

FLING!

Fling!

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This novel began in what is real, but became, in fact, fiction. None of the characters bear any relation to living persons, except that love or loss lends a reality to what is imagined.

First Edition

Printed in the United States

ISBN: 978-1-942428-20-6

Cover and interior design by Kelsey Rice

FLING!



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Pen-L Publishing
Fayetteville, Arkansas
Pen-L.com

FLING!

1. a brief period of indulging one's impulses
2. a usually brief attempt or effort
3. a brief sexual or romantic relationship
4. a Scottish Highland dance
5. a novel by Lily Iona MacKenzie

For Lily Barbara, my mother, without whom Bubbles wouldn't exist
For my son Leo Morand, who believed in *Fling!* from the beginning
For my husband Michael, my first and always my best reader

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

For their inspiration, good care, and thoughtful comments, I would like to thank the following people:

- ∞ Duke and Kimberly Pennell for their courage to run a small press in today's economic environment and for their belief in *Fling!*
- ∞ Eva Zimmerman, a publicist with an enormous heart and remarkable skills who also happens to be my beloved stepdaughter
- ∞ Joan Fornelli, my first fan who read *Fling!* long before it was published and believed it *would* be one day
- ∞ Hugh Cook, a fellow Canadian who offered wise editing advice
- ∞ Victoria deMara, who read *Fling!* in its early stages and resonated with its characters and themes
- ∞ And for anyone else I've forgotten!

From the lone shieling* the mountains divide us, and the
waste of sea. But still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,
and we in dreams behold the Hebrides.

—BLACKWOODS MAGAZINE (1829)

** a crofter's cottage built for shelter by the people of the Scottish highlands*

Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
‘Onward,’ the sailors cry!
Carry the lad that’s born to be king,
Over the sea to Skye.

—“SKYE BOAT SONG”

In books of fiction, [people] look not only
for more entertainment, but, at bottom,
even for more reality than real life itself
can show.... In this way of thinking, the
people in a fiction, like the people in a
play, must dress as nobody exactly
dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks,
act as nobody exactly acts. It is with
fiction as with religion: it should
present another world, and yet one
to which we feel the tie.

—HERMAN MELVILLE, *THE CONFIDENCE MAN*

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ISLE OF SKYE, 1906

Malcolm—Heather MacGregor’s grandfather on her mother’s side—told anyone who was willing to listen that his granddaughter hadn’t been born the usual way. She’d danced right off one of his paintings, landing in the family’s potato patch, except the ground was too barren to produce much by the time she came along. It wasn’t a promising beginning.

She made the best of it. At least it hadn’t been an onion patch.

The family and villagers had heard the story so often they were sick of it. Yet no one doubted Heather’s origins (or Bubbles, as she was later known). The Scots, reputed to have a sixth sense, know unpredictable things happen, and there’s no telling when something out of the ordinary will occur. They give lip service to Christianity, but the old religion hasn’t gone anywhere.

She grew up knowing that the sea was the province of Manannán Mac Lir, King of the Land-Under-Wave. And the Tuatha Dé Danann, the supernatural race, lived in the glens, appearing to mortals as birds or animals. In front of the hearth, while stirring the broth, her granny sang to Heather from the time she was a babe in a cradle:

Wisdom of serpent be thine

Wisdom of raven be thine

Wisdom of valiant eagle . . .

The prayers didn't help her much—at least her granny didn't think so. Granny thought that wisdom would appear as good sense and judgment. As she told Heather's mother, after whom Heather was named, "Maybe it will just take longer for wisdom to reach her in Skye."

And what of Feather, Heather's only daughter? She didn't visit Skye until she was a middle-aged woman, accompanying her mother there to meet the remaining relatives. Yet Feather also seemed infected by the Scot's sensibility, expressing through her art Manannán Mac Lir's underworld. It permeated everything she did or created.

CALGARY, JUNE 1996

The Air Canada Airbus soars through the stratosphere, a flying dinosaur carrying its passengers to Calgary. An oil-rich city, from the air, it seems to be levitating. Never quite losing its rural origins, its boundaries extend in all directions.

That's how it appears to Feather.

She grips the armrests of her seat, eyes wedded to the seatbelt light that just flashed on, wondering what it portends for this trip home. Landing is always the worst part of returning to Calgary, the place where she grew up. The air currents near the airport make for a bumpy ride before the airplane finally touches down and she can breathe again. Not a great fan of flying, she believes if humans were meant to do it, they would have been born with wings. But her fears don't stop her from traveling by air, even though turbulence causes her heart to do triple-time. Some weed to puff on would help settle her down.

