

EVERYTHING IS AN OCEAN

By Jacqueline Holland

“In person, cutting-edge fashion designer Sylvia Rosso perfectly embodies her signature style: a provocative, even jarring, mélange of pre- and post-human features. The day I meet up with her in a chic Loring Park cafe, her elegant North Korean face is starkly contrasted by robin’s egg blue eyes. On one side of her head, inky, black hair falls to her shoulders in an asymmetrical knife blade. On the other side, coils of snow-white hair are tightly pinned against the scalp. The fingertips of her left hand are chrome-dipped to the knuckle, while the nails of the right are perfectly manicured in seal-skin black. This defiantly incongruous look becomes only more incongruous when you learn that Rosso is Italian born, to a French mother and Sicilian father.

That a fashion icon's physical presence should impress, is entirely to be expected—Rosso effortlessly exudes an atmosphere as thick and bewitching as a haunted house (did the café lights really dim when she walked in?)—but one rarely expects the impact of a designer's style to pale beside that of her words. Yet this was precisely my experience as Rosso sat across from me, offering her cerebral and briskly articulated thoughts on the revolutionary fashion movement (*civil rights* movement, if she is to be believed) that she's been spearheading for the last ten years. Rosso's passion is intense and infectious, and her mission could be called anything but skin-deep.

FC (Future Couture): Sylvia Rosso, a pleasure to speak with you today.

SR (Sylvia Rosso): I'm delighted to be here. The pleasure is mine."

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Water collects in the tiniest cracks in the road. When it is cold, (which it is more often in the desert than most people think) the water, even such a very small amount, freezes, expands, and a tiny crack becomes a fissure. The road today is in ruins all because of hairline cracks. See how the mighty fall? See how power—*true*

power— is mysterious, unexpected, often invisible, often slow? Gabriela Elena Blanca, my best friend in the world, and her mother, Soraya Blanca, were cracks in our community. When the freeze came, they split us wide, but still we took the wrong lessons about power, what it is, where it comes from, what it gets you in the end. Be wiser, mi alma. Be wise. Enough of this foolishness.

Mama Celia says that even as a baby, just looking at Gabriela made her breathless with fear. She says that Gabriela's beauty used to fill her with panic, keep her up nights worrying. She talked to Soraya about it many times (they were friends once, if it can be believed). She even offered to cut Gabriela herself just as she and my father had done to me—six puckered lines of scar tissue on each side of the face, like fish gills—but Soraya wouldn't hear of it.

People will tell you that Soraya Blanca was a fool, willfully and dangerously negligent. How many warnings did she ignore? To this day, they still spit on her name and declare among themselves that she's the one who should have been locked up for what happened to Gabriela. But Soraya is dead, and so when they say that, I never know if they are wishing more punishment upon her or less. It was Gabriela, though who was put away. Not her mother, not the men who did it. Gabriela, tucked quietly in the big house outside town with the wall of agave plants—big, angry

blossoms spread out beneath the angrier sun—where she and the other defaced women could live out their ghostly lives, perspiring behind veils and swaying silently on the porch swings in the hot wind that blows angry too at our edge of the Mojave.

Fool or not, the happiest days of my childhood were spent at Soraya and Gabby's house. We used to put old records on the beat-up record player Soraya had salvaged and wired to the solar cell—records with strange names like Jefferson Starship and The Grateful Dead, music that it seemed only Soraya had ever heard of, and the three of us would dance barefoot on their dusty, wood floors, with the thin, white drapes flapping around us, and out the window, an ocean of electric-blue sky swimming up from the red beach of the earth.

When we weren't dancing to records, we were reading books. Soraya knew how to read and write in English, and she taught Gabby and me from when we were little. She had a shelf of old-fashioned, paper-books, water-damaged Reader's Digests that we read from cover to cover, until we'd each read each half a dozen times. Then at night, we spread blankets on boulders and chose our stars, or wound our flashlights and went into the desert to collect prickly pears. In the morning, we made cactus jam to slather on tortillas hot off the griddle.

I never told anyone this, but Soraya used to paint our faces. She had a little case hidden away, and every so often she would sit us down on the floor in front of the cracked mirror of a medicine cabinet she'd hauled back from a rubbish heap.

“Close your eyes,” she would say to Gabby and I, and then we would hear her rifling around in the small kitchen, opening and closing all the cabinets so we wouldn't know where she kept it.

“Open,” she would say at last, then she would sit down cross-legged beside us, her long, black hair skimming the floor, and set the case—blue, Chinese silk, frayed at the corners—on the floor in front of her, unfold it. The case was full of strange things: a small, metal box that held a skin-colored putty, a stick of eye charcoal, short like a pencil worn almost down to the nub, a tube of coral lipstick, a round, red cake of what Soraya called “rouge,” and a wooden-handled brush that she dipped gently against the rouge and then swept across our sweat-damp cheeks. In the side of the case, there was a zipper pocket where she kept a pair of turquoise earrings that clipped onto the lobes of our ears and hurt after a few minutes, and a ring with a big, smooth stone that changed colors to show how you were feeling. On me, the ring was always black and cloudy, like deep space, which Soraya said meant I was conflicted. On Gabriela, it was flushed blue and

flecked with silver, like all the stars of night sparkling on a summer morning.

“That,” Soraya said once, pulling her daughter’s long, silky hair back behind her shoulders, running a hand down the shining curve of her skull, “means she’s in love.”

Gabby and I laughed at each other mischievously, my eyes flaring bright with mock suspicion. I knew there was no one, but it was fun to pretend.

“Who is it, Gabby? Who is it?” I pinched the soft flesh of her side beneath her ribs. She curled away, laughing with her coral mouth, her white teeth flashing.

Soraya pulled a comb lovingly through Gabby’s hair, a waterfall of liquid jet.

“Not with a person,” she explained. “She’s in love with love. In love with herself.”

She tipped her comb toward the window, the dizzying blue beyond. “In love with the world and all the vast beauty in it.”

Soraya rested her chin on top of Gabby’s head. “Just the way all young girls are—” She glanced at me, and the smile in her eyes drifted to sadness, “—Or should be.”

In the mirror, they were a two-headed totem, Soraya a sun-faded and lightly lined future of Gabby. She had taken her

own beauty into the desert long ago in the hopes of keeping it and kept it now in her daughter.

“Now you, Dulce.”

She took my hand and pulled me to sit in front of her, but *not* in front of the mirror. Not yet. It would take her ten minutes with the putty just to cover my scars.

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“FC: I can’t help but notice your look today, Sylvia. Simply stunning.

SR: Oh, thank you. You’re kind.

FC: So, East Asian has been a tremendously popular look, a trend you are credited as having started with your 2020 show in Dubai, in which all of your international models wore Macau. That show was a scandal at the time. Yet now, cosmetic facial transplants are relatively common. How do you account for the dramatic shift in public opinion?

SR: Well, I think there are two things you can always count on from human beings: the first is that if they can do something they will. When the first facial transplant was successfully completed—

FC: Back in 2010, in Spain...

