“La Bruja del Barrio Loco”: A Beginning[[1]](#endnote-1)

By Dr. Maria J. Estrada

 Elisa cursed under her breath; she [[2]](#endnote-2)touched her lower lip. It was bleeding a steady stream of heat. She checked her teeth with her tongue and found none were loose. She held back her tears, and let herself be imbued by pure rage. Elisa visualized every detail of how she would tear that bitch apart, starting with her hair and splitting her cunt with the buck knife she stashed in the tire swing[[3]](#endnote-3). That is if the police hadn’t found it.

 “I’m going to kill that fucking *bruja* with my bare hands!” she said wincing as her lower lip opened more.

 “Still haven’t had enough, puta?” said the husky voice through the slot of her cell door, “There is no bruja! You killed your husband and as soon as they find your son’s body, it’s an injection for you, you murdering bitch. I hope you end up in hell.”

 “Fuck you! We weren’t married, and I. Did. Not. Kill. Him,” spat Elisa, “You damn lesbian, panocha licker!” Her string of filth was met with a laugh and a, “See you in three days, pendeja. I hope you take some time to repent.”

The slam of the metal flap sent Elisa in a tirade of fuck you’s and shove your God expletives. By the time she got to having the guard shove God into her ears, Elisa was exhausted.

She lay on the cool floor, not caring about the germs or fecal matter she was sure was there.

She thought about her little son Alexander, her perfect little son, with grey eyes and blond hair. He was her exact opposite. She was slim with long black hair and obsidian eyes. She called herself a pensive telenovela stereotype and even had unnaturally pink cheeks. Elisa was seria, serious, always analyzing the world. Her son was chubby with white, white skin, and he laughed all the time. The last time she had seen him, he had run up to her saying, “I poopied Mommy! Yawant it?”

Instead of cheering, she had yelled at him because he had smeared his shit from the bathroom all the way to the kitchen where she was in the middle of making a complex beef roast for her boyfriend Greg and his co-workers. Stressed out at the impression Greg and she were trying to make, she had put her whole efforts into a new recipe and had been watching YouTube videos and reading books by Julia Child and others. She had just finished searing it and was going to put it in the oven and start making chiles rellenos, which was a time-consuming dish, when he ran in trailing the disgusting diaper behind him. She wished she could take her anger back because she had yelled at him and made him cry.

That was the last image she remembered of him, his confused, hurt face, then screaming cries. Of course, she regretted her visceral reaction, but never had a chance to soothe him and apologize. Within seconds after her shouting, the room had grown cold and, then, pitch dark with the low hum of bees. She reached for him out of protective instinct, but all she touched were the diaper and cold mess.

When the sun streamed through the kitchen windows again, he was gone. She had looked for him in the apartment still holding onto the diaper in her left hand, but all the doors were locked. For a moment, she had also considered if she had gone crazy, and even inspected the roast. She did so methodically. When she found the empty roast package on the counter, which she had left there, so she wouldn’t forget the weight of the roast, she looked elsewhere. She even searched in the vents. There was no sign of him anywhere. But so many crazy things had happened in the last few weeks since she encountered the maldita bruja, that this horror didn’t completely surprise her.

Still, as she agonized in her cell, she hoped that la bruja had cleaned him gently. That she was singing him old songs from Mexico to keep him from crying and treating him with love. After all, that vile whore did have a soft side to her. On Sundays, Elisa had seen the old woman giving homeless people leftovers, and food to the strays on the block. Once, the old bitch had taken a nestling and put it back in its nest with the utmost delicate touch.

 Then, she would envision the worst. Her son was 23 months old, advanced for his age. And unbaptized.

The weeks following his disappearance, she had researched everything about brujas. After all she was a graduate student and had immersed herself in Medieval and American colonial history at St. Mary’s University in Chicago. She was the best student in her program because she was so O.C.D. about her research. She had read every book in library and inter-library loan and even convinced Dr. Olsen to let her into the archives. One thing was clear, they coveted the fat of unbaptized children, so they could fly. She knew that sounded insane, but that bruja was evil absolute. She wasn’t a harmless lechuza like her grandmother had taught her, like those mythical harmless women, Mexicans told tales about, women that turned into large owls and played mischief on passing cars. After she read that in book after book and even some wacko blogs, she cursed herself over and over for not listening to her mom. “Baptize my grandson, so he can be in the grace of God,” her mother had begged.

But, Elisa wanted to get married to her boyfriend first. It was his fault, too, not marrying her when he should have and for not taking her seriously about la bruja. Now, he was gone too.

She laughed and laughed—He wasn’t baptized either.

Neither one of them was really religious. In fact, she had only gone to a Catholic school because the university was newly founded and accredited; it was developing a new graduate program that she could shape, and the study of women had been her passion.

Images of blood stopped her. Blood everywhere. On the cliché white IKEA sofa. On her small plasma T.V. There was a disgusting pattern on Alex’s books in a crazy swirly design as if she had been mocking her. And Greg’s heart in the middle of the living room wall, dead center. It was held by nothing, and even, now the forensics team couldn’t decipher what kept it there. Someone thought it was super glue, but it wasn’t stuck to the wall. The media started calling her the Cold Heart Killer. Even the guards and prisoners of the precinct wanted to call her that, and she always corrected the morons in her mind, “Cold *Hearted* Killer. Stupid.”

As she detailed more of that awfulness in her mind, she started breathing rapidly, and her head was spinning, even though she was lying on the floor. She felt like she was falling, falling, until she hit the ground with a thud.

The smell of citrus groves woke her up, “What?” She saw the stars clearly and heard the haunting tune of cicadas. She knew this place. This was where her father had taken her in Orange, Arizona to go to work, when she was around eight. It was their grove where they would have late night meals when he worked the second shift patrolling the orchard. She had lived there with her parents, until the orchard was sold, and they all transplanted to Chicago. She was ten at the time.

“Oh shit!” she cried truly afraid, “I’ve lost my fucking marbles!” La bruja had stolen her son and killed Gregory, and now she was bat shit crazy.

Then she heard *her*, “¿Ya vez? Ahora si me quieres pedir perdón. Es. Tu. Pi. Da?” La bruja laughed and then howled like a tortured coyote.

“Fuck you!” she cried, “Give me my son back.” La bruja was wearing a gauzy white gown, and her hair was loosed. In the dark, Elisa couldn’t quite see her features. She rushed at her, but the woman vanished, and Elisa hit an orange tree, hard. The thorns scratched her face and arms, and a lonely bee that had no business in the night stung her left elbow.

La bruja growled and filled the night, “Oh pues, no spic Spanish? Pendeja, di ‘I’m sorry’ perra. I. Am. Sohrrry. Estupida, say sohrry.” Her thick accent and crappy pronunciation almost made Elisa laugh, but she lunged again. Once more, Elisa hit her chin, this time on gritty dirt.

Then, in the distance like a fading echo, she heard her Alex, “Mommy? Where are you, Mommy?”

“ALEX!!!!” she screamed with her whole might and paused, “I’M SORRY, BRUJA! BRUJA!!!”

She woke with a start screaming her son’s name. She searched the dark cell, groping at phantasms, but the grove and La Bruja were gone. Something was itching in her scalp, and when she ran her fingers through it, there was a twig with an orange blossom. Her elbow also smarted; she felt it, and it was swollen. She thought maybe she had banged it, but she found a painful thorn embedded in it. She dug it out and held it, then, dropped in the dark. Cursing, she felt for it in the emptiness, but what did it matter? Who would believe her? She stared at the clinical metal bunk; she refused to rest on it. Instead, she sat on the cold dirty toilet and counted the meager amount of toilet paper. There were five squares left.

She looked at the room and then at the security cameras. There was no way to line up the toilet seat, so she swallowed her pride and germ phobia and just sat.

Elisa thought back to that day Alex vanished. After looking for him everywhere and hyper-analyzing the roast, she had searched the entire neighborhood, running like a loca. Even neighbors who knew her had stayed away. There was no reason to search her block because in the city where she lived, the front and back gates were always locked. She looked in ridiculous places like inside the tire swing he loved so much, and even the tree where it hung, even though he was too short to climb up. There was no way someone had carried him over the gates so fast. The cameras.

Gregory had installed cameras in the front and back porch a few months back because someone had smashed her car window, probably La Bruja, for all she knew. She ran back almost tripping on an elderly King Charles spaniel and rushed back to the house to check the cameras. She viewed the footage three times: Nothing unusual was there. No one had come in or out.

She called the police calmly, and said her boy had been kidnapped. When she gave her report, the officer was suspicious at her demeanor. By that point, she had gotten rid of the diaper and cleaned up the mess.

“Did you see the woman in your house?” he asked for the third time.

“No, the doors were locked, but it was *her.* Look, I can show you the camera footage.” She looked to his partner for support, but she seemed to be more interested in her i-Phone.

Right then, his partner, a young girl with near white blonde hair had nudged him. Elisa that was sure that was their signal for, “This one is crazy. Let’s move on.”

They left, and she did the only thing she could think of. She went looking for the Bruja at that filthy shop of hers.

Like other shops in the neighborhood, the window boasted of tarot readings and limpias to cleanse people of their ills. But this shop owner was no benevolent healer. Elisa had crossed her over something so minor and petty. She looked in the window. The room was completely empty, except for some trash on the floor and a ragged poster of La Virgen on the far wall.

Six weeks before, Elisa had gone to that very shop looking for a love charm or something, a prayer to get Greg to ask her to marry him, once and for all. Her best friend Cindy had encouraged her to go in. Cindy was into this stuff and had three tarot decks and so many candles she defied Elisa’s abuelita’s devotions.

“It’s a new shop,” she had urged with her thick South Side accent, “Come on! We always do what you want. It’s *my* turn.” She had pouted her cutest pout.

Elisa had walked in with an attitude, but the old woman had been convincing.

“Eres de Amado Corazon,” the old woman had said upon her entry.

In fact, they were both, she and that crazy bruja, from Amado Corazon, Durango, a small town boasting a population of 513. The woman had guessed that is where she was from, and indeed, Elisa had emigrated from that sleepy town with her parents when she was a baby.