But landing isn't the only bad part about arriving in Calgary. At fifty-seven, Feather has lived in the San Francisco Bay area for more years than she lived in Canada. Dealing with Bubbles, her mother, who lives in a one-bedroom cottage that's part of Bow Lodge, an old folks' center, puts Feather on edge. She loves her mum, but it's very difficult to connect with her. The name suits Bubbles. She actually lives inside one she's never burst, making it nearly impossible for anyone to engage her, including Feather.

The two women talk on the phone several times a week. Feather tries to give Bubbles the emotional support she needs at this stage in her life, but it's a one-way street. Bubbles rattles on about whatever comes to mind, usually memories from the near or distant past, things that Feather has heard over and over. Since both of Feather's half brothers are too wrapped up in their own lives to reach out much, the responsibility falls on her shoulders to keep tabs on their mother. But most of the time, she makes the phone calls from a sense of duty, not a spontaneous and sincere desire to talk to Bubbles. She always ends up the listener, her mother rarely asking questions about Feather's life. It's hard to be a wall, an object, and not a living, breathing person.

The biggest reason she is making this current trip home is because of Bubbles' ninetieth birthday, a major event to celebrate. But also, Bubbles had called Feather in a panic a few days earlier: "We need to fly to Mexico City after my party and pick up Mother's ashes."

Feather knew the story of her grandmother taking off for Mexico City with Jimmy Campbell, the man who had employed her as a housekeeper in his Mount Royal home back in the 1920s. That's about all she knew.

On the phone, she tried to keep her cool, remembering that Bubbles could distort things. "Hold on, your mum's been dead for over seventy years. Why would her ashes turn up now?"

Bubbles said the dead-letter office in Mexico City had sent her a letter.

"A letter from the dead-letter office in MC?" Feather frowned. She's expected this phone call for some time. Senility was bound to claim even her mum, who has seemed immortal to those who know her. The woman enjoys a zest for life not often seen among her peers. She still lives on her own, cleaning the house before her monthly housekeeper shows up so "the poor woman doesn't have to clean up my messes." She also does her own cooking, laundry, and shopping.

Nevertheless, this latest story about her grandmother's ashes crossed the line of believability. If Feather weren't her mother's daughter, she

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might have considered moving her to a different facility where she could get more attention. But just as the Air Canada Airbus reminds her of what now are almost mythic creatures, so, too, did Bubbles' story seem plausible. Mysterious things happen all the time. Life is unpredictable. If nothing else, the ashes appearance made a good story to tell her friends.



Waiting for Bubbles to answer the door, Feather dangles her straw tote bag from one shoulder. She's wearing an ankle-length, red peasant skirt with matching top and scuffed, brown leather hiking boots. A yellow cotton triangle partly conceals her long, dark, auburn hair, now streaked with gray.

The door opens, and before Feather can speak, words rush out of Bubbles' mouth: "Mother's ashes, they're in the dead-letter office. Mexico City."

Feather sighs and steps inside, sets down her bag, and gives her mum a tentative hug. The corset she's wearing prevents Feather from feeling her generous curves, and she can smell urine. The scent is mixed with cheap Evening in Paris perfume. As usual, she feels overwhelmed by this woman who gave birth to her. Bubbles pulls away and pats her hair. "I'm telling you, we need to make plane reservations right away."

"Cool it, Mum. You'll have a heart attack."

Pure-white hair a frizzed halo, scalp pink as a baby's, she checks out Feather from head to foot and shakes her head. "I thought you'd be dressed up for my party."

"I *am* dressed up."

Feather should be used to her mother's scrutiny by now and her disapproval of anything that isn't the latest in fashion. But she isn't. It still stings when she doesn't accept her as she is, a leftover hippie from the '60s.

Bubbles swerves away from Feather and lurches toward the coffee table, snatching a creased, brown manila envelope from among the clutter there. “I’m serious! Mother’s ashes—” She hands her the letter. “Look. It says Mexico City. But I can’t make out these words: *Oficina de cartas perdidas*. What do they mean?”

“I think it’s the office of lost packages.” Or maybe it means office of lost souls.