SR: Yes, precisely. Well, way back then, the writing was on the wall for anyone who cared to see it. Cosmetic facial transplants were the future. It was just a matter of time.

The second thing upon which you can absolutely rely, is that people will be frightened of anything new. My 2020 show happened ten years along into the development of facial transplants, but to the public it was completely new, and so, of course, it was shocking. Which was good for me because shock is half of fashion. Now that it is so quotidian, we have to find new boundaries to push. So, I suppose, there is a third thing upon which you can rely: that people will come around, despite their initial hesitation. People come to see the benefit, or utility of the thing they were so afraid of. They come to enjoy it, even if they have some abstract, philosophical objections. Ultimately, they always come around, until eventually, those early concerns seem absurd.”

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Gabriela and I were born five days apart. Soraya, just days from giving birth herself, was there when I was born. She held my mother’s hand, and poured cool water over her as my mother knelt in the tin bath tub, biting the side, and grunting through contractions. When Yanaha, the Navajo midwife, pressed a palm

to my mother's belly and told her gently that I would be a girl, Soraya held her and hushed her as she wept.

"Yours too," Yanaha said, looking into Soraya's eyes, but Soraya didn't cry. Instead, Yanaha says, she smiled a smile that was as fierce as it was happy.

Soraya told me this, that at one point, when the contractions were coming very fast and hard, my mother began moaning *why?*

"*Why? Why?*" she asked, naked and writhing in the water. "*Why?*"

"Why what, Mija?" Soraya cooed, softly, her arms around my mother's wet shoulders.

"Why?" my mother said breathlessly, hollow-eyed. "Does God hate us so much?" Another contraction hit. She screamed silently and tore at her own hair. "Why does he hate women so much?"

"Oh, Celia," Soraya whispered, kissing the side of my mother's head, taking my mother's hand into her own. "Celia, he doesn't. He *loves* us. It's the world that hates us. It hates us *because* God loves us so—because we are his beauty, his sweetness."

When I finally arrived, Yanaha cleaned me in the washbasin and showed me to my father, while Soraya covered my

mother, whose teeth were chattering with shock, in layers of coarse wool blankets until the shaking stopped. It must have been the shock that caused the moment of unthinkable optimism that followed in my mother, or perhaps she was just grateful to her friend. How else could I have ended up with a name like Dulce? Dulce de Dios. Sweetness of God.

Five days later, it was my mother pouring water on Soraya's belly, holding her hand through contractions, leaning against her legs, as she pushed Gabriela into the world. It was my mother, still sore from birth herself, who covered Soraya in blankets, as the midwife took the baby and cleaned her in the basin, just as she had me. Unlike me, there was no father to show, so it was my mother who stood beside Yanaha and peered into the infant face as the midwife drew the blanket back. And even in her first blue and bloody moments of life, Gabriela's face had caused the two women to glance at each other in silent, stony concern. But mother took the baby and brought her to Soraya where she was nested beneath the blankets. She folded the baby into Soraya's arms and put her ear to Soraya's lips to hear the whispered name: Gabriela, woman messenger of God.

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Soraya and my mother remained friends for some years, while there was still the expectation that Soraya would do what

needed to be done. At just two years old, Gabriela was already alarming. When we ran, her dark hair twisted in the hot wind like a black, silk scarf. Her sweat, when we played, burnished her gold skin so that it shimmered all day, as the sun could only in setting. The red rocks we climbed were pale beside the flush of her cheeks and lips.

For a while, everyone in town —except my mother—just averted their eyes, expecting any day to see Gabriela with a bandage across her face. It was just a matter of time, they assured one another. Every parent has to work themselves up to it in their own time. Gabby’s third birthday came and went—her fourth, fifth. For a plainer child that might have been fine. A really homely girl might even make it to ten, though most people agreed this was a foolish gamble. What parent could ever forgive themselves if they were wrong? It was better to be safe than sorry.

All this time my mother was trying to talk sense into Soraya.

“You are putting the whole town in danger—” she whispered hotly to Soraya, as four-year-old Gabby and I played mothers to our cornhusk dolls, or chased each other around the fat trunks of the sago palms. Back then, I liked to run my fingers over the cool, raised arabesques that lined the fan palm’s smooth

skin, imagining that my scars formed beautiful patterns just like theirs. ”—Not to say *anything* of the danger to Gabriela.”

While Gabby and I, six-years-old, searched the dirt for gypsum, or mica, or a pretty piece of lemony quartz to place in our carefully tended rock garden, my mother scolded Soraya.

“All it would take is one wrong person catching sight of her as they drove through town. Then they would be on us, quick as a scorpion’s sting. There would be no warning.”

Through all this, Soraya just smiled at my mother, patted her hand, and said, “I appreciate your concern, Celia.”

The very things that had once drawn my mother to Soraya—her obstinate hopefulness, her stubborn serenity and persistent joy—were becoming infuriating.

“Have you no conscience?” My mother finally hissed at her one day, when Gabby and I were nine.

Soraya turned to her then, and the uncharacteristic anguish in her eyes made my mother draw back.

“Celia, I *know!*” she said, anger entering her voice for the first time in nine years. “Believe me, I understand the situation. And when I let it, it terrifies me.”

She put a hand to her chest, and for a moment her breath came raggedly, and neither woman spoke.

“Hear me, Celia, if Gabriela’s beauty were mine to destroy, I would do it. It wouldn’t be right, but the fear might drive me to it anyway.” She took Celia’s hand, pleadingly. She looked into her friend’s eyes, begging for understanding. “But it *isn’t mine*, Celia. I have no more right to destroy her beauty than *they* do. I simply cannot do what you’re asking me to do.”

My mother was silent for a moment, choked with frustration. The two women watched their daughters, thin and long-legged now, sitting in the shade of the house, their heads bent toward each other, taking apart an old radio with a screwdriver, as the chickens scratched the dirt around them.

“Okay,” my mother said finally. “Let *her* do it, then.”

Soraya let out a soft, sad laugh of disappointment. “Celia, *mi amor*”—Soraya looked at my mother, her eyes soft with compassion—“It isn’t hers either.”

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FC: So you have no lingering discomfort with using human faces as cosmetic products?

SR: Oh, absolutely not. The skin is an organ like any other. If we thought closely about the idea of one person’s lung or heart being put into another person’s body, we might still be able to dredge up some squeamishness, but the suggestion that we bring life-saving lung transplants or heart transplants to a halt for so

insubstantial a reason would be laughable. No one would ever propose such a thing.

FC: The difference, I suppose one could argue, is that a cosmetic facial transplant is not a life-saving procedure.

SR: I absolutely disagree, if you consider quality of life. The ugly or disfigured are some of the most discriminated against people in the world. They encounter unthinkable abuses, injustices, and limitations to the exercise of their rights. *Ugliness*, in this country, is truly crippling. It is an utterly unacknowledged disability that affects every aspect of a person's life, from the ability to make friends, gain employment, find a life partner. Ugly people are even more likely to be found guilty in a court of law, for God's sake!