That drew her in. The shop had typical saints on one wall, some larger than Alexander, and unidentifiable herbs on the other. There was even some rare copal, a cleansing thing, Cindy had been talking about for ages. Cindy had squealed and squeezed her arm, “Look, copal!” Elisa had sat down against her better judgment. For a few minutes, the old woman said nothing. She had tight braids like Elisa’s abuelita, but she was wearing a black Calvin Klein dress. Elisa was sure of it because she had seen it in a woman’s magazine and had admired it. The old woman’s earrings were silver with embedded emeralds. She had dark, pecan colored skin, like so many indigenous women selling their wares on the border. Yet, her eyes were not soft or kind. They reminded Elisa of a snake’s eyes.

Elisa had explained what she wanted in English, but the old woman said she needed to ask in Spanish.

“Oh fuck this,” she had told Cindy who knew more Spanish than her.

Cindy had explained with her grating English accent, “Quiero una oración para el amor. Una vela para que su novio le proponga, este, como se dice, get engaged, matri-, matr-i-monyyooo. No, no, no comprometido. Si. Oración para comprometido.”

The old woman held up her hand, “O.K., O.K. I can inglish.”

Elisa had giggled at the woman’s accent, which drew a glare, “Yeah Cindy, don’t strain yourself. Look, I understand Spanish just fine. *Entiendo*.” The old woman held up her other arm for Elisa to shut up.

“Este Gregorio,” she had said clucking her tongue.

“What?” she said, “I didn’t—How do you know his name?” She had looked back to Cindy wondering if she was playing a trick on her, but Cindy looked equally surprised.

“Pues, looky, aqui esta bien claro,” she continued, pointing to grooves in her hand and running her dark pinky up Elisa’s ring finger.

“Your Gregorio es una basura, trash. Trash,” she had said decidedly, “No bueno. He es trash.” Elisa remembered now that the old woman had given Cindy a nasty look that made her turn away and blush.

“Let’s go,” said Cindy changing her whole demeanor, “This woman’s a total fake.” She had grabbed Elisa by the arm and nearly dragged her out.

“Oyes, me debes $20 dólares!” the old woman had demanded on their way out.

But Elisa had grown furious at her judgment. Still, she drew a five and threw it on the floor, “That’s all you’re getting from me, you old hag.”

They stormed out, and she had said looking back before slamming the door, “Learn to speak English! Ingles! You’re in America now!”

The old woman’s face had completely darkened; it was filled with a grin that was too large for her face. She held something between her fingers on the left hand, and the five dollars Elisa had flung on her right. Elisa couldn’t see what it was, but the old woman held it victoriously, waving it about, and Elisa started to get an itch on her scalp. The five, she crushed and threw on the ground. Elisa thought it was trick of the eyes, but the bill never hit the floor.

Cindy and Elisa laughed at the incident and went to get $30 manicures, Cindy’s treat.

That very night, the nightmares started.

In her nightmare, Elisa had come home tired, from a seminar. Her mother had been complaining about watching Alexander for so many hours. When she walked in, the room, the whole house was painted red. There were lighter red petals strewn all over the floor with white candles trailing to the bedroom.

She had grown instantly angry. Was Greg serious? There was no way they were having sex with Alex in the house.

Out of the room she heard deep moaning and Greg’s signature and uncreative, “I’m coming,” which always made her want to laugh.

When she walked in Cindy was straddling him like a Texas whore. They were climaxing in unison and that slut’s back arched unnaturally. Her head reached his ankles, but Greg was oblivious to her origami talents. Cindy looked straight at her and Alex, and her face froze in an odd contortion and just stared at Elisa. He kept on moaning and saying, “It was never this good with El.”

“STOP!” Elisa had screamed. When she woke up, she had involuntarily slapped Greg.

“What the fuck, El?!”

“Oh my gosh!” she had apologized profusely and ended with a short apology blowjob, which they both pretended to enjoy.

She noticed his once athletic body was starting to become soft and was even starting to grow a potbelly, no doubt from his new desk job at the factory. He had graduated a few years ahead of her as an accountant, but the market was so bad he settled for a bookkeeping job. Still, he wouldn’t ask her to marry him.

That morning, she used too much teeth.

“Hey? Why are you so mad at me?” he had protested, stopping her abruptly.

Just then she had started choking on a hair and smiled, shaking her head, “I’m not mad,” but he was headed for the shower. Her head was still itchy, and she was glad to get up at 5a.m. She rinsed her hair off in the sink, to her horror, more strands were falling out, but she figured it was a hormone shift. Still, the hair loss was weird because they only seemed to be falling from some places, five to be exact, and they were leaving definite circles.

She made a mental note to go to the free university clinic, dried it, and started to make him a fabulous lunch. Elisa could not speak Spanish well, but she had learned every cooking trick from trailing after her grandmother’s long skirt. By six, she could make better tortillas than her mother. By eight, her aunts were asking her to help them make mole. She was somewhat a culinary prodigy, and would only need to see or hear a recipe one time to master it, and still she pursued a degree in higher education because she refused to be a stereotypical Mexican woman.

Using leftovers from a previous meal that day she made him two chiles rellenos burritos because Greg didn’t like corn tortillas and Mexican rice without vegetables because he was pickier than her Alex. Just for fun she had thrown in some chocolate covered strawberries into a Tupperware container from a class potluck. She wrote him a note and ended it with, “I love you.” That was the last good memory she had of him, where she had shown him love.

The lights began to flicker in the cold prison, and she wiped herself trying to only use two squares. Some pee lingered on her right hand, and she cursed. “Where am I supposed to wash my hands?” She thought back to the nightmare. Could he have been screwing Cindy? She wracked her brain, but thought it highly unlikely. He worked long hours, and even though they never had sex anymore, he always seemed to want her. On Friday nights though, Greg would come early, 5p.m. and he would watch Alex, so she could study in the library until 9p.m.

Elisa shook her head and more strands of hair fell out. She sighed again in resignation and thought back to the Cindy-Greg scenario. Alex, was unfortunately, the best cock blocker in the world. There was no way. Still, there was that one time a few months back when her mother had complained that Greg had picked up Alex two hours late. Greg had apologized saying he had to have the books ready for a Monday audit. He had explained how he had worked extra hard to generate reports and finish them meticulously so fast. In fact, he had gone into a great deal of detail. Of course, she had believed him, but the nightmares had been unsettling.

In them, sometimes Cindy would be screwing him, and with each repeat nightmare, they got more realistic. With each rendition, the walls grew less red and more like her home. In one of the last nightmares, before Alex was taken, Greg and Cindy had been in her house having a glass of wine. They had met somehow at the Costco gas station. Pure coincidence, and she had been distraught. Cindy was often distraught.

She had come over to talk, no doubt to bare her soul over some heartbreak. On the third night of having the nightmare, they were naked in her bed, and Greg had pounded one out. Cindy hadn’t enjoyed it, and what is more, they had both been instantly guilty. On the fourth night, the same thing had happened, except that Cindy changed the sheets to Elisa’s favorite pink satin sheets.

Elisa sat up with a start, “The fucking pink satin sheets,” she said to no one. Then, she remembered that same night, in real life, she had come home, and the sheets had been changed. Greg’s excuse had been that Alex had an accident. All week, he had been strange, more reclusive and at the same time extra affectionate, which had confused her. This behavior he had explained away with work stress.

*Work is getting harder El-. They’re bringing in new software, and I, I, may be out of a job*, he had said with real worry.

*Awe*, she had empathized hugging him and stroking his back, *I’ll be your sugar momma.* She remembered she had kissed him and tried herding him into the bedroom because Alex was taking a nap in one of his signature long rug naps in the living room, which could last an hour, but he had refused with some lame excuse.

“That motherfucker!” she cried to no one. The room was colder. There were no sheets or way of getting warm, and to her dismay, more of her hair fell out. She felt with her finger at the five small circles. In truth, it wasn’t a large amount of hair, and she could easily hide the loss, but it aggravated her analytical mind. She had bigger problems to worry about.

Next time she could make a phone call, [[4]](#endnote-4)she was going to call Cindy and get the truth. She tried to focus all of her anger on Greg. Over the past weeks, he had been too busy with work and hadn’t believed that old bitch was stalking her. Elisa would see her at the super market, the laundromat. One time, Elisa saw the old wench at church saying a Rosary, which Elisa was sure she wasn’t really praying. On another eerie night, she had been in the school library reading *Macbeth*, two tables from where she sat*.* She had looked up and smiled at her warmly, then disappeared.

She remembered something else, “Aye, como lloro la Cindy.” Her mother had told her Cindy had cried so much at Greg’s funeral, like *she* had been the wife. Some people actually went up to give her condolences.

A sharp cramp made her gasp, “Vile whore-bag! What now?” She folded over remembering the cramps La Bruja had given her a few weeks back. At least she was sure it had been La Bruja. They had lasted so long Greg had taken her to the E.R., but the doctors found nothing wrong with her. She also asked about her hair, and the doctor said it was probably due to stress, something she had laughed at so much, for a moment, the doctor probably considered giving her a psych evaluation.

She felt a steady stream between her legs. She called toward the guard and tried appealing to the cameras, but no one came to help her.

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” she asked no one. Elisa got up slowly and sat on the toilet. The stain on her clothes wasn’t too bad, but it still sickened her. That precinct had them wear grey clothes instead of the stereotypical orange, but she hadn’t gone before the judge to be sentenced. She stared at the three squares of toilet paper and thought about all the toilet paper she had wasted in the past. Greg had actually admonished her because their budget was always tight, and she had reminded him of the vinyl records in the basement that lined up two walls.

The toilet seat was getting increasingly uncomfortable. She would have to make a choice, so in the end, she wadded the net underwear that were like hospital underwear into a make-shit maxi pad and went to lie down on the cold metal bunker. There was no way she was going to get any sleep.

The previous week she had been complaining when she was in the first holding cell with so many broken women. The smell had been too much for her, and she didn’t feel like talking to anyone. Some of them recognized her from the news and had called her a baby killer. No one had done anything to her, and she was surprised that some of them completely avoided her. One woman in particular who was still wearing a lot of necklaces had one of El Ojo, The Evil Eye. El Ojo was another myth Elisa had scorned. When someone with a strong gaze coveted the property of another or gave someone a *strong* look, the person being stared at would get sick. If not treated, the person could die. The stranger had held up a charm towards Elisa and had moved away as far as possible, which was not an easy feat, given how crowded the processing cell was.