Given the little she knows of her granny, she seems a lost soul, unable to adapt to life in the new world after leaving the Isle of Skye. Maybe she does need to be rescued. locked in some in-between world for the sins she committed against her children, leaving them in the dust to follow her lover south of the border. The feminist in Feather applauds her granny for striking out on her own and going against the flow. But the mother in her knows the damage she did by abandoning her kids. She left much sorrow in her wake. Bubbles seems stuck psychologically at the age she was when her mother left, and Feather’s uncles didn’t fare well, either. Their lives were hollow shells, like something discarded on the beach. Still, she can’t be too harsh on her grandmother, a woman who followed her heart—not always an easy thing to do.

Feather flops onto the love seat, sending up a cloud of dust, and reads the letter aloud:

“Dear Madam: There big box dead-letter office address you name. Come get box. Mrs. Heather MacDonald ashes. Nun found box and note for family. Have box many years. No send ashes by mail for health reasons. When you pick up?”

“Granny’s ashes? She popped off years ago.”

Bubbles paces, the bunny ears on her slippers flopping back and forth, almost tripping her. “You’ve got to take me to Mexico City. It’ll be like old times. Traveling together.”

Feather throws up her hands. “Mexico City? No way. They kill tourists there. Anyway, I already have plans for the summer. I’m doing research in Puerto Vallarta and San Miguel de Allende on matriarchal cultures.”

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She's been interested in spending more time in Mexico since doing her earth goddess series of sculptures. The matriarchy still lives there, hidden under the layers of modern life. There's something very primitive hovering in that country.

Bubbles scowls. "I can't just leave her in a foreign country. I could get killed here, too. Gangs are attacking old people all the time. Never mind, I'll get Buddy to take me."

"Buddy? Jesus, Mum, he can't handle a trip like that. I'd be a nervous wreck with the two of you wandering around Mexico together." She thinks of her younger brother and the mental condition that the doctors can't quite diagnose—psychosis, schizophrenia, whatever. It's kept him from living a normal life, and at fifty, he's still totally dependent on his mother.

Bubbles plants herself in front of Feather, hands on her hips. "I'm surprised at you. I thought you'd jump at the chance to travel there with me." She gets a hurt look on her face and purses her Betty Boop-painted lips, pouting.

Feather digs in her heels, refusing to let Bubbles guilt-trip her. "You're too old, Mum. What if you get sick?"

She stamps her foot, and the bunny ears quiver. "Too old? Mother went there, and she wasn't too old."

"She wasn't ninety."

"That's not so old. You know I don't look or feel my age."

Feather nods, wishing she were like other mothers and *did* look and act her age.

"I'd worry the whole time. You need to be on a leash."

"What a thing to say! I'm no dog."

"No, but you're high maintenance."

"We can't leave Mother with those foreigners." Bubbles' voice falters, and tears creep down her cheeks. "I can't go to my grave in peace if she isn't buried properly."

"A trip like this could put you in your grave sooner than you'd like."

"Then I could be buried with Mother, and you'd be rid of me."

Feather throws up her hands. “Okay! Okay! I’ll take you. But I’ve already paid for a condo in Puerto Vallarta for a week. I can’t back out now, or I’ll lose a lot of money. And I’ve signed up for art classes in San Miguel de Allende after that.”

Bubbles frowns. “You’ve always got other plans. You never have time for me.”

“I said I’d take you.”

“You’re always telling me to ‘go with the flow.’ But *you* never do.”

“You’re not listening! You can join me in PV *and* San Miguel. But we can’t stay in Mexico City for more than a few days.”

“Just long enough to get the ashes, I promise,” Bubbles says.

“Don’t forget we’ll be doing a lot of flying. San Francisco. Puerto Vallarta. Mexico City. You hate planes. And we have to leave right after your party.”

“Don’t worry. I’m planning to win a Ford Bronco. I was hoping you’d drive.”

Feather laughs. “Yeah, right.”

Though Feather hadn’t included the capital city in her travel plans because of the dangers lurking there, she realizes it could be the centerpiece for her summer research. An eight-ton, disc-like statue of the moon goddess that the Aztecs worshipped stands in the Great Temple in Mexico City. Carlos Castenada’s books have further convinced her there’s something mysterious going on south of the border. That’s why she hoped to find a shaman—male or female—who could guide her. That had been her plan until Bubbles talked her into this mad expedition to pick up her grandmother’s ashes. Feather hadn’t anticipated Bubbles being the shaman she sought, but who knows. In Mexico, anything could happen.