Some may dismiss my work as "just fashion," but I see this work as a civil rights movement, a step toward a world where discrimination based on appearance is truly a thing of the past. That includes racial discrimination. At last the color of a person's skin is truly just a color instead of a tool for categorizing people, making assumptions about them, hating them.

Fashions have always had cultural implications. At the risk of sounding grandiose, I feel that the work my team and I are doing is perhaps the most culturally revolutionary in the history of fashion."

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On a day, not long after the conversation with Soraya, my mother baked an extra loaf of bread. She filled a plastic jug with fresh milk from Grunon, the older of our two goats. Father hot-wired one of the road-cars in the yard, and they told Gabby and me to get in. We were going for a ride.

It was evening when we set out. We took the abandoned highway for a mile or so, with the sun a sticky, orange lozenge melting into the hot asphalt of the horizon ahead of us. The desert had all but retaken the road, and the car bumped and dipped over the crater-like potholes that wind and ice had eaten into the crumbling tar. My father had stripped the doors from this car, so Gabby and I clung to the front seats with one hand and held the bread and milk in our laps with the other. The dying light washed across my mother's face, gleaming on the raised surfaces of her small, round burn scars.

“Mother,” I said. “Where are we going?”

My mother kept her eyes forward.

“We’re going to see what happens when parents fail to protect their daughters,” she said.

We drove up the scrubby side of a hill, turned a corner, and the house was there, low and red, like the red rocks surrounding it, and coiled into itself like a snake. It was old,

weather-beaten, and sun-bleached, but you could tell it had been a nice house once, nicer than our houses which were rows of hastily constructed stucco and drywall squeezed shoulder to shoulder against each other. There were pots lining one side of the yard, just as we had in town, with nets strung from poles and draped into them to harvest drinking water from the morning dew. On the other side, there was a ramshackle henhouse with an overhang to keep the sun off the goats that ambled about, biting at the chaparral. Above the house, the full moon hung low in the umber evening sky, like a bleached, white skull in the sand.

Two figures stood hunched in the center of the yard, between us and the house. They were shoulder to shoulder, their backs turned to us, draped in shawls that I could tell had once been white, but were rusty now with desert dust. Their arms beneath the shawls moved strangely; it looked as though they were struggling with something, but whatever it was, was hidden from view by their bodies. Strange sounds drifted to us on the wind, a language they were speaking to each other, but vague and incomprehensible.

Three other figures, also obscured beneath shawls, rested in the shade of the porch, still but for the lazy motion of their wrists as they fanned themselves slowly. No notice was paid to us when we pulled up. My father cast a long look up at the house

before pulling his toolbox from the back of the car and walking off toward the chicken coop without a word. My mother held her arm out to Gabby and me, waving impatiently for us to follow her. We scabbled down from the car with the bread and milk, and climbed with her up the hillside.

“Such a beautiful house,” Gabby breathed in wonder.

“They’ve earned that beautiful house,” my mother said, her eyes hard and narrow, “through much pain and misery, they’ve earned that house. It’s little consolation.”

Our feet turned up the dust of the dry, rocky hillside. I could hear the bleating of the goats and my father’s hammer in the distance as we approached the two women. I had just glanced over my shoulder to see him lifting a fallen plank, hammering it into the side of the coop, nails griped between his teeth, when there came a scream almost like the strangled cry of a child. As we drew up beside the two cloaked women, I looked down to see hands—old and thickly-veined, but still quick and strong—stretch a struggling goat deftly across a blood-blackened tree stump. An instant later, like two parts of a single motion, the other woman pulled a knife across the goat’s neck. There was a final kick from the goat’s front hoof, as the blood spilled over the animal’s coarse gray hair and down the tree stump. It pooled and beaded, crimson and mercurial, on the sand for an instant before soaking in.

I heard Gabby gasp beside me, and for a moment I thought, *silly*. We'd seen dozens of goats slaughtered before. We'd helped skin and butcher them ourselves. It was nothing to gasp about. But then I looked up just as Gabby had done a second earlier, and I saw the women's eyes, bleached white orbs as round and naked as the full moon, directing at us their wide lidless expression of permanent horror. No skin, no eyelids, no cheeks, no face to hold them, just withered, exposed muscle and tendon dried rust-red against the bone, like jerky. Their craggy and rotted teeth grinned out from lipless mouths, and saliva draped in slick strings down from their chins.

I gasped and dropped the bread in the sand.

"They were beautiful once too, Gabby," my mother said later in the car. "They are the reason we do what we do."

Gabby and I, in the back seat, hugged each other and whimpered.

"Do you want that to happen to you?"

When we didn't answer, she turned suddenly, her expression fierce. "Is that what you *want*?"

Gabby shook her head miserably.

"Then tell your mother."

It was late when we returned. Soraya was standing in the yard, silent and calm but watchful, her skirts ghostly in the white

glare of the headlamps. Gabby leapt from the car and ran to her, pressing her face into her mother's side, and I wished I could run to Soraya too. I was scared, and I wanted a soft mother's side to press my face to, but my mother, sitting in the passenger seat, looked like she was carved from rock. She got out of the car, her back straighter than usual, her movements slow and deliberate, as though Soraya were an animal, who might behave unpredictably. She said nothing to Soraya, and when Soraya said nothing to her, she walked stiffly into the house.

I could see from Gabby and Soraya's faces in the morning that they'd been crying. When I saw them, I started crying too, though I wasn't sure why. Soraya held me on her lap, hugged me and stroked my hair.

"Ah, Dulce," she said. "Dulce, Dulce. Tears are a wonderful thing, yes?"

I looked up at her. "What do you mean?"

"We could never survive in this world without tears. They carry it all out of us; that's what they're for. Didn't you know?"

I shook my head.

"All the pain, all the sorrow. They carry it right out of us."

She set me gently on the floor beside her and stood. She smiled, her eyes still puffy, and walked over to the record player, pulled a shiny black disk from a cover.

“And after we’ve cried—” She set the record tenderly on the player “—then we can dance again.”

The music laughed, high and loud with helpless joy. We danced and whirled, tears drying on our faces, hair flicking the air. We held arms up to the unnamable beauty we felt always all around us, too much to look at, too much almost to feel, and promising more, more, somewhere around some corner, so much we would dissolve in it, our bodies unable to contain it all. We danced and danced, until we were flushed and sweating, our feet pounding the wood slats as the music and the sunlight streaming cold desert winter through the windows and the hearts beating in our chests cried, *hold on!* The joy! The beauty! It *exists* somewhere, so distilled it becomes solid, enterable. *Cling* to it! *Hold unshakably to the hope of its existence!*

When we fell to the floor, happy and exhausted, Soraya looked at us, suddenly grave.

“There are very bad people in this world—your mother is right about that, Dulce—people bent on murder and destruction.” She sat still and thoughtful, watching the curtains dance beside the window. Outside, white gulls dove and wheeled. “My own parents

tried to sell me.” She turned to us and tears were shimmering in her eyes. She wiped them away. “But the world is *so full*, and beside that fullness, those people are so, so *small*. What matters in us and in the world, what *really* matters, they can never take it, never destroy it. They just aren’t that powerful. The best they can do is make destroyers of *us*.”