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The next day, she was practically swimming in blood. To her relief, the morning guard was a different one.

“You doing OK in there?” It was an African American woman with a kind voice. She opened the door.

“I need a maxi pad and more toilet paper,” she said. Elisa knew it was too much to ask for a new uniform.

“Sorry,” said the woman, “Can’t help you there, but here’s some more paper. Get as cleaned up as you can. Your attorney is coming early.”

Her heart leapt in her chest. Maybe her father had tapped into his savings account and hired a good lawyer for her. Perhaps her dissertation advisor had started a collection to liberate her; after all, she was innocent. Surely, he believed in her.

In a few hours, the sweaty corpulent lawyer, Mr. Stevens, was sifting through the evidence. He had graying plastered hair in an absurd comb over. His suit looked old and over mended. She lost absolute confidence in him when he said flat out, “Plea guilty.”

“What?” she had cried! “Do you want to hear what happened?”

“Your DNA was all over your boyfriend’s crime scene,” he said, “Your son is still missing and presumed dead, though he’s not why you’re here.”

“Of course my DNA was all over there. I found him!” Elisa was flabbergasted.

He rattled off other options, all of which were not acceptable to her.

“Fuck that,” she said. “We’re done here,” she slammed the table which brought the guard to the door, “I don’t fucking need you. I hope my Dad didn’t pay a lot for you, incompetent jerk off. At least you can go bring me some maxi pads.”

The guard came in ready to put Elisa in a chokehold or worse.

“We’re OK, Louise,” he told the guard.

“Your family didn’t hire me,” he said turning back to her, “I’m Cindy’s godfather. And I am telling you to plead guilty, so you don’t get executed. All of these judges are going up for reelection and will want to look tough, but if you admit your guilt, they’ll try to look fair. We’re not big on executions in Illinois, but yours is a particularly egregious case.”

“You know what?” she said, “I am not guilty, and if they decide to give me the death penalty, I don’t care. If my son is dead, I want to be with him. Expedite this shit, so I do get the injection or whatever. I’m tired of swimming in shit and blood, and I haven’t even gone to actual prison. Fuck this!”

He analyzed her while taking notes, “What about Gregory Holden?”

“What do you mean?”

He swabbed at his eve-sweating forehead, “You don’t want to be with him?”

“He didn’t believe in God. Besides, that cheating scum bag is probably in hell,” she said not adding that he had probably been sleeping with his lovely goddaughter.

“Did you do it?” he asked, “I need to know. Cindy swears up and down you are innocent and that this bruja is real.”

Elisa sighed and explained the whole story to him. The day he died, she had been looking for the old woman. It was a Friday, and she had lied to Greg saying she was going to try to catch up on her studies. That was a total lie; all she wanted to do was find her boy.

“When I came home, the door was locked. I tried not to step in that mess, but his blood was everywhere. I called the cops right away,” she ended.

Mr. Stevens took a few notes and left.

When they went before the judge, she was still bleeding. Cindy had chosen a nice pink suit for her that her lawyer had brought. Unfortunately, she was still bleeding and spilling over the sanitary napkin the bumbling lawyer had brought her. She was sure the red foulness was seeping through the thin pad. She paled and felt her head start to spin. Another strand of hair fell and trailed before her eyes, but she muted a string of curse words.

 “All rise!” said an uncharacteristically short white woman with a loud voice.

The blood running down her leg, ever so slightly, was irritating her beyond belief. She had never bled that much and part of her wondered if she was having a miscarriage. To her surprise, Mr. Stevens was doing a fantastic job of pointing out any lack of evidence.

No murder weapon.

The security footage, which did not show her killing Greg.

“What?” she had asked. The security footage had been a point of contention, but it had emerged somehow. For a fat sweaty man, he knew the law. He was about to get her released and sent home, when the bleeding intensified.

The lights flickered, and she gripped his sweaty meaty palm, although it was a gesture that made him uncomfortable. She was coming for him, to give him some heart attack, right as she was about to go home. The lights went out, and she smelled orange blossoms again.

She whispered, “Alex? Bruja, I’m sorry.”

In the distance, she heard the judge issue a house arrest. The lawyer was right. There was too much circumstantial evidence, and the footage showed someone killing Greg, but it was not her. The man had been large, and although parts of the film were blurry, he was far taller and fatter than she was. In fact, the footage showed a small child that was most likely Alexander Holden.

The lights came back on and just then, she fainted.

When she woke up, both her left leg and right were handcuffed to the bed.

“Is this really necessary,” asked her anguished mother, “Look Mr. Lawyer, she’s waking up!” Elisa looked to the lawyer who looked pastier than before; besides him was a doctor.

“What happened?” Elisa asked and whimpered. The pain in her uterus was intense. She tried to reach for it, but found both of her hands her handcuffed.

“I’m Dr. Cobarrubias,” said the doctor in a thick accent, “We just did an ultrasound, and you have a very large mass. It’s not a pregnancy. We will have to operate right away.”

She signed some papers clumsily and was taken to see the anesthesiologist.

“Aren’t they going to run more tests,” she mumbled, but the pain was getting fiercer. The last thing she remembered was her mother praying over her, and Mr. Stevens assuring her, “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’re going to be fine.”

With that, she wanted to laugh, but instead fainted again.

She woke up, with Dr. Cobarrubias hovering over her, “Elisa, how are you?”

He explained about the strange mass. He asked a few questions about how she was treated in prison and when the bleeding started. Elisa told him about the altercation she had with the guard and how the brute had hit her on the face with a baton, splitting her lip.

“What about any other abuse?” he had asked concerned and looked to the nurse, “Give her another hour. No more pain meds. You want her clear headed.”

She was taken to a room, and when she got there, Cindy was waiting. Elisa glared at her, and Cindy smiled, “Oh my God! I was so worried.”

She noticed the woman to her right taking notes.

“Who’r’u?” Elisa asked groggily.

“I’m Lieutenant Wang. Can you answer a few questions?”

Elisa told her the same story she told the good doctor and ended with a, “They had no fucking maxi-pads in the precinct.”

“Do you know what caused the bleeding?” Lieutenant Wang asked.

Cindy paled a little more. She was already sickly looking, and Elisa noticed she had lost quite a bit of weight. For Cindy who was already a stick, she was near skeletal.

“Uh, I guess I got my period, a really bad one,” she answered.

“OK,” said Wang.

When she left, Cindy waited a few more moments in awkward silence, until they were alone, “It was la pinche bruja.” Cindy spoke in a rush, “Elisa, she put a ball of thorns and bees and orange blossoms in your hoo hoo!”

Elisa wanted to laugh because Cindy’s terminology was ever absurd, “My what, you skank?” Despite her anger towards Cindy and her screwing Greg, which she was almost certain of, she laughed at her ridiculous use of women’s anatomy. This movement made the pain in her uterus worse.

Cindy also giggled, and Elisa stopped.

“Did you sleep with him?”

Cindy gasped and wobbled a little. She held onto the bed railing.

Elisa went to grab her arm, but her non-IV arm was shackled, and couldn’t sit up “Well? Tell me the truth Cindy! It was that night he came home late wasn’t it? When I went to hear that talk on Pablo Neruda?”

Cindy’s mouth puckered, and she turned bright red, as she shook her head no.

Elisa knew that look and that shake of the head. The lips were her tell. They quivered like a child’s lips.

“You fucking whorebag! I’m going to end you!” Elisa tried to get up, but snapped back down. The pain was radiating throughout her whole body.

“Mija!” Yelled her father as he entered with a pathetic cup of coffee, “Te vas ha lastimar.”

“This motherless bitch slept with Greg! How many times?! HOW MANY!!! AND IN MY BED!” Elisa twisted to the right and breathed through the pain.

Her father stared at Cindy who was sobbing wretchedly and confessed, “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it.” Between sobs she tried to explain.

“GET OUT!!!” cried Elisa which made her uterus throb even more, and the bleeding intensify.

“Oh Elisa, please!” she cried, “I didn’t mean it!” She choked violently, “She’s after me, Elisa. She’s after me, too—“

Elisa wanted to shove Cindy’s face into the ground and stomp on her head, “I DON’T CARE! GET OUT, YOU FUCKING SLUT! IT’S YOUR FAULT THEY’RE GONE! YOU TOOK ME TO THAT SHOP! YOU FUCKING WHORE! I FUCKING HATE YOU! I HOPE ALL OF YOUR STUPID HAIR FALLS OFF!”

Shaking her head, still pleading, Cindy left.

“Mija,” begged her father, “Please. She helped you. Her godfather helped you go into house arrest, until the trial before the jury. My money, I have very little. You see?”

“Oh, please! All you care about is money,” she sank back into her pillow and pushed the nurse button, “Pains’ getting worse.”

He said, “You need to calm down.”

“Who is after her,” he asked after she was still.

“La pinche bruja, ‘Apa. I know you all think I’m crazy, but that bitch is the reason Greg is dead, and she has Alex Papa. I know it. I dream about him, and she has him,” she said looking at her dad for a reaction.

He sighed and sank into a chair and ran his hands through his non-existent hair. He paused for a long moment and was lost in his memories. “I believe you,” he said quietly.

“What? What did you say?” she asked bewildered.

“My daughter, you have to understand. Well, you have to understand that bad things happen to good people,” he said.

“What? You are offering me a fucking cliché? Greg is dead! That puta Cindy slept with him on. My. Damned. Bed—“

Her father held up his hand, “I mean, bad things happened to my brother Toño.”

“Here we go,” she said resigned.

“No listen, you don’t know the whole story, but you have to promise not to hate me, my daughter. You are my *only* daughter, and we love you very much.” Just then her mom came in with some broth and 7-Up for her.

“No Oscar!” her mother pleaded, “Don’t tell her.”

He looked at her angrily, “Estas loca?! Que más le va ha hacer? She can’t hurt her any more than she has already. Look at our daughter!”

