big wicker chairs mothers-to-be sat in, decorated on-theme, their rented throne a seat for all to pay homage. Flor was long past childbearing years, but she thought she, too, had something to deliver to her respect-givers. She ordered a peacock wicker chair.

Her menu would be a buffet line, she decided. Pastora, tight-lipped on the subject of the wake, would approve that at least. Pastora was the stoutest of them all and delighted in any event that encouraged seconds and thirds. It was the catering detail that made it all real. Flor would have to call Yadi again; she couldn’t cater a party and give the money to someone other than family, especially with a new restaurateur in the family.

Flor had planned many funerals in her life: for her father, her husband. But no planning raised the hair on her arms or kept her up at night the way planning her own services did. Imminence careened toward her, ready to reach into her chest, grab on to her heart, and take over the steering wheel. She was a woman driven. And she needed to gather her kin before it arrived.

She knew. She’d known.

The truth that is the truth, but is also the truth she did *not* want to tell: her teeth shattered. In a dream, of course. The night before she’d watched the documentary. And the pain of the enamel crumbling had been excruciating. And in that dream, when she’d reached fingers into her mouth and rummaged through the rubble of incisors, canines, and molars, the name her fingers latched onto and pulled from between her lips didn’t have too many letters at all; why, it was barely more than a small, breathless incantation:

flor flor flor

Flor: Interview Transcript (Translation)

ONA: . . . and that's where you think it starts?

LOR: Yes. Of course. It begins with the body for me. . . . I have sometimes felt like an occupant in this flesh; something that is being hosted. Until I had my first love, although looking back, those were a youngster's emotions.

I truly became human when I became pregnant with you. Nothing, not even making love, had ever arrived me to my own body like growing another person. It was primal, physical, the sensations that became new to me. I would wake up and brush my teeth, and the moment the toothbrush touched my tongue I would begin to gag. A visceral shock from the dream world to the body . . . You know me, Ona, I struggle with decisions sometimes. But from the moment I learned I was carrying you, the most animal of choices became easy. What do I want to eat? Not that, not that, yes, this. I would stand at my station at the button factory, and hunger, urinating, resting were sensations as loud as the machines whirring around me. The cues were urgent, unignorable.

I have never known so clearly what I wanted and needed at almost all times.

I remember one day walking through Morningside Park, you know that patch by 110th where the baseball fields are? They had just mowed it, the tractor not yet having rolled off the field, and I swear to you I wanted to drop to my knees. The grass smelled alive, the milk of each cut blade sweetening the air, and I felt like my nose picked up every single drop of dew. I'd known beautiful fields, and admired trees and birds, but with a second heartbeat in my body, my senses were newly electrified.

You grounded me here, with both feet, on both knees, stooped on all fours, heaving to bring you forth. I have known death since before I was born, but I had not truly known life until I gave it to you.

Two Days Until the Wake

Matilde

did not startle at the series of dings announcing that the siblings' group chat had found spicy new fodder. She had grocery shopping to do before class, and she was circling items dutifully in the supermarket weekly so as not to overshop. Yadi had sent her the list of dishes they'd be preparing over the next two days for Flor's wake, and Matilde, devoted in all things, was especially diligent about her job as Yadi's assistant manager at the shop.

Even when the house phone rang, she didn't flinch. Malditos scammers always got ahold of her number despite how many times Camila put her on a Do Not Call list.

On the seventh ring, Matilde put her pen down, pushed her glasses up from where they'd slid halfway down her nose. Half by half she folded the specials. The caller ID flashed *PASTORA*. Matilde sighed. If one must answer a call from Pastora, apprehension was advised; her mouth had never known silk.

Matilde hoped Pastora merely wanted to bochinchar about Flor; they talked around it, the reason their sage of a sister might be doing something so unordinary as throwing herself a wake without providing details. The theories had run from the guess that she must have gotten an ominous test result at her last physical to the opinion that maybe the family's curse of dementia had already lassoed her brain. Flor was mum on the subject, which left the remaining sisters to gossip among themselves.

But Pastora was not calling to talk about Flor.