Still, she feels her wings have been clipped again. Weighed down by Bubbles’ demand to travel with her, Feather also feels guilty for resenting it, knowing this could be their last trip together. Even so, she had anticipated a summer free of responsibility, with time to explore

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and expand and try out new modes of art. Pushing the envelope. Throwing off the restraints of teaching and being in control.

Bubbles' abundant energy suddenly makes *her* feel old, though it dawns on her that she'll be orphaned one of these days. Though Bubbles seems immortal at times, she can't go on forever. That thought makes Feather think of the upcoming Mexico trip differently. It could be an opportunity for them to make a deeper connection before . . . She doesn't want to finish the sentence.

She looks around the cluttered cottage, inhaling the musty odor that's part decaying flesh and part rotting food that Bubbles has forgotten in the fridge. Doilies and afghans that she's crocheted cover every available surface. Photos of Feather and her brothers at younger ages sit on top of the TV. And a forest of ninetieth birthday cards covers the coffee table. The birthday has brought an outpouring of greetings from relatives in Scotland and from friends far and wide—even from Jean Chrétien, Canada's Prime Minister. Of course, Chrétien's office staff had sent the card as part of the government's attempt to acknowledge the country's oldsters. He didn't know her mum personally or he might not have sent it.

Bubbles rummages through a box of See's chocolates, a birthday gift. Her pudgy fingers select two chewy, soft-centered ones. She pops them into her mouth, cheeks puffing out like a chipmunk's. Then she turns on the TV. It flickers, and lines zigzag across the screen, distorting the actors' features. She grips the remote control in her right hand, jiggling it, aiming it at the set, trying to unscramble the images. A fake green stone glints on her pinkie, and her eyebrows meet in a "V" of vexation.

Feather knows her mother's routine so well that she can picture what her days are like. She's just rushed home from cruising the Hudson's Bay, her hangout for years—the cafeteria on the fifth floor, the beauty salon on the second, and all the new fashions she likes to inspect—to watch *The Young and the Restless*, her favorite program.

Eloise, a nurse, has lost her job at a hospital because she's been caught stealing her patients' drugs and selling them on the side. Bubbles

shakes her head. "I never would have suspected the nurse of stealing. She seemed like such a nice girl, though she was living a pretty fast life, running around with drug addicts who smoked Mary something. It would break my heart if you ever did those things."

Feather conceals a smile and grabs a chocolate while there are still a few left. "Mary something" is one of her good friends, relaxing her during tense times and expanding her vision, giving her insight into things she would otherwise overlook.

Bubbles switches off the set, heaves herself off the chesterfield, and patters into the kitchen.

Feather says, "Where'd you find the bunny slippers?"

"Where do you think? The Bay. I thought they'd be a nice gift for one of my granddaughters. But they're too warm and cozy to give up. Those girls get enough from me, anyway. And what do I get in return? Nothing but great-grandchildren. They produce babies as if they are rabbits themselves, and all from different fathers."

Feather follows Bubbles into the tiny kitchen, amazed that at ninety she still has so much vitality. And spunk. Amazed, too, that they are daughter and mother. The two of them are so different, physically and otherwise.

Bubbles stops in front of the fridge. "Did you know Blessed, the youngest girl, had twins the last time she got pregnant? I had twins myself once. Stillborn. Beautiful babies. Boys. She must get it from me."

Feather frowns. "Get what?"

"You know, the ability to have so many babies. I guess I should be grateful. But at my age, each new great-grandchild is like a nail in my coffin. Well, I refuse to think about that. I've still got a lot of living to do. One of my grannies lived till she was one hundred and five. I'm going to outlive her."

Feather has heard these stories so many times that it's hard to pay attention any longer: The dead twins. The granny that lived to a hundred and five. Another reason why she doesn't look forward to

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spending a lot of time with her mother this summer. Bubbles' endless stream of verbiage wears her out.

Feather watches her open the fridge door. A sour odor overpowers the room. Bubbles pretends to gag and says, "It reminds me of Ernie, that no good Englishman. I should've known better than to marry an Englishman after what they did to the Scots—my people. My father and granda would turn over in the grave if they knew. Was Ernie my third or fourth spouse? I can't keep track. Of course, I didn't marry Manny, but we were as good as married. Lived common-law for more years than I can remember."