“Yeah mom, Cindy should be in jail. That bitch.”

“No,” said her father, “I don’t mean Cindy. I mean La Bruja, Ana.”

“What?” she asked.

Her mother looked terrified and crossed herself, “Don’t mention her name.”

“You see,” continued her father, “Your Uncle Toño fell in love with one of them. They said the family was from Europe, from a family of witches. Mija, they were all weird, and strange things happened around them. Cows would die. Babies would get sick. I thought it was superstitious nonsense, but I believe it now. He fell in love with the most beautiful girl with blonde hair and green eyes like Alex, and they went against the old woman’s wishes, Ana’s wishes. They ran off to the capital. But that romance lasted five days. On the fifth day, a horse stomped your uncles’ head in and almost killed his new bride, too. It would have if these soldiers hadn’t shot it. They had to shoot it thirteen times.”

“She did it!” said her mother, “She made the horse go crazy.” Her mother crossed herself again clumsily spilling some of the broth.

“Ten months later,” he said pausing, “A baby girl was born. We couldn’t have kids, so you see.” He opened his hands in a plea seeking forgiveness.

“What?” she asked dreading what he was about to say.

Her mother continued, “We couldn’t have babies, *y pues*. We tried and tried, and she came desperate. She said she wanted a better life for you, away from her.”

“Who? What?” A loud buzzing filled the room, and Elisa’s uterus began to ache again.

 Her mother started screaming, and her father threw himself over Elisa. Suddenly, it stopped.

“Ya vez Viejo!” screamed her mother, “It’s her. She wants her back.” She cried so uncontrollably, and a nurse made them leave.

“No wait,” she cried, “I need to know!” She screamed in sheer agony as her uterus pulsed with what Elisa could only describe as rage.

Just then, the nurse went to get more support. Before she could protest, Elisa was removed from the room to get another ultrasound. She was whisked away into surgery.

When she woke the doctor was there. He checked her vitals and left. She slept for almost two days straight, not even aware of the nurses prodding and poking. On the third day, she was able to sit up, despite the dull pain.

“Well,” Dr. Cobarrubias, said with enthusiasm, “You will most likely have children again. You’re still so young.”

Elisa chuckled dryly, “You know I’m accused of murder, right? My son is missing. . . .”

“No,” said the doctor, “I overheard your lawyer. The footage was on social media. It’s genuine. That is not you killing him. And the little boy, your little boy, is alive. We just need to find the man or man-creature.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Dr. Cobarrubias pulled out an i-Pad, and she watched with fascination as Greg was launched by a force into the living room. Then a man with horns appeared. He was unnaturally tall with long white hair. The horns were protruding from its forehead. It stared right at the security camera with those same black eyes and poked its teeth out in what Elisa thought was a smile.

“Holy fuck,” she said, “It’s her.”

“Who?” he asked, “You know this person? It’s obviously not a woman.”

But she had the same earrings. She was just enlarged, a grotesque She-Goat with a stretched snout. The doctor saved her from watching the horrible parts and refused to budge. But he let her watch the end. There was Alexander. He had used the blood as paint, and he created a party of swirls over his books and grabbed his favorite, *Mommy Night Night*. He was laughing and so was the She-Goat, Ana, or at least her body shook in a grotesque spasm.

“That’s one hell of a mask, but see,” said the doctor pointing out the obvious. La Bruja took him gently in her arms and nibbled on the forehead. Alex kissed her right back, just like he used to kiss his mommy, right on the chin, except he kissed her on the hairs of her chiny chin chin.

Elisa wanted to vomit and cry at the same time, and she did vomit all over the side of the bed. The heat burned her throat, and she looked with horror as an occasional bee stinger emerged in the mess.

“I’m sorry,” he said setting the i-Pad aside, “You rest now.” He fiddled with her IV and called in a nurse and housekeeping to clean up. Before long, she was asleep.

When she woke up, she was in the orchard again. It was a sultry night with moths and random queen ants flying everywhere. Ana was sitting there with him on the dirt. There was a circle of dead animals all around them, and it sickened her to see her son holding what looked like a dead gopher.

“Mommy, lookey what I got!” he cried wanting to run to her, but she held him back with an invisible force, “Please Gamana. Please. I wanna show Mommy.”

Elisa’s heart broke over and over, “I said I was sorry bruja.”

The old woman snorted, “Pues, is a start.” She said. The old woman grinned and horns began to poke on her forehead, and her mouth began to extend itself.

“What more do you want?!” Elisa woke up with a start. She sat up, and she lay down just as fast. She looked at her arms; the familiar cold steel binding was gone. Her legs were also free.

At the foot of her bed was Cindy looking a sick green. Elisa hissed, “What the fuck are you doing here? Again?”

Cindy pleaded, “Elisa, please. I am so sorry, but I can’t take it anymore.” She looked around and eyed the window.

“Oh, poor you,” said Elisa.

“No, no. I deserve what I get for Greg, for sleeping with him, for taking you to that fucking shop, but it’s not about me,” she took off her long shirt and showed Elisa her arms. They were gouged by claw marks. Cindy lifted her shirt and showed the same wounds there.

“It doesn’t want me, though,” she said shaking, “Elisa, please. It’s not about me.”

Elisa was never going to forgive Cindy, but something in her voice softened her. Plus, she really needed to talk to someone, and Elisa only had one good friend, and even though her parents believed her, they had betrayed her. They had *lied* to her. For years.

“I saw it,” Elisa said choking up, “La Bruja showed me the whole thing right up to you changing the sheets. . . .”

Cindy cried again, “Oh, you’re going to be so mad at me. Please, I know. I’m a worthless fucker.” She started crying again, and blurted out, “I’m pregnant.”

Elisa stared at her and wouldn’t quite register what was said.

Cindy went on, “I found out pretty early on, and he wanted me to get an abortion, which I was going to. I was like a week, then, but then, she killed him, but El. She marked me, and the baby. I have to convince you to go with her, or you’re never going to see Alex again, and I’m going to lose my baby.”

“The baby you didn’t want?” Elisa spat.

“It’s not the baby. It’s what she’ll *do* to it. I know stuff. You know what they do to babies. She won’t let me abort it. I tried like five times,” said Cindy. Just then a fresh gash appeared on her cheek as if to punish her for uttering the word. Cindy whimpered and started crying again.

For a moment, Elisa wanted to reach out to her.

“I’m not going with her,” said Elisa.

Cindy paused, “Of course not. We’re taking this bitch down and getting your boy back.” She smiled, and Elisa smiled back, like old times. Cindy neared, which made Elisa cringe. She went in for an unwanted hug and handed Elisa a secret paper like she used to hand notes to her in high school. Before she disengaged, she whispered in her ear, “She can hear what you say. She is everywhere, but if you read or write in the dark, she can’t see that so well,” and pecked her on the cheek and left.

Elisa stiffened, but hid the paper under her right buttock.

She waited until it was dark to read the contents. She was not well enough to do so, but she went into the shower slowly, dragging the IV along. Once she almost dropped the paper, and other time a nurse outside the door saw her, but said nothing. It seemed to take forever when she got to the shower. When she tried walking over the lip of the shower, pain made her double over. She thought about her little Alex and made her heavy legs go over the border, one at a time. She went to the far corner, holding her right arm extended to not tip over the IV. Running the water at a low stream, she used her body as a tent and opened the note and read it.

As ever, it was cowgirl plan put together by Crazy Cindy. Her plans often read like Scooby Doo plans, and something would go wrong. It involved the help of good curanderas. The last part of the note, of course, relied heavily on Elisa’s part, Elisa who was recently operated on, twice. Stupid, stupid Cindy.

She tore up the note and considered eating it, but tore it up into small pieces and threw it in the toilet.

She gave herself a warm spit bath, careful not to get her incisions wet. Elisa wanted to wash her hair, but couldn’t maneuver. Still, the hot water was glorious. After being locked up in the precinct cell, she was happy to wash at least some parts of herself. Before she could finish, a barking nurse barged in. She was tall, at least six feet, with intense red hair. She had a permanent furrow on the forehead and a scowl that could curdle milk. Elisa took a step back and pressed against the wall.

“What are you doing without assistance?” she mumbled what Elisa thought were swear words, “You should NOT get the incisions wet!”

“I didn’t,” said Elisa trying to match the nurse’s tone.

Exasperated, the nurse stared at the toilet and shook her head. She grabbed a washcloth and washed all the parts Elisa had missed.

Pushing her luck Elisa asked, “Can you wash my hair?”

The red head scoffed, “I got some dry shampoo, sister. That’s as good as I can do. Let’s go. I have other rounds to make.” The woman grabbed a can of some herbal product from a cabinet and sprayed Elisa’s hair, focusing on the greasy parts.

Despite her harsh demeanor, the nurse was gentle, but strong. Still, Elisa would not want to tango with her in an alley. The nurse checked her incisions and asked about her pain level.

“9,” said Elisa pathetically.

“Well, what do you expect? Huh?” asked the nurse adjusting her IV. The nurse stepped out briefly and came back with more morphine. She injected the solution, glared one last time at Elisa, “Now behave.” She walked away, but not before, tucked in Elisa with another blanket.

Elisa was conflicted. On the one hand, she wanted to sleep and awaken in the grove to see her Alex again, but on the other, she was even more terrified of La Bruja, She-Goat. Something was tugging at the back of her mind about goats and paganism, some obscure reference to blood, but she couldn’t quite remember it. She looked out the window. There was a crescent moon, but in the orchard, there had been a full moon. She pondered on this as her eyes grew more droopy, and she imagined being in a red convertible with Greg by her side. She drove down a field of sunflowers in into a vast horizon, laughing and whooping all the way into nowhere.

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At 8a.m. sharp the next morning Cindy came back with a huge box of chocolates, but Elisa stared at her rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. She wasn’t ready to forgive her.

“Leave them there,” she said pointing to a distant chair, “I’m not hungry.” In fact, Elisa hadn’t been able to stomach the broth her mother insisted on bringing every day. Nothing sat well with her, and the acids in her stomach were screaming.

“You have to eat. You need your strength,” said Cindy paling a little and then running to the bathroom.