Her voice cut into Matilde's greeting. "I'm going to tell you it exactly, just like my eyes saw. Rafa walked right by my store today, and into the CVS across the street. It was just before lunch, como a las once y pico. And yes, before you ask, I'm sure it was him. He was wearing those ripped white jeans he thinks make him a papi champú and that Águilas hat he loves so much. His arm was wrapped around a woman who was big pregnant. Iban agarraditos de manos."

Matilde had received calls like this before.

Rafa was seen at the karaoke bar performing a love song at a pining waitress.

Rafa was seen at the billiards on 207th instructing a pretty young thing by pawing her too-large ass.

Rafa was seen entering the apartment of the widow in 5D, and he emerged an hour later without his toolbox.

Rafa was always being seen by somebody doing something with someone who was not Matilde.

But the witness of these transgressions had never been Pastora, this younger sister who acted like the eldest, and so Matilde had never received quite this kind of call. In fact, this little sister had always been tight-lipped on the subject of Matilde's marriage, refusing to even look at Matilde when inquiries of her husband's infidelity arose in conversation between the siblings. And even with the calls that *had* come before, there had never been rumors about *pregnant* sidepieces.

Matilde removed the fogged-up glasses from her face. She'd been panting, she realized, her short bursts of breath creating a film of moisture on the lenses. She should wipe them clean. Instead, she pressed the middle finger and thumb of her free hand against her closed eyelids. The light spots flirted with memory and arranged themselves into a half-opened car

door. She was haunted by that fucking car door.

It was the night of her wedding, 1988. Matilde sat alone in the back of the car creating revolutions around her ring finger with the still too-shiny wedding band. Her hands itched to touch Rafa now, when they were allowed to do so without censure. How many days he had sat in her living room and drunk un cafecito and smiled and all she could think about was touching him *right* there? Or pressing her body close to his. Or threading her fingers through his picked-out 'fro. She'd imagined it all under the watchful gaze of her chaperoning siblings, imagined and hoped that he could read in her eyes what she was thinking and was, perhaps, thinking them back at her. Although she was the second eldest, she was often treated like the youngest of the bunch. An air of innocence, her younger sisters loved to say while offering her a pat, pat.

She glanced down at her river of skirts, an impossible crossing she'd need to attempt if she wanted to act on any fingertip-to-body action with her new husband's delectable neck. Just as she was about to arch forward and wedge herself between the two front seats so she could at the very least share a giddy glance with Rafa, Manuelito hit a pothole that jostled her backward.

"Me disculpa, Matilde," Manuelito said, his eyes finding hers in the rearview. She offered him a little smile. So far, he was the most courteous of her brothers-in-law and had offered both his new car and his chauffeuring for transport on her wedding day. Correction, it was now her wedding night. Which would commence in less than ten minutes, if she was correctly pinpointing where they were on Avenida George Washington. And she was pinpointing their location down to the millimeter and second since El Hotel Jaragua was also where she worked. She made this commute daily. Her employment discount and regard as a desk clerk were the only way they were able to afford the illustrious hotel for the one night.

From his seat, Rafa tapped his fingers against a windowsill, patterning a beat only he could hear. They'd met through music. He was the star weekend singer at the discoteca she and Pastora had visited routinely when Matilde had first joined her in the capital. The eldest sibling and only brother acted as escort, but he was unnecessary muscle. The women were equipped with their own ways of discouraging unwanted attention. All except Matilde, who solicited the most attention to begin with because her heels, once they touched the dance floor, seemed forged from pure light. She was a dreidel, spinning and spinning, her skirt a halo enshrining her hips. Under the flashing disco balls, alongside the whine of the accordion, Matilde spawned herself the loveliest swan. Even in their campo back home, folks had whispered that Matilde might be the sister without magic, but she was also the only of her kin who could fly; her tacones seemingly hovered over the ground when an orchestra was in her presence. Rafa, from his lofty position as front man, took notice of the young woman with the cheap department store dress and winged soles, and he turned his voice into her spotlight; she'd spun with other men, but his crooning sung her eyes right back to him.

He'd found her later, standing with Pastora by the bar. "I want you to dance to my music for the rest of your life," he'd whispered, pressing a rum and Coke into her hands. Matilde hadn't known her temperature could rise any more than it had when she was shaking and sweating on the dance floor, but it did. A long lick of heat crawled up from beneath her heaving cleavage.