She turned to us again, suddenly stern. “Do you understand me?”

Gabby and I just gaped at her. Soraya, stern, looked frighteningly beautiful and fierce, and I thought this must have been how she looked when Yanaha told her she’d have a girl.

“Do you *hear* me?” She repeated, “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” we said. “We hear you.”

We did not say we understood.

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“FC: What about critiques that facial transplant trends actually encourage discrimination by placing a premium on particular ethnicities over others? Some say that the simple act of assigning a market value to a face is inherently discriminatory. Do you disagree?”

SR: The pricing of ethnicities is not an issue of discrimination, but simple supply and demand. Japanese beauty, for instance, is expensive because the population is small, and

aging, and few young people with intact faces die, thus the supply is extremely limited. In larger populations, obviously, supply is greater, cost is lower. It is unfortunate if the scarcity or abundance of a product confers in the mind of the buyer a false sense of inherent beauty or worth, but this will not be the case for long. Believe me, these are but growing pains on our way to an altogether new kind of existence.

FC: New kind of existence? How so?

SR: Technology in this field is advancing daily. Soon all faces—all organs for transplant of *any* kind— will be grown in the lab, and we will be completely unbound from living donors. It will, of course, take time for human engineering to match the subtlety of design found in nature, but in time, they'll get there, and when they do, cost will go down, and units per capita will go up. Soon faces will be like purses or shoes. We will change them with the year, the season—eventually, with our fluctuating mood. This greater diversity, I believe, will cause a shift from single, large-scale trends, to thousands of micro-trends—a daily pageant of unimaginably diverse beauty.

But here's the important thing—and pardon me if I get a bit philosophical for a moment—when we get to that place, we will cease to think of our born faces as *ourselves*. If you think about it, discrimination can only be directed at a self. We discriminate

among object all the time—that dress is gorgeous, while that one is hideous—but it doesn’t matter because an object has no selfhood. When a face can be removed, changed, put on and taken off, it will become an object rather than a symbol of the self. We will finally realize that *we are not* our externalities. We are *not* our bodies. I see a day coming when we will *finally* be able to appreciate the physical without mistaking it for the fundamental essence of who we are.”

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After my mother took Gabby and me to visit the women, she stopped speaking to Soraya. Ten years old, Gabriela’s beauty was now inexcusable in the eyes of the town. When Gabriela and I walked to the fuel station mart to look at magazines, or to *the island*—our name for our favorite place to play, a formation of rocks on the far side of the highway that jutted up from the ground like craggy, red, witch’s fingers— the women clucked their tongues and shook their heads over their brooms in disapproval. Their daughters, beating rugs or hanging laundry nearby, watched Gabby with silent fascination. Sometimes the older boys made kissing sounds and whispered, but their eyes were cold and hateful. Little boys threw rocks at us from the windows of long-vacant shops, or from behind the rusty, metal trash bins that sat on the street corners and were never emptied.

Despite all this, I still wasn't expecting it the day my mother told me I couldn't play with Gabriela anymore. I'd finished my chores and I was sitting on the floor, pulling my threadbare sneakers on. The clear, fragile light of an April afternoon was coming through the kitchen windows. My mother, who was wrapping up the leftovers from lunch, paused at the counter, and without looking at me, asked, "Where are you going?"

I stared at her, dumbstruck. I was going where I always went, where I'd gone every day since I could walk—to play with Gabby. She knew that. What was she really asking?

She wiped her hands on her apron as she came over to the table to pick up the plate my father had left there. She still didn't look at me.

"Not today," she said, despite my not having answered. "Not anymore."

"What?" I said, uncomprehending.

"You will have to find a new friend. We can't allow you to play with Gabriela anymore. It's not safe."

My father, who was out in the yard bent beneath the hood of a roadcar, came into the house when he heard the screaming. Ordinarily I was a quiet and obedient child, but I raged like an animal that day. My mother and father struggled to hold me down

against their sleeping mat, until I finally wore myself out, and my angry tears subsided to a soft, whimpering sleep.

When I woke, it was to a strange sound and the flash of a gecko running across the wall. The light had changed. It was dusk. My eyes dipped back toward sleep, but then I heard the sound again—a voice, high-pitched, deranged, screaming my mother’s name from the road. It was Soraya, approaching in the dusk, yelling my mother’s name with a rage I could never have imagined hearing in her voice.

“Celia! *Enfrenteme, Celia!*”

My mother had fallen asleep beside me on the mat, and she woke with a start, but her eyes went stony when she recognized Soraya’s voice. She was expecting this. She got up and went to the door, opened it. I ran to the door too, but she put her arms up at her sides to keep me inside the house, still, I could look past her and see Soraya approaching with Gabriela tucked behind her body, just as I was tucked behind my mother’s. The shadows they cast long before them were three, dark lines—one for Soraya, one for Gabby, and one for the crowbar that hung from Soraya’s hand and dragged in the dirt.

“It didn’t work, Celia!” Soraya shouted loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. My father had come up behind

us in the doorway. He gave my mother a look, but she held up a hand.

“It didn’t *work!*” Soraya screamed at the silent houses lining the road, at all the people she knew were tiptoeing behind door frames, craning their ears to hear.

“One drop on her cheek! That’s all they got—*one drop!* And when it has scarred, it will only make her more beautiful.”

She pulled Gabriela’s face forward, a frightened, trembling proof, and I saw my friend crying, and with a small, bloody wound the shape of a teardrop high on her cheek, but Soraya was right, it subtracted nothing from her beauty.

“This is *my* daughter! Do you all hear me? *Mi hija!*”

Soraya released her daughter, and with both hands, lifted the crowbar over her head and brought it down into the windshield of the rusty car in our yard.

“*Hijo de puta!*” My father cursed and lurched forward, but my mother held her hand up again, stopping him.

Again, and again, Soraya threw the crowbar back over her head and swung it down into the windshield. Blue-green glass sparked like icy chips, tumbled, and bounced against the dirt.

”You tell them, Celia. You tell them if they ever, *ever* come near my daughter again, *I* will damage *them!*”

My mother said nothing, but Soraya was not looking for a response. She took Gabriela, still crying and cowering behind her, by the wrist and backed away from our house as though the dark doorway of every house on the block had a shotgun aimed at them.

“You will not *touch her!*” She screamed at the listeners hidden in the falling darkness, in their houses silent as jury boxes.

“You may mutilate your own children, but you will *not—touch—mine!*”

My mother swore later that she had nothing to do with the plan to throw acid on Gabriela, but she admitted that she had known about it. The women at the mart had warned her to keep me away from Gabriela that day. They did not want me to be hurt. They did not want Gabriela to be hurt, my mother said. I rolled my eyes and turned away from her in furious contempt.