The loud retching made Elisa really smile for the first time. She remembered what a terrible time she had with Alex and how many times Cindy had driven her to the hospital due to dehydration when Greg was busy at work. He usually came rushing hours later with different apologies for having to work so late, but Cindy had been her constant. She would have been in the labor room if Greg hadn’t thrown a fit.

Something in Elisa cracked, and she started crying for Greg. She had let the hatred of their cheating mask any sorrow she had over his loss. Even her mother had commented that Elisa hadn’t shed a single tear, and now, it sunk in. She would never see him again.

Cindy came out to offer her support, “Oh El!” They held hands like two sorority girls consoling each other over their broken hearts.

Elisa removed her hand, “So, you remember Stacy and Rita?”

That was their call signal from before. If they ever wanted to ditch school, they talked about Stacy and Rita inviting them to a gathering at a certain day and hour.

“Can you go to their party?” asked Cindy.

“By this weekend, I should be able to walk. I think they are sending me home under house arrest, which makes no sense,” she paused, “Did you see the footage?”

“Yeah,” she said starting to cry again, “Godfather is doing his best to appeal to the judge. I don’t understand this court system. I think it’s an election year or some shit. I started a Go Fund Me account for your legal defense and an online petition to the governor, that conservative asshole; you have over 5,000 donors.” She smiled triumphantly.

Elisa smiled again, “Huh, look at you getting all political and techie. But enough rambling. Focus. I am walking around the floor today, until they have to pick my ass up and put me in a wheel chair. It’s like having a C-section. It hurts like a motherfucker after a while, but it’s really important to see Stacy and Rita.”

“Ladies,” said the charming Dr. Cobarrubias, “You aren’t going anywhere. You need to rest.” He had been standing there for a while, listening to their absurd plans about a party, shaking his head ever so slightly.

He went in and inspected her stitches, “You’re overdoing it. No more getting up without support. You have to get a nurse to help you. Understand? Nurse Rachel told me about your little escapade; she should have made you go to bed right away.” He paused and looked at Cindy, “You see here? She is overstraining her stitches.

Elisa really looked at him for the first time. He was handsome in his own way with brown curly hair and honey colored eyes. He was a little pudgy, but his height helped mask some of it. He was light-skinned like her, and he had a glorious smile. Right now, he was giving her his serious doctor face.

*You’re an unconscionable asshole* *Elisa,* she judged herself, *Greg has only been dead a few weeks.*

She smiled at him weakly, “Sure doc. I get it.”

“Besides,” he said, “You may need to stay here as long as possible.”

“Why?” Cindy and Elisa asked at the same time.

“It looks like they are going to send you back to prison,” he answered.

“What?!” she exclaimed, “I thought they were putting me under house arrest. Fuck!”

“There are too many strange things with this case,” but he didn’t elaborate more because he was paged.

“Fuck it,” Elisa said and beckoned Cindy over. She got close enough, so Elisa could near her ear, “Stacy is going to see me tomorrow night. You get your girls ready. Visiting hours are over at 8p.m.”

Cindy’s lower lip quivered a little, “O.K. Narc up.” Cindy wanted to say more, but Elisa wasn’t going to give her absolution.

The rest of the day, Elisa complained about the pain in her uterus so much, the Nurse Rachel La Roja as Elisa dubbed her, brought her morphine and more pills. Elisa would pretend to take the pills and stash them. There was no point in being in pain during their heist. She had serious doubts the plan was going to work, but if she was terrified of what the She-Goat was doing to her son. That kiss, their affection still made her nauseous, and the way he called her, “Gamana,” was too awful.

Elisa needed her own back-up plan. She thought about all of her research. Witch burnings had infuriated her when she studied them because angry men who were threatened by healers killed so many innocent women. Elisa had argued that it was genocide in her midterm essay and had gotten a low B. Obviously, her professor was a sexist pig. It never once occurred to her that there could be real witches. She thought back to every trial she studied, and all she could think about was water and fire. Had a real witch ever been trapped and burned? La pinche bruja would certainly not be easy to trick or entrap. She fell asleep doing intense memory work and wished she had her laptop and some decent Wi-Fi.

The next morning, two women came to visit her.

Before she could say anything, one of them, put her finger to her mouth. Elisa watched fascinated as the older woman with the longest hair she had ever seen hobbled to the window and placed objects there. White cascades of hair nearly reached her ankle, and there was an abundance of it, like she had never seen before. *That is how I want to age,* Elisa thought to herself. The other woman was mentally handicapped, at least her facial features indicated so.

Her body was stocky and short, but there was an intense sparkle in her eyes. She smiled ever so sweetly and went to Elisa. Without permission, she took off her blanket and started rubbing an ointment over her wounds. Elisa tried to protest, but the girl was persistent and fended her off. She then put a red necklace with a stone around Elisa’s neck. The symbol on it twinged a distant memory, but she wasn’t sure from what book or what slide.

The older woman nodded at her companion.

“My name is Flor,” the mongoloid woman said sweetly. Elisa immediately kicked herself for using a non-PC word, but tried to analyze if she was autistic, “That is Luz, my aunt. Cindy is my friend. Now, I’m your friend.” Flor hugged her awkwardly.

“Oh,” said Elisa getting a horrendous sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. *This was the cavalry.*

 “Mmmm mmmm m m m,” said Flor playfully, “You have the gift.”

 Elisa asked, “What?”

 “But,” said Flor frowning and ending the hug, “You are angry. Angry, angry, angry.” Flor shook her finger in what Elisa assumed was a stern imitation of her mother or aunt.

 Luz chimed in, “You must not let anger defeat you. It’s what *she* wants.” She looked at Flor, “We have ten minutes.”

 Flor said, “She is strong and sees all. But we are good.” She pointed to her chest and to her aunt.

 Elisa smiled. She liked Flor instantly, and her companion Luz was focused. Elisa liked focus.

 “Put this on every hour,” said Luz giving her the jar, “And never take off that charm. There are few like it so have a care, girl.”

 Before leaving, Flor took a few strands of her hair.

 “Ouch!” said Elisa, rubbing the spot on the left side of her temple.

 Flor seemed to go into a trance and for a while her face seemed to grow more intelligent, “You will have to make a choice,” she said in a different voice that sound like a smokers’ voice, masking the sweet tones of her earlier speech, “Do not make them without love.” Flor returned and gave her another awkward hug. She seemed oblivious to the transformation and walked away humming a cheerful tune.

 Elisa looked at Luz for an answer, but Luz left, unphased, with Flor trailing after her.

 She hid the ointment behind her pillow just as Dr. Cobarrubias came in with a stranger. His stiff walk and heavily starched shirt had detective written all over him. The good doctor looked tense.

 “This is Detective Anderson,” said Dr. Cobarrubias.

 She was waiting for him to question her again, but instead he only observed. Dr. Cobarrubias stepped forward, looked at her face intently, and winked.

 She wasn’t sure what to do, but when he pressed on her abdomen she whimpered and added a dramatic, “That hurts, real bad!”

 “I have to draw the curtain,” he told the officer and kept on inspecting her. When he assessed other parts of her, she did cry in earnest pain, and she began to bleed again. He spoke gently, “I’m sorry, sorry. I’m done.”

 Dr. Cobarrubias opened the curtain and said, “Five days and that’s if she doesn’t get an infection. The incision doesn’t look good.” He failed to say that was her fault. As they were leaving, he gave her a smile behind the detective’s back and a thumbs up. That check-up had raised her pain levels once more, and she took a couple of pills from her growing pillow stash. It was 2p.m., and she would wake up by the evening. She rubbed the ointment on her wound one last time, and that helped dull the pain a bit, but the stream of blood flowed more.

When she woke up it was 7p.m., a new nurse was checking her, “Fuck!”

“Hi, “ said Nurse Red, “Looks like we have to get more tests. You’re flowing quite heavily.”

Elisa sat up and saw she was sitting in a mess of blood. She grew suddenly dizzy. As she sat up her ointment rolled from under the pillow and onto the floor.

“O.K.” said Nurse Red “Lie back down.”

“I feel fine,” Elisa tried to lie.

Nurse Red gave her a quizzical look and had her transferred to another bed. The blood streaming down her legs smelled faintly of oranges.

“That fucking bitch,” she muttered.

The orderly asked, “What dear?” Suddenly he stopped, “Oh my.” He pushed her into the ultrasound room.

“What the fuck?” asked a cranky ultrasound tech. Elisa wanted to smile because her auburn hair was in disarray. With her glasses askew, she looked like she just gotten a nooner.

Elisa snorted and then started crying when she took in what was happening, “Oh my God! I am so embarrassed.”

The tech grew queasy and had to step out.

“Amateur,” said the orderly playfully as the tech left the room in a rush. He gave Elisa a new robe, two large pads, and a disposable mesh underwear, “I’m going to get a mop.”

Elisa looked down. She had trailed in so much blood, Elisa wondered where it came from. Surely, it didn’t come from here. She tried taking her robe off, but nearly passed out. A sharp ringing in her ears made her sit awkwardly in a chair, “No, no, no *pendeja!* This is your chance.”

She willed herself to change and saw a sweatshirt on a desk. She peaked out the door, gripping the wall for support. No one was around. As fast as she could, she grabbed the sweatshirt and put it on. She grabbed another robe and tried to make a huge maxi pad. It was ridiculous, she looked ridiculous, but it was now or never.

There were cameras here and there, but before anyone could stop her, she made it to a stairwell. Luckily, she only had to struggle down two flights of stairs, but each step was a herculean effort. By the time she reached the bottom floor, she couldn’t move without gripping the wall.

“Fuck,” she said realizing she had no cell phone and worse, no pain pills, “Mother fuck!”

She stepped into the hallway. A janitor was rushing somewhere, probably to the second floor. In the distance, she saw the front entrance, and she hobbled out. It was dark, probably near 8p.m. Unsure of what time it was, she kept walking when she heard a familiar voice.

“El,” said Cindy, “What are you doing?”

Elisa crumpled into her arms, “Help me.” Cindy have pulled and dragged her to her car. Cindy looked around, but no one was looking for her. They were scot free, but just then, Dr. Cobarrubias came out with a security guard.