The music was too loud for anyone to overhear his delightful whisper, much less Pastora standing closer to a speaker, but the patch of skin between her sister's brows had still furrowed and she'd shaken her head, an easy sign of disapproval to interpret, yet Matilde had turned fully to this man, pretending she hadn't seen her sister's motion. He'd wooed her from that day on, scaling her prim demeanor, telling her over and over she was special, unlike anyone he'd ever known.

Rafa had a beautiful voice, clear as a church bell, and he'd told her more than once that he felt it was the greatest injustice of his life that he'd never been able to strike it big, despite all the nightclub owners who'd regularly asked him to sing in their clubs. She'd never told him this, but it was that exact comparison to the church bell that she believed could be at the root

of his lack of success: his voice was indistinct. It was reliable, sure, but it chimed like the kind of thing one grew accustomed to and learned to tune out. Not *her*, of course. At this point in her courtship, she was still besotted enough that the tips of her ears perked up whenever he gave a tiny clearing of his throat. Like he did now in the car. Matilde waited for what he would say.

“Drop me off right there,” Rafa said to her brother-in-law, pointing a finger at a beachfront building. It was not the tall, coral-colored columns of El Hotel Jaragua. She calculated they were still five minutes from there. “Take her to the hotel for me, compadre? You need to teach a woman early who is in charge, ¿no es verdad?”

She’d not met her brother-in-law’s eyes in the rearview mirror. She must have misheard Rafa. Although from the stillness of Manuelito’s hands on the wheel, the way he had not cracked a smile at the bridegroom’s jest, she’d gathered he had heard what she had heard and was waiting on her to speak. Her sister Flor would have stared him hard in the face with her good eye if her bridegroom had said that to her. Pastora would have been at his throat before he’d made it to his second sentence.

Matilde stared out the window and said nothing. And in this, she hoped her brother-in-law understood: *Say nothing, Manuelito. Not now, not later when you go home to Pastora. Reserve for me only this embarrassment.* Her husband clapped Manuelito on the back and reached for the car door handle. She had a single moment. Less than a second—

(I, Ona, was not alive then. And since I wasn’t, there was no resident anthropologist in the family. However, if I had been born, or if someone Matilde knew had had this particular occupation, one might have tried to explain that she was turning to ritual in that nanosecond; she had recognized that door as the blinking entrance sign into a new liminality. Before Rafa thrust open the door, and there was the blissful then of a few moments ago, and the impossibly hungry future yawning in front of her, Tía Matilde had just enough wherewithal to understand that she was undergoing a rite of passage, experiencing an in-betweenness, and just like the ceremony she’d undergone to become his wife, this too would undo a former self and would concretize a self not yet formed.)

—he expelled himself, the outside air rushed in, hot and humid, a sweaty slap to the face. And then he slammed shut the door. Tapped a beat on her window, she remembers. When she lowered it, he moved the veil away from her face. She’d removed it for the reception, but before leaving the wedding reception her sisters had shuffled her into the single-stall bathroom to help her pin it back on. These two sisters closest in age to her, Flor and Pastora, were newly wed. Flor was even preparing to be a mother, having traveled back to Santo Domingo at seven months pregnant to be at the wedding. And Pastora, enamored with being wife to Manuelito, was trying to be kind despite her misgivings of Matilde’s choice in husband.

“Husbands like having things to remove. The more you give him to unshell, the more anxious he’ll be for the cashew,” Pastora said.

But it seemed Rafa had heard the reverse.

“This way you’ll be eager from missing me.” He had chuckled just before his mouth pecked her own. It was the first time in their relationship she had the thought that life to him was only a great big joke he loved telling and was too self-centered to realize no one joined him in the laughter.

Manuelito drove the next five minutes in silence. Matilde knuckled away the moisture on her cheeks. She kept the window lowered and took deep breaths. When they pulled up at the hotel, she grabbed the overnight bag she’d packed with lingerie and a flask and tomorrow’s change of clothes and marched into the hotel before Manuelito could offer to escort her. She knew the seed of shame would blossom under the shine of her coworkers’ speculation, their wonderings of why she entered with a man who was not her new husband. So, she preferred to enter the revolving doors alone.