Bubbles hums, "I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair," relieved that it's Ernie who is now underground and not herself. They buried him a few weeks earlier. The two had tied the knot when she was seventy, in her prime. They met at a singles' dance, and it was love at first sight. Nine years her junior, he was quite a dresser in his white tux with a red bow tie and red cummerbund. All the women wanted to get their hands on him, but he chose her.

If she had known then what she knows now, she never would have married the bastard. He couldn't get it up the whole time they were together, and he ran her ragged. It's a wonder she isn't in the grave instead of him.

"Mother, get me my dinner. Mother, I need some razor blades." Mother this, Mother that. It drove her crazy.

He also put a good dent in her savings.

When she viewed him for the last time at the funeral home, she had asked for a few minutes alone with the body, wanting to leave something for him to remember her by. The others tiptoed out of the viewing room, and she stared for a few minutes at that face she'd grown to hate. The crooked Popeye nose with the black hair growing out of the nostrils. The mouth permanently twisted in a cruel smirk. Well, she'd get the last laugh on him. A waste of twenty good years. She could have met someone else and had a nice life.

She could still see Ernie sitting in that lumpy chair of his. She had covered the ugly thing with one of her crocheted afghans, geometric patterns of orange and yellow and rust partially hiding it. The top of a concealed rum bottle sticks up in the space between the chair's arm and the cushion, and a *Penthouse* magazine is open on the footstool in front of him. Gray hairs on his chest show through the "V" in the navy-blue bathrobe. He wore it constantly in his last years, no longer bothering to dress.

He hollers, "Mother, get me some milk, my ulcer's acting up."

Well, his ulcer won't act up any more.

Bubbles had leaned over the coffin and picked up his left hand, the fingers stiff and resisting. She wrangled with the wedding band she had bought him until it flew off, landing on the floor. She bent over, snatched it up, and dropped it into her coat pocket. He wasn't going to the grave with her ring on his finger.

She shoved his hand back under the white satin sheet covering the lower half of his body, opened her purse, unfolded the Kleenex she'd tucked in there, and carefully removed a razor blade. Gripping it between her thumb and forefinger, she slipped it under his shirt, next to his heart. He wouldn't need razor blades where he was going, but she left him one, just in case.

Now determined to put him out of her mind, she grabs a jar of maraschino cherries from the fridge, slams the door, drops the lid on the kitchen table, and shuffles to the living room, popping cherries into her mouth and swallowing them whole. Some of the red juice dribbles down the creases on both sides of her mouth. The thought that her own mother might still be alive makes sense. No one saw the body. Bubbles just assumed it was buried in Mexico. Maybe she didn't die after all. Maybe she's remembered her daughter's birthday.

A whirl of movement, Bubbles pauses in front of Feather, who has settled on the love seat. "You know," Bubbles says, "strange things have happened in our family. You remember Malcolm MacGregor, Mother's father? He was a portrait and landscape painter. He died three times.

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Each time they put him in the coffin and were ready to bury him, he sat up and scared everyone to death. He had lead poisoning from the paint he used. It made him appear dead when he wasn't. The last time it happened, the family didn't believe he really was gone, so they kept his body in the house for two weeks—until it started smelling."

"What a great story, Mum. You never told me that one before."

"You're usually too wrapped up in your art to listen to me."

"Not true. All I do is listen to you."

Bubbles turns away, her feet moving to the rhythms of "La Cucaracha," a tune that she hums. She dances around the room in the arms of a handsome Mexican with a thin, black mustache. He's wearing one of those floppy sombreros. After bumping into the TV set, she falls, out of breath, onto the couch, laughing, and grabs the letter from Mexico's dead-letter office, fanning her face with it, feeling hot suddenly, though she shouldn't be getting hot flashes at her age. She still can't believe it. Her mother's ashes? She's heard how bad the mail service can be in Mexico from Feather, who sent her a post card once from Puerto Vallarta that reached her two years later. Everything mañana. But seventy years? Holy smoke. It's just like her mother to make a surprise visit.

Of course, Feather is full of surprises, too. Once, when she was driving up from California, she detoured to visit a sweat lodge in Summerland, B.C. Bubbles waited a week that time for her to show up. She changed her name from Heather to Feather not long after, hurting Bubbles' feelings. After all, it was a family name.

She had named her daughter Heather after herself and *her* mother so they all could have the same initials—HHH. The letters look like a fence, or three women with their arms around each other's waists in a cancan line. Bubbles could have been a dancer herself. It came naturally to her. She could do a Highland fling or a sword dance with the best of them. But her father put an end to that idea. "No daughter of mine is going on the stage!"