“Hey! Stop!”

“That pudgy fucker can run,” said Cindy pushing Elisa’s legs into the car.

Elisa screamed, “Ouch, you whorebag!!!”

Cindy ran around to the driver sea, sat, and slammed the door. She fumbled for her keys. The doctor and the guard were just a yard away, and she dropped them onto the plastic mat.

Elisa locked the doors. The doctor tapped on the glass with a notepad, “You need medical attention!”

After so much, Elisa started laughing; she lowered the window a crack still laughing, “I have to find my son. Nothing else matters.” She paused and added, “You’re really cute!”

He looked at her and stopped banging the glass. The guard stood there impotently with a tazer in his right hand.

Dr. Cobarruibas wrote something on a piece of paper and slipped it through the crack, as Cindy finally got the car started and raced away.

 “What is it?” asked Cindy.

 “His number,” she answered, laughing again, “Oh that fucking hurts!”

 Cindy gave her an appreciative look, “You slut.”

Elisa laughed harder, but the sensation of being stabbed halted her.

Cindy blanched, “Jesus Cindy,” and pointed to the growing pool of blood.

“I’m not doing so good Cindy,” she whispered, “Let’s go see your girls. Now.”

The girls were at a tiangis in Little Village, a replica of a Mexican market. Elisa hobbled bringing attention to herself. A little girl pointed to the large streak of blood.

“I can’t take much more,” she told Cindy. A security guard took one look at them.

“She having a miscarriage?” he asked.

Elisa noticed the eye necklace to ward off the Evil Eye and so did Cindy.

“We’re seeing Flor. No one’s been able to fix her,” said Cindy, nodding towards Elisa.

He understood and nodded his head, “Hold on.” Within minutes, he brought a wheel chair and what seemed to be a gym towel. He put the towel on the chair and helped her into the seat. Elisa whimpered.

“Don’t worry miss,” he said, “Flor is a saint. A true saint. It’s her suffering that makes her legit.”

Elisa was in too much pain to ask what he meant because within minutes he was rushing her through the tiangis*.* Her stall was at the end of the market. It was a stall with a make shift room constructed out of a dark plastic sheet for privacy.

Flor looked at Elisa and smiled. She gave the guard a huge hug and a peck on the check, “I will light two candles for you, Rigo.”

“Awe,” he said, “Just one. That’s why you’re so broke.”

Flor chucked a napkin at him and punched him on the arm playfully. He punched her back and left back to his post, “Gonna get someone to clean this up.”

Flor looked down and grew startled, “Luz! Emergency Luz!” The other stall vendors tried not to stare, except for the one selling cowboy boots. He held the paper with Elisa’s picture on the front page. “Guilty? Crazy?” Elisa thought it was an odd headline and wanted to read the article, but the pain in her uterus was so intense, she thought she was giving birth.

Luz and Cindy took her into the plastic room. It took a while before they placed her on the masseuse bed. There was something poking her left buttock, and it wasn’t as stable as she would have liked.

Without asking, Luz commanded Cindy, “You stand there and help us pray.”

Cindy tried to follow the chant with her broken accent. It was an odd rhythmic chant, peppered with Cindy’s mispronunciations, but after a few minutes, it tugged at the muscles in her uterus. It felt oddly like a hand was caressing her womb, and she was sure it was a woman’s healing hand.

First, the bleeding subsided, and Elisa felt a pop in her uterus.

Elisa sighed, “That is much better.”

“You’ve lost too much blood,” Said Luz, “We can’t go forward now.”

“No,” said Elisa, “We have to do this before it’s too late. She is possessing him or something. I can feel it. Flor, please? He’s just a baby.”

Flor looked at Cindy’s frail body, “She is stronger because of her.” Flor pointed at Cindy. Flor grabbed a rope made of cornhusks and tied it around Cindy’s body.

Cindy was disturbed, but knew better than to complain. Flor went around her three times chanting in a tongue neither one recognized.

“Tear it,” said Flor in that same strange throaty voice Elisa recognized.

She tried to tear that rope for a few minutes, and she huffed, “I can’t. It’s too strong.” Elisa stared fascinated, “Cindy, that rope is just dry palm.”

“Yeah, but it feels like wire,” she said.

“TEAR. IT!’ Commanded the Not-Flor voice. Cindy jumped and struggled with it. She managed to make a small tear, but not quite all the way through. Flor then looked at Elisa, which terrified her. “You have to forgive her,” said the deep voice. Cindy shivered and pleaded with her big blue eyes.

Elisa gave a begrudging look at Cindy. She thought long and hard. She thought about Greg and the life they once shared. Thought about the shop and missing son. *It was her fault, Cindy’s fault. All of this started because she wanted to visit the new shop.* Her chest tightened, and she clenched her hands until they bled.

Then, she thought about the day her son was born. She paused and remembered. With that she said, “I forgive you.”

Snap. The rope crumbled to the ground.

“She may come for you again,” said the voice to Cindy, “But you must be stronger. Guilt has no place in this war.” Flor returned almost instantly, “Good.” She punched Cindy on the arm. And added, “It’s a girl. You will be best friends, forever.” Flor pointed to Elisa too.

Cindy was taken aback because even though she had failed five times, she still wanted to have an abortion.

As if reading her mind, Flor shook her head, “Not your decision to make. We need her, and she needs you. And you.” She said pointing at Elisa again.

Elisa looked at Luz.

“What?” asked the old woman, “You thought this fight was just about you?”

Elisa waited patiently, as Luz continued, “We have been fighting them, since their ships arrived.”

“What ships?” asked Cindy.

“La Niña, La Pinta, and La Santa Maria,” answered Elisa.

“Yes,” responded Flor, “We’re the good guys.” She laughed cheerfully and began to gather materials.

Luz worked on Elisa some more and got some large Kotex from somewhere. Without asking, she shoved a twig into Elisa’s mouth, “Chew.”

“Geez,” said Elisa but failed to complain after Luz glared at her. She chewed obediently. Her legs grew more steady. Luz gave her a pouch, “No more that two a day or else your boy will be motherless.” She stopped, “You felt her didn’t you?”

Elisa knew exactly what she meant, “Yes.”

“Good,” said Luz, “She *is* with us. Not all is lost.” Elisa wanted to ask more questions, but Luz shushed her. She whispered into Elisa’s ear.

“What? I can’t do that,” said Elisa.

“You want to be free? You will!” with that the conversation ended, “You, Cindy, go get her some fresh clothes. Quickly.”

Cindy left and came back with slut jeans and a red top. She also bought a pair of boots from the man with the newspaper. After giving him her last $50 he agreed not to call the cops. Cindy suspected no one wanted to cross Flor and Luz, but she hoped he was a man of his word. Just to seal the deal, the man had thrown in a free pair of bulky mismatched boot socks and had given Cindy his number, “Here guerita. Call me any time.” Cindy had batted her eyelashes and swished her tail as she walked back to Elisa.

Elisa laughed at the story, and Luz added, “Ese bastardo,” said Luz, “His wife is in Michoacán with six children.”

“Bastard,” chimed in Flor, “is a bad word Tia.”

As they bickered, Elisa grew surprised at how much the pain had dulled. The bleeding had also lessened to a trickle.

“I’m ready,” she said definitively. Flor nodded in agreement. The two readied themselves and were set to go. Cindy handed her a Hello Kitty backpack and wanted to say more, but she knew it was too soon.

As they climbed into the car, which was dubbed *La Puta*, Elisa couldn’t help casting them as the Scooby Doo gang, but didn’t want anyone to be the dog. She definitely felt like a Velma, and Cindy was most-likely Daphne. Flor was Fred, the fun side of Fred, and Luz was a serious Velma. Had Greg been around, he would have been Scooby. She choked a sob and gripped the backpack.

Elisa felt a twinge of pain again as she boarded the car. Flor patted her arm, “Soon,” and smiled a wide goofy smile, “Remember, don’t be so mad.” Off they went, an awkward gang of strangers, now friends.

Despite the growing needles in her uterus, Elisa smiled. The store was ten blocks away, but traffic could be a pain.

“Mother fucker!” cried Cindy, as a tortilla truck cut her off.

Luz began a rhythmic song, and Flor accompanied. It was in that strange language, and Elisa was itching to ask questions about what they spoke and the history of the ritual.

Suddenly, the world darkened. “What’s going on?’ asked Elisa. A soft rain began to patter, and Cindy gasped. It was hundreds of small eggs falling from the sky.

“What the fuck?” asked Cindy. Suddenly, visibility was down to almost zero, like a blizzard in winter.

Elisa looked out the window half-expecting birds to start flying, but could see nothing. As on cue, something smashed the windshield making a webbed crack in the upper right. It was an animal Elisa had never seen before, a rodent with large ears. She thought she recognized it from a nature show she had watched with Alex. Another one splatted onto the roof of the car making them all scream.

“She knows we’re coming,” said Luz.

“So much for the element of surprise,” said Elisa grimacing as a cramp radiated heat through her body. Flor held her hand, and her face transformed into the other woman. Elisa was still not used to that shift, and she yelped as the non-Flor howled in pain.

“She’s having a seizure,” cried Elisa.

Flor’s body shook so hard the car rocked. Elisa almost threw up as cockroaches emerged out of every opening in Flor’s body. They crawled all over the car, all the while Luz continued her rhythmic chant, and she stopped.

Cindy squealed as one dropped on her nose nearly making her crash again.

“Watch out Cindy!” said Elisa, and they swerved to miss a homeless man in a wheel chair.

“It’s too dark, and these fucking roaches! Open the window and get them out!” she yelled.

Elisa soothed Flor, “Luz, she’s passed out.” Luz said nothing but continued her ancient tongue.

Flor’s eyes shot open, “What tickles?” she asked as a roach ran up her arm. “Oh,” Flor smiled and talked to the creatures, which obediently ran out the open windows taking all of his friends with him.

“Are you OK?” asked Elisa.

Flor shook her head and began to chant along with Luz. It was so dark, they could barely see the other headlights.

“She’s going to kill us,” said Cindy holding back a sob and added as an afterthought, “She’s going to kill my baby girl.”