“They threw battery acid on her, Mother. How can you say they didn’t want to hurt her?” Ordinarily I would never speak so boldly to my mother, but she didn’t scold me. Instead she put a hand gently on my arm.

“They want her to be *safe*, Dulce,” she said. “That’s all any of us want.”

I turned away again. “*They’re* the ones Gabby isn’t safe from! The ones who threw *acid* at her!”

My mother's gentleness was used up. She grabbed my shoulder and wrenched me toward her with frightening strength. Her eyes were terrifying.

"Do you think we enjoy this?" she hissed so harshly I felt her spit on my cheek. "Do you think we do this for *fun*?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. With one hand, she grabbed my chin, her long, strong fingers reached up and squeezed my cheeks. "There are people, Dulce, who would take any part of your face that wasn't ruined—" She stared deep into my eyes, a wild hatred flickering crazily; the red flush of her face concentrated in her scars "—and they're not gentle."

She released me and turned away, and I dissolved into quiet tears.

"If I could kill every one of them..." her voice was a soft, shamed whisper now. "But I can't. So instead we do what we *can*."

After that there were no more attempts at marring Gabriela. The whole town simply turned their backs on the two women, pretended they did not exist. My mother added to my chores at the home, trying to keep me busy, but I just worked faster and then went over to their house to dance, or read, or be made beautiful by Soraya.

Sometimes Gabby would pass by our house on her way to the mart, and, if my mother hadn't seen, I would offer to go trade for coffee beans or milk. I'm sure my mother knew—nothing ever escaped her—but we pretended, both of us, that she didn't.

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The magazine, the man on the highway, and what came after have always seemed connected in my memory, but I suppose really, they're not. They were just three things that happened all together. It's just like Gabby and Soraya, and me lying on a blanket in the desert looking up at Orion's belt; you could see a belt if you wanted to, or you could just see three, lonely stars.

First, the magazine.

We were fourteen when the mart got new magazines. It was years since the last ones had come in. By then, it was only the delivery drones, stopping to recharge fuel cells on their way to other places, that kept the mart, the only business in town, running, and drones didn't care about magazines. But Gabby and I did. They were our only window to the world beyond El Mirage, and we had flipped through the ones we liked so many times that the corners were greasy with fingerprints, and the pages splayed out like an open fan.

The cashiers at the mart all knew us, and most knew that we weren't supposed to be talking to each other. If Senora Ramos

was working when Gabby and I met at the mart, we would just glance at each other and get our things without speaking. But Senor Jimenez, the obese, pock-faced manager, didn't care, and if he was behind the counter, Gabby and I could sit in the middle of the magazine aisle for twenty minutes flipping the dusty pages and whispering.

On a day in early October, Gabby walked slowly past my house. Fifteen minutes later I was on my way to the mart. Sr. Jimenez was outside with his push broom, cursing as he battled the desert for the parking lot it was constantly reclaiming. I was about to open the door, when Gabby rushed out.

"Ramos," she said under her breath. I looked through the glass to see fish-faced Senora Ramos wagging her flabby chin at some customer inside.

"Dulce," Gabby said urgently. I turned back to her. She looked past me for a second, checking to be sure Jimenez across the parking lot wasn't looking, then she lifted the bottom of her shirt. Tucked flat against her belly was a magazine, not one of the old ones we'd read a thousand times, but a new one—*Future Couture*—with a glossy cover and corners sharp and crisply uniform. My eyes went wide in surprise. She lowered her shirt again and smoothed it over the magazine.

"Come!" She whispered.

There was a sudden clatter of metal on metal as Senor Jimenez emptied his dustbin into the trash can, and Gabby and I both jumped.

“Okay,” I said. “As soon as I can.”

When I got to Gabby’s house, she was already flipping through the magazine, and she looked up at me with eyes so wide that they reminded me for an unpleasant instant of the women my mother had taken us to see back in the hills, years ago. She waved me over impatiently.

“Where’s your mom?” I asked, sitting down beside her on the living room floor.

“The houses, probably.”

There were whole tracts of houses that were still empty. The last people had left so many things behind. Appalling, was what my mother called it. She said, the last people had no business living in the desert when they needed so many silly things like air conditioning, and swimming pools, and ice cubes in a cold freezer. She said the last people were too soft to endure the slightest hardship or difficulty. Not like us. “We are hardy creatures,” she said. “All we need is each other.”

The most valuable things had mostly been taken from the houses, but there was more, always more. Soraya went out regularly to rummage through garages, or pantries, or closets

looking for anything she could use or trade with the other families. She brought back things for Gabby and me too: fuzzy slippers, or a board game without the instructions that we'd have to invent rules for. Once she brought back a bottle of wine, and we waited three months for her to find a bottle opener. She brought things for my mother as well: a lavender sachet, insoles for her shoes because her feet often hurt, even a nice molcajete. My mother never accepted any of these things, but Soraya never stopped giving them, so I took them to the island where the gifts just piled up.

“You have to see this!” Gabby said. She turned back to the beginning of the magazine and started flipping through. There were ads for amber-colored perfumes in geometric glass bottles, thick watches on the wrists of angry-looking, square-jawed men, an interview with some strange looking fashion designer with half-black and half-white hair. Then we came to the fashion shows, and we saw for the first time what we'd been hearing about since we were small. There were full-page pictures of models—some human, some robot, and some a combination of both—throwing their oiled, spidery legs out before them on the runways, and the bodies of the models were one color—pale ivory, or caramel, gleaming ebony, or peach with a static of russet freckles, or in the cases of the robots, opalescent white, gunmetal gray, even mint

green and lavender—but their faces were a different color. Page after page showed black faces on white bodies, Asian faces on black bodies, tawny faces, like our own, with thick black brows and long black hair on brushed platinum or silver-plated bodies. They were hypnotizing in their beauty and strangeness.

Gabby and I stared down at them, our breath slow and perfectly synchronized in silent wonder.

“The faces...” I said, my fingers absently wandering along the ridge of scar tissue that traced my cheekbone.

“They’re *beautiful*,” Gabby breathed.

“Yes,” I said in a barely audible whisper, and I meant it. They were beautiful, but they frightened me deeply as well. I heard somewhere, dimly in my mind, my mother lecturing us. I saw the fury and indignation that would be in her eyes if she were here, looking at these pages with us. Soraya too, would have something to say, something solemn and important, but I couldn’t remember what.

Gabby said we had to hide it. Like me, she also knew that her mother would not approve. The island, she said. We would take it to the island, where no one would find it.

So we did, and for the next week Gabby and I met at the island as often as we could to sit side by side and look down at the faces. Soon Gabby had the idea of bringing Soraya’s makeup case

to the island so that we could make up our faces like the ones in the magazine. I was uneasy about the idea. Soraya's one rule was that we didn't leave the house with painted faces. The parents, she had said many times, would be furious with her, and they wouldn't be wrong. I also didn't like the idea of betraying Soraya, stealing from her something she'd gladly shared with us countless times before. But Soraya would never even know that I was a part of it. If Gabby wanted to take Soraya's case—I excused myself—that was between them.

