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MARTA EVANS

Malcriada

You grow up together, say. You are a trio; the adults make a gate in the hot chain-link between the houses. Maybe no one ever closes it and rust builds on the hinges. Maybe the gate breaks off and on that day all the dogs run back and forth, leaping. They chase chickens and give you their long faces, crusted with blood, for a scolding. There are cats: three cats twelve cats seventeen twenty. No one knows how many cats. They leave dust prints on the cabs of trucks. They lie on ventilation grates with their pink mouths open, sides heaving. They are severe and stare down the dogs, stare you down when you kneel on the cooling ground and try to tell them about your day.

*

They have each other and you have only yourself, that's the first difference. He has your patience and your shyness and she has your excitability and your meanness, so you can run with either of them and you do, even though you're not as strong as they are, even though neither of them has your sadness—but say no one in the world has your sadness. They live with just their *tía*, the *pobres*, and you know you're supposed to feel lucky, with two adults flanking you on Sundays, two tall poles to cling to, but maybe you don't feel lucky. They're too tall, for one thing. They close you in.

*

When the wind is right sometimes you stop and feel it all unfurl before you. The date palm that was watered and watered but never made dates, the mulberry picked clean each spring by mourning doves, the place where your mother once sat staining herself with pomegranates, the limbless saguaro scooped out and abandoned by woodpeckers, the citrus bombs rotting under waxy green shade, dry bitter hybrids with pith an inch deep. Bougainvillea up to the roof and marigolds planted in split crenellated tires painted orange. Halves of houses pasted together and propane tanks blooming under windows, poured cement squares on forgotten lots, washer dryers tucked under the metal canopies of carports, three generations of cars left outside to bleach. The coop beneath

the mesquite dropping creamy pods for pecking and the blue swing set that creaks and tips when you throw yourself from it. Peacocks screaming out of sight and dairies sighing thick air for miles. The cotton and the alfalfa and the streets named for the cotton and the alfalfa, long straight streets in love with their own order like the fields. The bridges over dry washes. The freeway you rode, whipped by wind, in the brown truck bed next to sliding shovels and gallon jugs of sun-hot water, which only a tonta would leave home without. The White Tank Mountains scattered beyond, sawing off hunks of sky. You were only walking out to the buzón, mi vida, you big silly. What took you so long? And not even any good mail this time.

*

Maybe you love him and maybe you love her and maybe you love no one and nothing, you terrible animal. When you sleep over, their tía lays a mattress on the playroom tile and in the dark they join you on either side. Maybe you love being their border, his long cold feet on your stomach, her elbow in your ear, both of them heaped over you by morning, all ribs and chins and breath and eyelashes.

You fit between them in age, him first and her last, and in height for a few more years until she overtakes you. You pose for pictures in this order, leaning on the fence at the magic hour, and as your father winds the film he says to their tía, Bet you didn't know you were signing up for three. She laughs with her mouth all the way open, and he winds the wheel too long in looking at her. You know she only laughs that way with men because you've tried to get some of it yourself, bringing her the funnies. Everyone says she's a beauty, she keeps them coming. There's the Frito-Lay man and the Schwan's man and the propane man. There are other men you don't know but have seen at mass, holding their hats while they dip their fingers in the water. Say two men visit on the same day and she sends them out to drink in the driveway in plastic chairs, where they unwrap tamales on their laps in silence. A man from up north brings her a red telescope, for the children, as if that would do it. No one knows what she wants, but no one thinks it's a telescope. The three of you take it out between the houses and spin its bulging eye, spying on one another's faces. Mmm, very good, very good, you say in your doctor voice as you examine his pores. You're going to want to get that looked at, she says, staring into your nostrils.

*

Their tía gets her nails done and fans her fingers for hours, touching things with just the meat under her knuckles. Once, when you're the only one near, she needs help in the bathroom. Come here, mija. You crack the door, and she waves you in—she doesn't like it when you hang back. Your feet sink into the bath mat as you unroll a length of paper and tear it for her, folding it along the seams. Good girl, she says, pinching it delicately, leaning her weight to the left and lifting off the seat so she can wipe herself with fingers splayed. Her four gold bracelets sound when she moves. There are ripples of shining scars on her thighs. Later, your mother catches you with a bottle of polish like poured candy, finds you painting over each of your nails and letting it drip down your fingers for good measure. Cabrona, she groans as she brings out the cotton balls, and you smell like acetone for days.

*

They are not beauties. Say their mother was the ugly sister—the pobre viejita. Se murió? ask cousins visiting from Rainbow Valley or Surprise, and you know the right face to make, the way to nod and then shake your head while sighing. He is flat-footed and gives off sour air. Her hair is frayed and so greasy that when you grab the roots the press of your hand stays behind. They have the same weak chins and their white tees go yellow with sweat at the necks.