A light began to emerge from the car. Elisa looked at Flor and gasped. There were two women sitting there. One was Flor. The other was an old crone with long hair like Luz. They overlapped each other like the refrigerator magnets she would buy Alex. The woman turned to look at Elisa, while Flor stared forward; the woman smiled a warm smile.

The light grew illuminating the, car and it reached out into the world. It was the most beautiful thing Elisa had ever seen short of her newborn baby. Her stomach did a flip of excitement, and for the first time in years, she felt a true sense of peace.

Cindy was still cursing about the lack of visibility.

“Are you seeing this?” asked Elisa as the light grew, shining a path on the road, “My God, this is amazing!”

“I can’t see shit!” And just then the stars and moonlight appeared, just in time for Cindy to swerve once again exciting a cacophony of angry honking.

Elisa looked at Flor, but the light had dimmed, and the woman was gone, “You didn’t see that?”

Cindy looked back at Elisa through the mirror, “See what? That weird assed darkness? My life flashing before my ey—Learn to drive mother fucker!” She honked the pathetic horn on her small car that meeped.

“Ah,” said Luz irritably, “Keep driving, guera. Just keep driving.”

Elisa looked at her backseat companion. She was somehow diminished. Flor seemed to be asleep, breathing heavily, “Are you OK?”

Shaking her shoulder gently, Flor opened her eyes and smiled a large infectious smile, “Yep,” and without asking Flor, rubbed more ointment on Elisa’s abdomen, which was awkward with the seat belt. Elisa noted that her hand was shaking like the gentle flutter of a fledgling, and she swore Flor had new patches of gray hair.

“Go back to sleep,” commanded Luz giving Elisa a stern look, “We have a little bit of time.”

Elisa was amazed at how easily Flor knocked out, snoring loudly.

“Is she O.K.,” whispered Elisa to Luz.

Luz looked back at Elisa and said, “Keep rubbing the ointment. We don’t want you passing out.”

Cindy said, “She knows we’re coming. What’s the point?”

Luz snorted, “Of course she knows. She’s not stupid. We fight like hell, is what we do. Besides, she only knows you two are coming or did, until this pendeja lit the way.”

“What?” asks Cindy.

“Never mind. You just get us there in one piece, blondie,” and added sarcastically, “You drive as good as my Jose used to, may he rest in peace.”

 Cindy hated being called out for being blonde. Hated blonde jokes and was about to snap back, when Elisa said, “Hey Cindy, how many blondes does it take to change a tire?”

“Oh man, is this one of yours?” Cindy chuckled, “How many?”

“11. Ten to hold the car up, while the other one waves some idiot down to change it,” Elisa laughed again like she hadn’t in a long time.

Even Luz joined in, “Shut up hyenas, you’ll wake up Flor.”

Cindy chuckled, “That one was actually pretty good.”

The rest of the trip they were quiet, and Elisa had time to think over the plan. She would have had more confidence if there were ten of them, but there weren’t, and now, Flor seemed to be struggling with her breathing. She closed her eyes and did something she hadn’t done since she was a little girl, she prayed to La Virgen Maria.

“Whatever you’re doing,” said Luz sharp tongued, “Keep doing it.”

Elisa prayed in earnest asking for help, then thinking better of it, and apologizing for all the wrong she had done. It was a jumbled prayer, but it was heartfelt, and Elisa didn’t feel alone anymore.

When she opened her eyes, Flor was holding her hand and handing her a Kleenex. Elisa dabbed her eyes.

“You’re a good person,” Flor said sagely, “Everything else is lies.”

Elisa was startled, “Did you read my mind?”

Flor smiled and looked out the window, without answering.

They arrived to La Bruja’s old shop.

“What if she has her coven?” asked Cindy in a panicked voice.

Luz pulled out a huge revolver from her bag, and smiled.

“Holy shit!’ said Cindy.

Flor looked at Elisa, took off her seatbelt, and gave her a powerful hug.

“Whatever you see in there,” said Luz, “Don’t stop doing what we told you to do.”

Elisa’s heart was in her throat and even though she really wanted to see Alex, her legs were lead. She willed her body forward, but nothing happened. She hadn’t been this terrified since she found out she was pregnant. She thought about him, Greg, and that was what it took to get her out of the car.

 She turned to Cindy before she walked into danger and said, “I forgive you. You take good care of that little bean.”

Cindy choked a cry, and said, “Don’t be stupid. You’re going to be the godmother, you slutty dolt.”

“Whatever, slut,” she said, “I love you. I’m sorry things got so fucked up between us.”

Cindy cried in earnest this time, but before she could answer, Elisa walked away. On her way into the shop, Elisa thought about all the things she would do, when she found her little boy. She put her hand on the door handle and asked La Virgen for help one more time. She pulled at the handle, but the door was locked.

A voice startled her, “Está cerrado. La señora que da tacos, ya se fue.” It was typical drunk. He approached her, and she tensed up instantly. Something in his eyes remind her of crow’s eyes. The glimmered and odd yellow, and she pulled back some more.

“Uy,” he said, “Ni que estuvieras tan buena.”

Yeah, she thought, she wasn’t so hot anymore. We walked away, making a stop before Cindy, but she shook her head, “No.”

Elisa tried the door one more time, and nothing.

“Fuck,” she muttered, “So much for that.” She looked around on the sidewalk. A few yards away was a large enough rock. She took a deep breath and looked around. Except for the weird drunk, no one was there. *The darkness probably spooked everyone* she thought. Not even Chicago PD were around. She walked to the rock, and as she was reaching for it, a black greasy mass dropped right next to it.

Elisa shrieked like a little girl. It was the ugliest, largest crow she had ever seen. It cawed at her and was about to peck at her hand when a shot rang so loudly Elisa yelled. Luz blew its head clean off.

“Holy fuck!” she grabbed the rock and went for the door, “It’s serious! It’s serious! It’s serious!”

Elisa grabbed the rock and with sheer adrenaline smashed the glass. It cracked, “Fuck!” She smashed one more time and got made a large enough hole for her to stick her arm in. The exertion brought increased pain to her uterus, but she forged on and unlatched the lock and stepped in.

The store was empty. There were some scattered papers on the floor and a disgusting roach making its rounds. Defeated, Elisa wanted to cry, but then she remembered what Luz had told her, “You do what we came to do. Don’t let that bitch fool you. There is a doorway there.”

Elisa reached into her backpack, which seemed to weigh a ton. The exertion was making her incisions hurt, and the pain in her uterus kept creeping back. She pulled out five candles and set them equidistant apart. In a Tupperware bowl was a strange blue and glittery dust. The glitter was Flor having fun, despite Luz’s seriousness when they ground the concoction in a metate. She sprinkled the dust onto the floor, and Elisa was astounded that she made a perfect circle.

“Fuck,” she said, “Maybe it’s in my blood after all.” She lit the candles slowly and looked around one more time. She had written the words on a paper bag, and they were difficult to read even with the candles. Sitting in the middle of the circle, she squinted and began to recite.

“Puta!” said a familiar voice from nowhere, “Tu Español es caca!”

Elisa wanted to run, but she held fast. She chanted even louder, and the candles grew brighter. Suddenly, *she* was at the edge of the circle.

“I am going to tear your heart out!” said La Bruja, “Then, I’m feeding it to your little boy.”

Almost stopping, Elisa looked away. *That fucking bitch! I knew it.* La Bruja not only spoke English, she spoke it perfectly with a slight cockney accent. The floorboards began to groan, and she was pitched into an eternal darkness. She slammed into the ground one more time, this time landing awkwardly on her left arm.

 She was winded, but got up faster than she thought possible. For a moment, she took in the beauty of the stars, and the deep scent of orange blossoms. She loved that smell and remembered how wonderful her childhood had been with her dad, but a sharp kick to her uterus brought her back to reality.

Elisa reached for the bag that had fallen a few inches from her, but La Bruja stepped on her had hard with a hoof.

“You bitch,” she said, and struck at the old woman. Elisa cried. She was made of steel or was protected by an amazing force. Elisa held her hand whimpering. She was sure she had broken it.

“No Gamana!” said her little son, “Please, Gamana!”

La Bruja paused and smiled at the little boy, “Oh, sweetie. Don’t worry. I’m not going to hurt her. We’re just playing, right, puta?” The She-Goat slapped Elisa making her head snap back.

She stared at Elisa with those strange black eyes, “I’m not going to hurt you, if you behave.”

Elisa reached into her back pocket and pulled out a white paper napkin and flung the contents at the witch’s face.

She howled an unnatural howl that neither she nor Alex would ever forget. The witch scratched at her eyes and attacked aimlessly with an invisible force. One forceful blow hit Elisa right on the ribs. She heard an unnatural crack, but she kept going for the bag. She finally reached it and pulled out something and threw it at La Bruja. It was a bird’s next made out of silver barbed wire. When it struck the witch’s feet, it unwound like something out of a movie and wrapped around her. She was bound. The old woman bled and looked pathetic, but Elisa wasn’t fooled.

“Now what? You stupid whore,” said La Bruja, but it sounded funny because she was speaking with a wire slanted across her mouth.

Elisa ran for her son and put cornhusk ropes around his wrists and legs then cut them. She almost started crying when she saw how emaciated and dirty he was.

La Bruja bellowed, “LET GO OF HIM!” The old woman started chanting, and eerie howls began from every direction. She knew that sound and had loved it as a child, but when they started coming out of the grove, Elisa grabbed her son and ran.

“Hurry Flor!” she cried. They came at her, and she knew she was dead. One of them bit her leg, but she kicked it away. Another one nipped at Alex and just then witch said one word, and they stopped.

“What’s the point of running, you stupid cunt!?” she said calmly, “Wherever you go, I will find you.”

“What the fuck do you want?” she screamed, “What’s your price?”

 La Bruja chuckled, “You think this is about you? You stupid idiot. I don’t want a mongrel in the family. I want the boy; he was never supposed to be, but your parents took him away from me. You you! You stupid slut, you had him, but his blood is strong.” She paused for suspense, “I want his blood. For what, is none of your business.”