But I was there the day she did it. I stood lookout at the window while Gabby threw open every drawer and cupboard in the kitchen, even the stove. It wasn't in the kitchen though. Either she'd moved it, or it had never been there at all. The case was hidden in the seat of the old piano bench that the record player rested on. Gabby was just putting the record player back on the bench, when Soraya appeared at the end of the street.

“She's coming!”

Gabby tucked the silk case in the old, Indian-weave purse she always carried, threw the purse in a corner, and set her shoes on top of it. We looked up and saw that the arm of the record player was hanging off to one side. Gabby leapt up to put it back in place just as Soraya walked in the door.

“Mami!” Gabby shouted much too loudly, and I waited for Soraya, so smart and attuned to the two of us, to look at her suspiciously and then me, but she didn’t. Instead she took her scavenging bag off her shoulder and began to rummage through it. She was excited, and Gabby and I eyed each other uncertainly.

“Put this on!” Soraya cried, pulling a yellowed album from her bag. The corners were fuzzy with age, and small dots of black mold speckled a man’s creamy face. His eyes were dark ponds reflecting dreamy moonlight.

“What is it?” I asked.

“*Pedro Infante*,” Soraya said in a reverent whisper. “I’ve been searching for *years*.”

She handed the record to me, and began pushing the piano bench with the record player on it over to the window. She set a small speaker right up on the windowsill.

“What are you doing, Mami?” Gabby asked.

Soraya looked back at us from the window, and her face was radiant, eyes aglow with joy.

“It’s for *them*. They asked me for it years ago, and it’s taken me all this time to find it.” She motioned me forward. “Put it on, Dulce. *Put it on!*”

I pulled the shining, black disc from its sleeve, and placed it on the turntable. Soraya lifted the arm and carefully set the

needle down into the groove of the record. She pushed the white drapes as far to the sides of the window as they would go, then, as the trumpets swelled, as Pedro Infante brayed sweetly at the sun, she stood at the window looking out, waiting with all the fixed expectation of a dog for its master, waiting for something extraordinary to happen, for her neighbors to fling wide their doors, to leap from crumbling porches, for women to kick their legs, dance with skirts whirling like the brightly colored rings of Saturn, for men to throw their heads back and unleash exultant grittos into the tremblingly blue sky.

Gabby and I stood at the window beside her, waiting with her and watching her wait. The music was so full of movement, yet the houses along the street were still, but I had the sense again, just like the night Soraya smashed the car window, that inside the houses people were creeping quietly, slowly on tiptoe, their ears strained again to the unpredictable sound of Soraya.

One song finished. Another began, a ballad this time. We caught a sudden glint of light, and turned our heads in unison toward the motion in time to see a window across the street being slammed down suddenly. The bang made Soraya jump. Her eyes searched the silent facades of the neighbor's houses. Two doors down from the first, another window slid down with unnecessary force. Like dominoes they fell. With each window, Gabby and I

looked to Soraya's face, which was shifting from confused, to dismayed, to stricken with each crack of wood on wood.

Then Senora Ramos came out onto her porch three doors down from us. She turned her stippled face, scoured long ago by steel wool, toward us, her fish-mouth turned down so far that the corners drooped below her chin. She held up a gnarled, accusing finger in our direction and wagged it scoldingly. Then she retreated into her house. A moment later, the side window of her house slid down noisily as well.

Soraya's face was blank now. A strand of hair that hung down in her face quivered with her slow breath. She turned to the record player and lifted the needle from the record. Music became silence in an instant. She slid the record back into its sleeve, placed it at the back of the stack of records in a milk crate. Then she carefully, silently slid the window down, turned and walked into her bedroom.

Gabby and I looked at each other anxious and confused. Why were they all so mean? We couldn't understand it. Gabby went to her mother's bedroom door, and knocked softly.

"Mami?" She called.

There was no answer. She called again. She cracked the door and called into the dim room, then she came back to me.

"She said she's just taking a nap."

We stood for a moment, embarrassed and uncertain of what to do.

Gabriela put on her shoes, tied the laces absently. We sat on the floor, kicking our feet. I picked at a scab through the split knee of my pants. The house was silent around us. Gabriela held her bag in her lap and fingered a loop of string pulled loose from a seam.

“Should we go?” Gabby asked.

I shrugged. “Should we?”

She shrugged back, and then we shrugged our way out the front door.

We headed for the island. We walked eastward toward the highway, through the Joshua trees and scruffy chaparral, the lizards darting out from under our feet. The October sky was cloudless and glittering blue forever. Soraya had told us once that the sky and the ocean were not very different at all, just fluids of varying densities. Our houses were all beach houses, she said, and if we were birds, we’d know how to swim right up into it. That always felt especially true in October, when the sky was so big and so achingly blue that our whole world below seemed like the ocean floor, a small and flat, forgotten place under the weight of all that blue.

The highway was a flat black ribbon winding through the desert, and whenever we crossed it, I stopped in the middle, stared as far down the road as I could and imagined a car coming.

The parents said that not long ago—twenty years at most—road-cars and trucks and motorcycles would have been whipping up and down this road. You couldn't just walk on it, or stand in the middle of it staring down the edge of the world because you'd get run over, crushed like a bug. That was back when El Mirage was a real town, and California was a place where people lived. Now it was like an empty planet, too close to the sun to be bothered with. But sometimes I had the feeling that my mind was so powerful that I could see or hear a thing just by expecting to—that I could substantiate a thing through sheer will. But the truth was that I was afraid to see a car too—all the frightening things the parents had said—and so I always stopped my mind, just an instant before it transformed the swirling particles of a distant dust devil into a car's exhaust.

"Dulce!" Gabby called, picking her way among the rocks, her dark hair flicking in the shifting wind. *"Venga, loca!"*

We painted Gabby's face. I was too scared, my face too unyielding a canvas with its spidery cracks like broken glass. Besides, Gabby's beauty was my beauty. I took part in it so deeply

that on the rare occasions when I saw my own face reflected back at me in some surface, I was always surprised, almost disbelieving of what I saw.

At first, we worked with what we had. We rouged her cheeks. We corralled her lips. We lined her eyes with the kohl pencil, but the faces were so varied, our supplies so limited, that soon we were bringing things—strange things—from home. We stole cups of flour from our kitchens to give her the pale complexion of the Japanese faces in the magazine. Some days, we dotted her cheeks with freckles made from a paste of the red desert dirt. On others, we stained her lips with the pink juices from the prickly pear. We searched and searched for something red, like the lips of the coffee-colored face that looked most like ours. The face had thick black eyebrows like Gabby's, thick black lashes, and long black hair. It *was* Gabby, but with lips as red as the beating heart of Christ, that bled beneath its crown of thorns on Soraya's flickering prayer candles.

Then, one day, my father killed the goat. Grunon, old, and feisty, and giving up ever less milk from her dried-out dugs. Her blood poured into the tin tub where father let the blood of all the animals, and when he took the carcass, small and folded like a tent of naked muscle, into the kitchen to be butchered, I took half a

broken bottle from the yard, filled it with blood, and ran off to deliver it to the island.