Thirty-some-odd years later, when she thinks of that night, she does not wish to change

that he left her alone for five hours after their wedding so he could dance, and sing, and—now she believes—whore. She does not even regret the wedding, which was achingly lovely, her parents dressed in all white, her sisters carrying soft pink rosebuds down the aisle. She could not imagine a life without the pregnancies, each one its own forlorn hope, the last-ditch efforts of a general attempting to conquer the other side of a lonely life.

There was no point in questioning the marriage. All she wishes she could alter was that when he'd walked into the hotel room that wedding night, smelling of salty grajo, oblivious to the way she'd thumbed to wrinkles the lace of her nightgown, that his lips hadn't been so soft on her collarbone. His hand moving the strap that held her clothed the way she'd seen her own father, who could not read, slide the fringe of a bookmark onto his favorite passage of Psalms. Rafa's hand when he palmed her breast had held the weight unmoving for a long second, accepting an offering. It was clear who was supplicant and who was god.

When her husband had made love to her that night, she had no choice but to believe he'd had the right of it. She was eager, humid, clinging to him as if he'd been out for months instead of hours, licking his jaw as if she could swallow him whole. A panting bitch welcoming her owner home. Maybe this was what was necessary the first night a woman made love. She wished he hadn't been so proficient. Trying, with his body, to make her unremember. It would have all been easier if he hadn't had so much conviction in his kisses and touches, affirmations that he loved her, of course, only her.

The children never did hold. And as each one of Matilde's siblings married and had little ones, she became the designated godmother. The one to send the children gifts and buy them ice cream and indulge them the way a family member can for a child who is not theirs to overspoil. To date, she is godmother to four of her siblings' children. Her sisters never said so, but she knows it was pity that made them do it. Otherwise, why get a family member to be a godparent? The formality of further structuring a relationship proves redundant. Here was barren Matilde, who could grow a babe to the size of a melon before he decided he'd rather be elsewhere. They never said it, but she always thought they must think this too: If only she'd given Rafa a child when they were first wed, maybe her husband would not have strayed. And she would counter that imaginary critique by assuring them that unless she'd been prepared to go into labor long before their wedding night, no child would have yoked her husband to her. Just ask Manuelito, who'd borne witness. It wasn't a child that Rafa had searched for in other women's skirts.

Still, she refused to be tragic. She knew how to be happy for others. She knew she participated in the world as more than a womb.

She tapped the specials, folded throughout her reverie into an accordion fan, against the kitchen table. Pastora was still talking about what she'd seen outside the CVS.

Matilde heaved up from her seat. "Not now, Pastora. I have to go grocery shopping. I promised Yadi I would pick up some things for the catering."

Matilde pictured Pastora's irritated hand gesture. "That girl always figures it out."

Then Pastora's voice turned gentle the way a bread knife is gentle as it parts an airy crumb. "We have to talk, Matilde. Today."

Matilde walked to the phone cradle. "After I go shopping, I have my class."

"Where is your class again? I'll stop by before it begins."

"The middle school auditorium, pero please. I don't want distractions before class."

A rude noise on the other end preceded Pastora's "Afterward."

Matilde did not bite back her sigh. "I'm seeing you tomorrow night, Pas." Matilde knew that the nickname was like base in a game of freeze tag: it paused Pastora long enough that she might chase after something else. But Matilde also knew Pastora was a more vicious chaser than most, so she pressed her point. "This conversation *can* wait until tomorrow, can't

it? At this point in my marriage, is it life or death?"

There was a long pause, Pastora trying to read the situation, trying to hear whatever it was she heard in people's voices. Matilde waited. One second. Two. Three. . . . It took eight before Pastora spoke. "Mañana entonces. Pero en serio, Matilde. It's time."

And it was. Time for Matilde to fold the specials into her pocket. Time to wipe clean her glasses and put them back on her face. Time to pack her dancing shoes, and pick up the ingredients her niece needed. And then it would be the hour to head to class.

And then. And then. And then.