Say you are no beauty yourself, tan fea la niña. Your toenails grow too fast. You lose a half-dollar of hair in the same place each summer, at the base of your skull near the knots of bone. One day after eating a bowlful of plums your skin itches and heats, raising red marks at the touch of elastic or zippers. You pull your nails across your chest and write your own name in welts that last an evening. You must wear loose clothes and take antihistamines. When you don't take them, you let her draw a ringed planet on the inside of your wrist. You let him draw a set of eyes between your shoulder blades. Maybe they fight over you, over the tense back of your calf and the fat above your hips, and you fall asleep between them feeling your pulse in your swollen skin.

In the mornings the drawings have soaked in and you eat breakfast together: three glasses of milk, three grilled ham-and-cheese sandwiches laid out on the vinyl tablecloth, heavy food to push something back inside you.

*

If your family visits for a weekend you are not allowed to go next door. Your mother will say, But your primos came all this way to see you! Your family brings ice and guitars and bags of crumbling cinnamon cookies, already shouting and pushing up their sleeves as they walk in the door, bending for kisses. Your nana and her sisters are five old ladies laughing. During a talk-show commercial break the youngest of the nanas refuses to bring her husband a chocolate pudding pop. Your sugar, she yells with her head in the freezer. Chinga tu madre, he says from his armchair, it's only one. She calls back, Chinga la tuya, está más cerquita, which is true because her mother is dead, while his is ninety-eight and just over in Maricopa. She walks in and stands behind him, wiping her hands on his bald head while he says out the side of his mouth, Woman, don't curse so goddamn much. The nanas laugh. There are children everywhere on the floor. They are your cousins or the babies of your father's cousins, but you are your father's first and only, the oldest grandchild, preciada and spoiled and strange. When your tías ask about school they cut you off to tell you to stand up straight. They look at you like you keep secrets. You hate the white cuffs of your socks and the way you stand with toes pointing in. You hate every place you are hard or soft.

Go on, mi vida, it's okay, whispers your mother, leaning forward with her hands clasped. No seas tímida. Maybe you wish you didn't know about them, those other babies who should have been, all the better versions of you who were named and made, or almost. This big writhing family and all down to you, the single spot of you alone.

*

They have each other and you have only yourself, that is the difference. Their tía plans a weekend of fishing in Payson with a new man who knots the laces of his work boots three times. You help them pack. You sit on his bed handing him the clothes their tía laid out, a Suns sweatshirt and hiking shoes you've never seen him wear, while he tells you how stupid it is, how the fish don't even live in the lake. They have to drive them there in trucks! his sister yells from her room across the hall. You go and help her stuff a pillow into a nylon bag. Their tía comes in and touches your shoulder, then swats you softly right above your tailbone. Vayanse, mija, we have to get up early.

That night you dream again and again of dawn until it comes, and when you wake you know they're gone, but still you run outside to say good-bye. Your mother stands waiting for you at the screen door, a dishtowel in her hands. Qué pasó? she asks, holding your head to her

chest. The dishtowel is damp on your neck as she leads you back inside. Qué pasó, qué pasó.

Your father strides by shirtless, asking for a little quiet. It's a Saturday, qué la fregada, he says, microwaving old coffee.

The next evening, when you hear the truck pull in, you walk over and see him crouching on the open tailgate with one arm deep in a blue cooler, laughing beneath a soft brown hat that ties under his chin. They're slimy! he says to the man. She stands beside the man, who steadies her as she reaches up to take a bag of ice from her brother. She puts the ice down and looks over her shoulder at you. He points. This is our friend, he tells the man, the hat shifting down to touch the tip of his nose.

I hope you like fish, friend, says the man, watering the ground as he holds out a long one with whiskers, curving heavy between his hands, pink from neck to tail. I skinned it, she says, tightening her ponytail and nodding in the fish's direction. The cats have gathered near the truck's back tires. The little ones sniff the wet dirt with their tails up. You say, My mom made chicken, and walk back home.

*

He grows taller and moody and begins to make treasure maps just for you, slipping them in your mailbox. Maybe there are pits of fire and waters troubled by sea snakes, or thin suspension bridges with uneven slats, or caves dripping cold as you crawl through their shrinking tunnels. It is all there on paper with one lacy edge, rolled up and sealed with Scotch tape and his initials. He sees you orienteering under their basketball hoop and comes out to help. He carries you across the stretch of deadly poppies. You tug him away from a cliff's crumbling edge but lose your balance and fall backward onto the blacktop. Later, inspired, he falls on purpose from the lowest branch of the olive tree and fakes a fracture. You take a sleeping bag from your parents' closet and make camp, feeding him eighty-nine-cent bags of Cheetos left by the Frito-Lay man. You tend to him, setting his arm in a sling made from your windbreaker. He keeps it tied up all night. You laugh and reach out to hush each other when his sister asks why.