Gabby was there, flipping through the magazine as usual. I handed her the jagged bottle and when she looked inside, her eyes lit up. She turned the pages quickly, looking for the face. She dipped her pinky into the blood and then smeared it on the face's lower lip. A perfect match.

"I have to help with the goat." I said. "I'll be back soon."

"Okay." She said, still gazing at the blood. "Hurry."

I took off running fast for home, but because it was habit, I paused in the middle of the road, looking for just an instant, far along the faded, black ribbon of road, to almost convince myself that a wispy, dark smudge of cloud curling on the horizon was something moving toward us, slow and small and far off, but growing bigger.

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"FC: What about the concerns that some are raising about the emergence of a black market for facial transplants? Suppliers who are sourcing their products from outside the current, highly regulated market?

SR: I have no information that leads me to believe that these are anything but insubstantial rumors. I am skeptical that there are many people foolish enough to undergo back-alley facial

transplants; such a market would be low in demand and high in risk, and I think we can at least count on criminals to limit themselves to profitable endeavors.

FC: Nevertheless, if evidence of such a black market were to surface, would you have to rethink your position on the industry or any of your own business practices?

SR: As I said, I have encountered no such evidence, so any answer I might give would be entirely speculative. When you're busy changing the world, you have little time to spare for fruitless tasks like speculation."

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My mother and I cracked joints, pulled ligaments from bone, muscle from ligaments. I skimmed white fat off the skin and spooned it into the grease jar. I touched a bloody finger to my lip, pretending it was an accident, then searched the kitchen window for my reflection, but it was ghostly in the fading light. I could see blood and nothing else.

"Wipe your lip," my mother said sharply, holding a rag out to me. Then, she paused, hand extended, her eyes glazing suddenly the way they did when she was listening. I listened with her, and for a second, I thought I almost heard it too, a faint buzzing, but the wind kicked up and whistled across the roof, and my mother remembered me.

“Wipe your lip,” she said again. “You look obscene.”

It was an hour later when the work was done, the goat’s blood and grease washed from my hands, and I was on my way back to the island. I was coming up over the hill through the Joshuas, when I saw Gabby standing on the far side of the highway, and I stopped. There was a man on the road. He was straddling an old black motorcycle and he was speaking to her.

Gabby’s skirt and her hair were being tossed in the wind. The sunset was glowing gold against her skin, and her lips—I could see from a hundred feet off—were red and perfect with blood.

I crouched down in the dirt, and watched them. Gabby spoke to the man. The man spoke to her. He reached a hand out and touched her chin, then dropped his hand down to take hers in it. She let him. He spoke, then she spoke, then he spoke again. She looked down at the ground and swished her skirt nervously with her hand. Then she spoke again. In a sudden motion, he threw his boot down, and the motorcycle roared, a buzz like the one my mother and I had heard, amplified a hundred times. He revved the engine, and then he was gone.

As soon as he was out of sight, I ran to her. When she saw me, she made a face like I was pulling her from a dream she

wasn't eager to wake from. Her lips were so red. She looked just like the face from the magazine. She looked exquisitely beautiful.

"Who was that? What was he saying to you?"

She went on dreaming, her hair dancing around us, tickling my elbows.

"Gabby, what did he say to you? Do you think he's dangerous? Do you think we should tell the parents?"

"No, no!" She said, taking my arm in her hands. "He's not dangerous."

"How do you know, Gabby? What did he say to you?"

She blushed, deeply. I'd never seen my friend blush before. She hid her cheeks in her hands. Her pretty nails were creamy and pale, like small shells.

"He said I was beautiful..." She blushed, and blushed, furiously, like an opening salt rose.

"*Everyone* says you're beautiful, Gabby!"

"He said it like it was a *good* thing."

I tossed my head in frustration, "What *else* did he say?"

I felt scared, and Gabby could hear the agitation in my voice. She gave me a long look, as if from a great distance. "Nothing," she said, looking away. "Nothing else."

"Is he coming back?"

She just looked at me.

“He was nice. Gabby, I believe you that he was nice, and I won’t tell anyone, but is he *coming back?*”

She gazed down the road, turned her eyes to me, considering me carefully. She pulled up the hem of her long skirt, wiped the blood from her mouth with the underside.

“No,” she said. “He’s not coming back.”

I lay in bed that night listening. A thousand times, by the power of my mind, I conjured the sound—a faint, lonely buzz coming over the hills—until I was crazy with it. Finally, I got up, wrapped myself in a wool blanket, pulled my shoes on, and slipped out of the house. The walk to Gabriela’s house was cold. The stars were a motionless ice storm overhead. I pulled my blanket tighter against the importuning fingers of the wind.

I went around to the back of Gabby’s house, stepped through the scrubby dead bushes that fringed the house, put my hands to the glass of Gabby’s darkened bedroom window and looked in. The mat she slept on was empty, the blankets tossed aside. She had lied to me. I knew as she was doing it, as the words were coming out of her wiped-clean lips, that she was lying. The man was coming back for her.

I questioned for an instant what I should do. Should I keep her secret or wake up Soraya? Would she ever forgive me for telling on her? I went back around to the front door and started

knocking, quietly at first, then I was pounding. Soraya finally came to the door, rubbing her eyes and disheveled. In her nightgown, I could see she'd grown thinner.

“Dulce?” She was disoriented. “Mi alma, it’s the middle of the night. What are you doing here?”

“Gabby’s gone.”

Soraya turned her head back toward the dark interior of the house in confusion.

“There was a man,” I said. “On the highway today. He talked to her. I think—”

The sudden look of terror in her eyes made me certain at once that my quiet fears from the day had been, not only right, but small in comparison to what they should have been. She ran into the house and rummaged frantically for something, and I stood on the porch, crying suddenly, as the reality of our parent’s fears dawned on me—all the dangers Gabby and I had mistaken for fairytales and walked eagerly into. Soraya came out to the porch with the crowbar in her fist. Her dress was thin, but she hadn’t bothered to grab anything warmer.

“Where is she, Dulce?”

I sputtered uncertainly, tears running down my face. She turned and grabbed my shoulder tightly, her eyes, which had

looked strangely small when she'd opened the door to me, were large and fierce, boring into mine.

"Where did she go?" she shouted.

"The highway. Maybe the highway. That's where they spoke."

Then we were running, and I was struggling to keep up with Soraya even though she was running with the crowbar hugged tightly to her chest.

We crested the hill in the moonlight, and in the floodplain below we saw the highway, like a dark river on a moonless night, and Gabriela beside it, so small in the vast desert, with bags laid at her feet. The man on the motorcycle was there. The moon was large overhead. It looked down tenderly as the man held a gloved hand to Gabriela's creamy cheek.

"Get down and stay here." Soraya ordered me, and I did, then she walked forward softly, like an apparition, the crowbar held behind her back.