 Elisa screamed every obscenity she could think of, and just as quickly, La Bruja commanded the coyotes again, which made a larger wound around her mouth. They inched slowly, their bodies shaking in anticipation. Elisa knew La Bruja was fucking with her one last time.

 Elisa looked at her son and kissed his face all over, “I love you, my son. I tried so hard to find you.”

 He smiled at her and held her tight, “Bad doggies.”

 Turning in a circle, she reached into the bag and pulled out the knife. She was supposed to plunge it into La Bruja at the designated place. She looked at her son one last time, and held him tightly.

 “I’m sorry, mijo. I love you so, so much,” and she would have done it, when a large owl appeared and started attacking the coyotes. That was her moment. She ran with her son in a fucked-up warrior princess cry at the old woman.

 But Ana wasn’t through. She called on hundreds of scorpions. Elisa ran through them, as some stung at her, but she reached the old woman and plunged the knife into her heart, or where she thought the heart was. The knife made it halfway through when the hilt and part of the knife broke in an unnatural snap

 The scorpions fell off, confused, just as one reached her left eye. They started attacking each other, and one stung her a last time on her right hand.

 She looked at Alex who seemed fine. But the old woman, despite the knife half way through its mark was cackling.

 “You stupid whore! You think this will kill me?” she stopped and glared, struggle to move the wire off her mouth with invisible fingers, “I have outlived mountains.”

 “No,” answered Elisa, “I knew it wouldn’t kill you, but I hope it hurts like a mother fucker.” Elisa plunged the knife that was left in further and twisted. The blade cut her fingers, but she held tight.

 This hurt la bruja, and she howled a pitiful howl, but Elisa didn’t care. She kicked la bruja hard in the crotch with her painfully stung right foot. She kick wasn’t as powerful as she had hoped, but I felt good.

 The old woman tore at the wire with unnatural strength, and Elisa hobbled away as fast as she could. Running was out of the question, and she was sure she was dying from all the poison. She stumbled and fell to ground bringing Alex with her. He cried hard, and she stared at the night sky with a flurry of fur snowing all over the place.

 She looked towards Ana and then towards the light that was reaching the night sky.

 She screeched and half bellowed, “I can bring him back, your trash! I can bring him back. He will be better than before!!! Your Greg, that filthy man.”

 Elisa paused and turned back to look at the witch who was half woman, half She-Goat. Could she really bring him back? Elisa was sure Ana could do anything. The old woman was in pain, and unable to release all the wires, “Just give me the boy.” She heaved trying to loosen the wire on her right arm, but then she fixated on her son, “He is an abomination and should never have been born.”

 Elisa turned cold, “So that’s it? That’s what this is about? Some bullshit ideology of women being better than men? You fucking cunt!” And she stepped closer to the light.

“You won’t be able to manage him! STOP! I can bring your love back!” her voice cracked and ended with the bleating of a goat.

Just then, the non-Flor entity crossed over; she was brilliant and exuding a power Elisa had never felt. The ground was pulsing and any remnants of the coyote force scampered away. Though Flor and the old crone overlapped, they walked in unison with the same purpose. The light shone brighter at the witch and struck her. She shrieked and cursed, twisting violently against the wire. A lock of the witch’s hair fell to the ground. Elisa stared fascinated as it floated to the ground, and she stumbled, unable to continue. Her mouth hit the floor, and she sucked in dirt. She thought she heard another voice, saying, “Get up, my Love,” and at the same time a pair of strong arms grabbed her and Alex.

 “You!” screeched Ana, regaining her human voice, “I should have known!”

 Flor and the crone split, and Flor said, “No more bad,” and they both stretched out her arms.

 Luz and Cindy pulled her back into Chicago, and as Elisa left, in Flor’s and the crone’s light, she was sure she saw him. Greg smiled at her sadly and took one last adoring look at Alex. She tried to whisper, “I love you,” but the scorpion stings numbed her face. At the last moment, she said, “I love you,” but it sounded more like a plea.

 “Quickly,” Luz told Cindy as they rushed through the store. Elisa’s consciousness blinked in and out, with every pulse of electricity coursing through her body. Within moments, she was on the cold sidewalk, and Luz was putting something into her mouth.

 “Drink,” commanded Luz, “Or the sacrifice will be for nothing! Drink!”

 “Alex! Greg!” Elisa called.

 “He’s OK,” said Cindy, “Just scratched up and scared. Greg is—”

 “Mommy!” cried Alex trying to go to her.

 Luz rubbed a hot ointment onto all the stings. How she knew where they were, was a question Elisa wanted answered, but before she could ask Elisa vomited an endless sticky foulness. She vomited everywhere, even on poor Luz.

 “I’m sorry,” she said and wretched again so violently she thought her heart would come out of her throat. With every exertion, the pain on her skin fully registered, and she wanted to cry out loud, but she couldn’t between the vomiting and the gasping for air.

 “Jesus Christ,” said Cindy holding back her own prenatal sickness.

 Alex said, “Oh, gross, Mommy!”

 This made Elisa laugh, choking on her mess, and just as suddenly Luz left her side.

 “Where are you going?!” asked Cindy, “Don’t leave me here!”

 “I have to try,” said Luz, “Please, you help me. Please, Cindy.” She beckoned Cindy to follow.

 “No,” said Elisa, “Don’t!” Cindy looked at Elisa, stooped down while returning Alex, and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

 “It’s my turn to be brave. For us,” she said tweaking Alex’s nose. She walked unsteadily after Luz.

 Elisa tried to get up, but the coward in her would never let her back into that store. Never. She held Alex tight.

In the distance, she heard a siren. Some do-gooder had called an ambulance, and she was sure it was for her or because of the gun shot. Elisa looked at her son and got up with a lot of effort.

 “How are you?” she asked analyzing his whole body.

 “Good, Mommy!” he smiled, “Happy, my Mommy!”

 She held his hand tightly and led him to the car. Stumbling awkwardly, she tried to outrace the paramedics and the cops. She secured him in the back, center seat and drove off before anyone could get there. Elisa looked through the rearview mirror, as the ambulance shot by. Luz and Cindy didn’t come out.

\*

 It was 5a.m. the next day, and Elisa was still in excruciating pain. Her left ankle would not bend, and her fingers of her right hand were stiff. Still, she stroked her son’s forehead and continued to pray. Flor had given her numerous wards in the backpack, which she used. She stared at the six wrappers of bean burritos Alex had eaten. Even now, she couldn’t stop cursing that old hag between her endless prayer. Elisa was furious as she held back a sob, but then, she remembered Flor’s warning.

 “I won’t let hate consume me,” she said to herself like a mantra. She finally fell asleep in an uneasy dream. In it she caught glimpses of Flor and the crone battling Ana, but at the end, Flor had collapsed and the crone had faded into the air. La bruja had vanished, but somehow, before she did, she wasn’t as imposing as before. She looked pathetic and old, with stringy, greasy white hair and a slacked mouth, and she simply disappeared. Elisa was sure that had been Flor’s last miracle. Flor and the crone beaten the witch and made her gone, hopefully, for good.

 She woke up with a start. She wanted desperately to call Cindy, but realized she had no way of doing so.

 *It’s better this way,* she thought to herself.

 Her son was awake and eating dry Cheerios. It was 10a.m. and Elisa watched the news. There was a report of a body found in Little Village. Elisa began to cry when she realized it was Flor; she cried and cried until she started bleeding again from the exertion. Alex was so startled, he started crying too, and they held each other and entered into the depths of each other’s souls.

\*

 A few days later, Elisa was feeling a little better. She had procured a baby seat at a Goodwill for $15 and had all the snacks ready to go.

 “You like your new seat?” she asked Alex who was getting more color in his cheeks.

 “Yeah Mommy!” He was still painfully thin, and he didn’t laugh as much as he used to before la bruja ruined everything.

 She looked around; she always looked around now. The heavy necklaces were around her neck and her son’s neck. “I look ridiculous,” she said to herself. Tucking her short, newly blonde hair behind her weathered Cubs hat, another great find, she smiled at the boy.

 Elisa prayed for Cindy’s wellbeing and thanked her. Cindy wasn’t a total idiot. She had put Alex’s birth certificate and her passport into the backpack. She was even smart enough to put unofficial graduate transcripts in the bag. Where she got the money from she would never know, but then remembered the Go Fund Me account. There were almost $7,000 dollars in there. There was also a very long letter, which she did not have to read, but would read once they settled. She didn’t want to wonder how Cindy had the combination to the family safe, which held Elisa and Greg’s documents. In the end, she didn’t have to know these answers anymore.

 When they neared the Canadian border, Elisa was ready to get more questions from the agent. She worried the cops had put an APB out for her, but the woman had waved her through without giving her a second look. She figured, the woman thought she was white and looked nothing like a criminal or terrorist.

 Elisa looked into the horizon and kept vigilant for coyotes and crows or any other poisonous thing.

 “Where we going Mommy?” he asked sweetly.

 Elisa smiled, “We’re going to get help. Mommy’s going to a new school to take care of you, always. To take care of us. Mommy will never, ever, let *anything* bad happen to you.”

 “Oh,” said Alex, not really understanding. He thought for a while, “Will my Gamana be there?”

 Her heart pounded, and then, she calmed herself, “No. She’s going on a long, very long vacation, sweetie.”

 That seemed to satisfy him. She braced herself for the question she did not know how to answer, yet, *Where is Daddy?* But, he never asked. This troubled her even more than the past events, and she wondered if Ana had lied about his death. Who knew what she had done to her cheruby boy? She would figure it all out, later.

Elisa looked down the lonely road and said a prayer of gratitude to La Virgen, something she did often now. She thought long and hard about her compatriots. Thought about Flor and what she sacrificed for them. She wanted to cry and mourn, but had no time.

Instead, she said a prayer for Flor, for Luz, for Cindy, for Greg, and even one for Ana.

1. Precinct cell and bright with cameras. Metal bunk and toilet and no sink. Few piece soft toilet paper. No maxi pads. Three days. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. More on the kid being an aberration and emphasizing why his birth was a major fuck up to Ana.˝ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The buck knife never comes back to the story line. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. How do calls work before the judge’s hearing? [↑](#endnote-ref-4)