The treasures, when you find them, are things from your home you never noticed were missing: a pastel porcelain angel from the nativity, a wooden grape come unglued from the cluster on the sill, a green bottle of salty Parmesan you once fed to his herd of shy pillbugs. You check the mail without being asked.

*

You sneak out with her sometimes at sunset. You go to the corner of your lot, where you are out of your mother's sight, your mother who is always at the sink touching a sponge to a bowl of soap and watching out the window for something to happen. You make little fires with candle lighters and a stack of *Marie Claires* or *Reader's Digests*. You like the way a flame goes nearly clear at the center. You both move closer to it, you stand as close as you can. You are not cold but you pretend to be, stamping and clapping, thrilling with shivers that start made-up but take you over truly. You throw sticks into the fire, standing side by side. You know the curve of her spine and the soft bubbling of her stomach working, the way she wants to make a mess of things, the way she hates to please. You worry she knows you too. You keep yourselves to quiet rooms away from windows, on the floor under your bed, touching without looking, and maybe you like the scratch of the carpet under your back, the way she erases you. You think about it while you watch the threads of smoke curl up darker than you expected. One of the dogs, a thin brown dog with gray eyebrows and a wiry beard, watches the fire too.

*

Maybe he suggests it or maybe you do, but one day after school you walk to the end of your road together, drinking Pepsis, and keep going. You throw the Pepsi cans over a barbed-wire fence at a doghouse, but the dog isn't home. You follow the road toward the point where heat lifts off in sheets, talking about walking into town. You stop to drink from someone's garden hose, and he lets you wipe your lips on his sleeve. His lips are swollen, and you stare at each other. He blinks first. You keep walking, all the way through dinnertime. When we get there, we'll eat where they put napkins in your lap, he says. Italian food, you say. You want meatballs in sauce and buttered garlic bread. The sun is going down on the farthest fields, the bursts of cotton blurred by light, the soft world forgiving you. He is tired. He says so. He tugs at your hem.

You lie together on a strip of crisped grass beside a brown two-story house with no lights in the windows and no cars in the driveway. On the wall beside you there is a tin crescent moon hanging above two tin geckos. Someone has hammered holes into the moon so that it smiles. He points to one gecko and says his own name, then points to the other gecko and says yours. You kiss each other and compare the length of

your arms. You roll over and try to hold him down, pressing on his collarbones, but he laughs and pushes you away. You try again and feel him slipping, dismissing you. He flips you over and locks his elbows until you feel all his strength trembling above you, and you want to put your teeth on him, to send him home with marks for everyone to see.

When the search party arrives, someone lifts you off him by the back of your shirt. Your father holds you close but does not stop their tía when she slaps you on the high part of your cheek, her French tips grazing your ear. Sucia. They walk you toward the truck. They pull his hand from yours, or maybe he does. In the cab of the truck, you see his sister's shape outlined in light from another house, but you can't tell if she is looking at you.

*

At mass, they sit three pews in front of you, but you watch them through the spaces between other families, kneeling when you kneel, answering when you answer: And also with you. They cross themselves and touch their lips afterward, which your family does not do. Through my own fault, you all say, and you watch their tía crush her fist to her heart. When it's time, your parents lead you through the crowd and squeeze into their pew to wish them peace, your mother hugging each of them in turn, your father patting their shoulders and shaking their tía's hand firmly. Then the three of you stand against the rack of missals and say it, very low, keeping still. Their tía stares down at you and rubs the sign of the cross onto your forehead with the side of her thumb. Peace be with you, mija, she says, frowning.

After the final blessing, the adults go down to the church basement to eat sweet rolls and talk about you while you sit together on the steps outside. He shades his eyes with his hand, squinting anyway. She twists the plastic pearl stud in one ear and then the other, for balance. You slouch between them, your hands flat against the smooth concrete, the skin of your knees shining in the sun. It's early but hot, and you smell parishioners sweating as they file past. You wait together as the parking lot empties, watching each car pause at the church sign before making a slow left onto the street. Maybe you already know what will happen to you, every single thing, starting with the old deacon, who saw you all baptized and will see you all confirmed, walking toward you with sweet rolls in the pockets of his robes, nodding and chewing, saying in his bad accent, Move along, mis niños, move along.