Soraya, moving quickly and softly from Joshua tree to Joshua tree. She had almost reached the road, when Gabby saw her and drew in her breath. Soraya ran forward suddenly with the crowbar raised over a shoulder like a baseball bat. Gabby cried out and stepped back in dismay. The man turned. His hand went up to shield himself as he ducked out of the crowbar's trajectory, but

the metal tip cracked against the fingers of his raised hand, and he howled. Gabriela was wailing and screaming, “Mami! Mami, no!” Soraya was pulling the crowbar back to take another swing.

She screamed, “Run, Gabriela! *Run!*”

Then the lights came up, blinding, white headlights flooding forward, blanching the road, the rocks, muting the stars in the sky. Soraya and Gabby both shielded their eyes against the blinding light, and it was maybe only me, from where I lay on the hill, who could see the trucks, two of them, with their blazing headlights bounding around the island, the men standing in the truck beds, and hanging out from the open windows, the guns slung across their shoulders, the machetes hanging from their hips.

The man seized the chance to rip the crowbar from Soraya’s hands. He pulled it back then, and as Gabby screamed and screamed, he folded Soraya’s form in half around the length of the crowbar. She clawed at his feet, at his legs, but he folded her again, and again, as Gabby fell to her knees wailing, and I vomited into my hands.

The trucks bounced forward, tires kicking up ghostly vapors, lights trained on the man, who, because of Soraya’s blow to his hand, couldn’t do to Gabriela what my father had done to

our goat, and instead held her down while another man did it, while her screams shook rocks free on the hillsides.

The poachers went through every house in our town that night. They kicked down unlocked doors, pointed the muzzles of guns at sleeping mothers and fathers, older brothers. They lifted the heads of the slumbering girls by their hair, threw flashlight beams in their faces. The girls, as young as two, as old as twenty, woke with fluttering eyelids and groggy cries to a spinning terror dream, to men that smelled like boot leather, tobacco tar and diesel, and shouted in rage at their defiant ugliness.

By the time it was over and the trucks had peeled off, a strange and small aberration of motion in the icy, black stillness of the desert, a few girls and women with long hair had had it hacked off at the ear—what price would the poachers get for those locks?—but no other girl was defaced. The parents, who had known better, who would have had their own skin flayed from the bone before they would have let their daughters grow up beautiful, who had dutifully burned and cut us, broken our noses, smashed our teeth, were vindicated. It had worked. The men had found little among us to sell. But Gabby—she would bring a good price. Gabby's face had made the poacher's journey to our desolate, forgotten corner of the world worth their while.

When I ran to her, she was crawling on her knees in a pond of blood. Her hair was shorn, her face a glistening, pulpy mass in the half-light of dawn. Her fingers, groping blindly in the dirt, had just found the strap of her mother's sandal. They crawled over the dry, dusty heel. They clung to the ankle. I took my friend in my arms, the bloody stump of her face weaving in a delirium of pain against my chest. I said her name over and over, *Gabriela, Gabriela, I am here*, and I discovered, by the spasmodic heaving of her body, that it was possible still to cry without eyes.

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Soraya, they said, spitting tears of rage, burying her beneath angry shovelfuls of dirt—the stupid, hard-headed fool, dead in a heap at the edge of town with smashed-in skull, and fingernails torn and bloody from trying to tear a man down with her bare hands. We told her. We *told her*. How many times did we tell her? It just goes to show you. It just goes to show. You pay with your life for your lofty ideals; you pay with the lives of your children. They said these things at her grave, then they drove the cross into the ground.

They thought Gabby would die, but she didn't. They took her to the house in the hills, and I visited her often. I brought her some of their things from the house: the brush Soraya had run so lovingly through her hair, books that I read to her, the record

player and records—Pedro Infante smiling dreamily on top— that sat unplayed in their crate in a corner and gathered dust. For years, she didn't speak. I understood her silence perfectly. *We* had killed Soraya, and we—fools without question—had caused her to be buried as a fool. *Was she a fool?* I asked myself. *Was she?* It seemed sometimes that, yes, she was. It seemed, at other times, no.

Everything changed. Locks were put on the doors. Guns were brought in from traffickers on the border. A barbed-wire fence went up. The little girls who were born, from then on, were cut on the day of their birth. They would not spend a single day in the world carrying the dangerous beauty. We are responsible for what happened too, the parents said. We were too permissive. We have learned our lesson. God hates us, or God is turned away, or God is nothing at all. We will not pray any more. We will oil our guns instead.

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“Was she a fool?” I asked Gabby again, just the other day. “Should she have cut you? Should I cut mine?”

The belly in my lap, round as the rising moon, was already, it seemed to me, dangerously beautiful.

My friend, resting in her rocking chair on the porch, turned her smooth, blank face toward me. The muscles—cords of variegated red ribbon, like the variegated red of the earth around

us—twisted, knotted, wove, fanned out delicately against her skull, an elegant tapestry, hugging a vase of curved bone. It was, somehow, beautiful.

“I’ve thought about it a lot, Gabby—of course. I think of almost nothing else.”

I gazed out at the blue, tremulous sky rising up from the beach of earth—the ocean we would swim in if we were birds.

“I don’t think she was a fool, Gabby. I think she just knew that it’s hopeless. If we had a million knives, we could never cut all the beauty out of the world—out of ourselves.”

Gabby rocked. She said nothing for a while, and we sat there feeling the hot wind cool our sweat. Then she spoke and her voice was soft and choked, almost tearful, as though speaking were a violence to the air around us.

“The world,” she said, “is so full of sounds. There is a sound the sun makes when it slips below the horizon. I had no idea before, when I could see, that there was *so much sound*.”

I took her hand in mine.

“*Everything* is an ocean, Dulce. *Everything*. All of it. It’s all *so full*. Mami was right. There’s no getting to the bottom of it, and there’s no getting rid of it.”

“Yes.” I said, softly, tears slipping onto my cheeks. “*Yes*.”

That night, *mi alma*, I lay on my bed. I closed my eyes and listened. I heard my husband breathing next to me. I heard you, my baby, swimming inside me, your small toes tapping against the stretched drum of my belly—I don't need Yanaha to tell me that you are a girl. I heard the wind miles off, carving the desert, animals stepping delicately, teaching their young to hunt by moonlight. I heard cactus drawing water up their roots like straws, dew gathering on the panes of our windows. On the far side of the universe, I heard old stars snuffing out with a dying gasp, sending the gift of the memory of their bright, burning beauty outward forever.

Then, I heard the music—guitar, violins, trumpets, Pedro Infante's dreamy voice, soft and stubbornly hopeful coming over the dark hills to us, and I knew where it was coming from, and if my beautiful friend could have seen us from the window, I promise—you and I— we would have danced for her.



Jacqueline Holland is an overactive dreamer, an incorrigible prevaricator, a terrible teller of jokes, who lives in Chicago (for now), where she highlights her books to excess, infects her children with an inability to discern fantasy from reality, and slowly drives her poor sweet husband insane. Her published stories are buried in back issues of *Hotel Amerika* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and after half a decade of labor, she hopes to publish her first novel soonish.