She had tried to teach Feather the steps, but that girl could never get them right.

Never mind. They can keep their stage. Bubbles is always up dancing before the music even starts, the life of the party. Dancing is in her bones. She heaves herself off the sofa and glides into the bedroom. Her bones creak a little as she slips nylon stockings over her legs. She calls out to Feather, "Look, I've still got pretty good gamms. Strong. Shapely."

Not like Feather's spindly legs. She wonders how she can walk on those two sticks. Bubbles hooks the nylons onto her girdle, her body shaped a little like the rain barrels they kept on the farm. What could she expect at her age? The flesh has a mind of its own, and rain barrels don't have legs like hers. "I need you to help me put on my shoes."

Feather comes into the room and kneels on the floor. Bubbles hands her the new, blue satin shoes she bought for the occasion, and Feather slips her mother's feet into them. "I bought them with money Ernie left me."

"I thought he left everything to his two boys."

Bubbles snorts. "They aren't boys. They're both in their forties. I went to an attorney and claimed what was rightly mine. What was left of his pension. I didn't nurse and cook for him all those years for nothing. I was entitled to something in return. Besides, he used up all *my* money."

"Good for you! You do deserve something from him."

Bubbles stands up and admires the shoes. They match her blue dress, flounces of chiffon setting off her hips. Her grandson Marvel, one of Abbot's brood, had given her a discarded gown of his to wear, but it was too small for her. She never could figure out why that boy wanted to wear dresses. It wasn't right for him to dress like a girl. Anyway, she wanted a new outfit. She didn't turn ninety every day.

She twirls in front of the mirror, preening. "Not bad for an old bird, eh?" she cackles.

Feather laughs. "You don't look like an old bird to me."

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Bubbles agrees. Her hairdresser claims she doesn't look a day over seventy, and she doesn't feel it. Not anymore. She gets a sharp pain in her side now and then, and she has lots of gas. Her doctor said she should have some tests done, but tests are for school kids. She's too old for that stuff. She doesn't need a herd of doctors poking at her.

Otherwise, she's fit as a fiddle, and she's had a new zest for life since Ernie died. His dying freed her, made her feel indestructible in some way. She started writing poetry again and baking. She made the best pastry the day of Ernie's funeral, flaky and light. She froze some of the apple pie she made and has been feeding off it ever since.

A little of that flaky piecrust would taste good right now. She hasn't had any lunch. "Want some pie, dear?"

"How old is it?"

"It's still good. I froze it."

They both head for the kitchen. On the way, Bubbles notices her father's picture on the wall. He would be proud of her, outliving everyone, though he probably would have skipped the party. He'd be holed up with a book somewhere, hiding himself away like a hermit. Some of the books were in Latin or Greek. A real scholar. That's what drove her mother away—he never talked to her. That and her father's temper. He could wither you with a look when he got angry. She's almost forgotten about her mother, as well as Feather, who is waiting to take her to the party.

Bubbles says, "I'm going to pack my suitcase right now so we can make a fast getaway."

ON THE ROAD

SAN FRANCISCO, 1996

During her mother's ninetieth birthday party, Feather felt she was the princess serving the queen, but for once she didn't mind being upstaged, though that hadn't always been the case.

When Feather was a girl, Bubbles overshadowed her in everything, from sewing to cooking to attracting men. She had to compete constantly, an underlying current in their relationship. But Bubbles' need to be the center of attention gets old. It's the main reason Feather has kept a good distance geographically between herself and this woman who gave birth to her. She needed that space in order to find herself. It's also why she changed her name. It was too much of a burden to be another Heather rather than the distinctive Feather.

Pushing away these painful memories, she tried to get caught up in the festivities. Streamers and balloons cascaded from the ceiling and hung from the birthday girl's chair, a throne the lodge manager provided for these events. Feather had hired a piper, and Bubbles was up dancing before he could begin playing. She even sang a few Scottish songs, a capella, blasting them out so the walls shivered and everyone's eardrums hurt. A few of Feather's friends, who had known her mother since childhood, turned up. The rest of the partiers lived at the lodge and enjoyed a free bash, downing the non-alcoholic punch and dainty party sandwiches the kitchen staff provided.



After the celebration, the focus quickly shifts to leaving for Mexico with a stopover in San Francisco on the way. Bubbles didn't win the Ford Bronco, so they'll have to fly. She claimed some foreigner—a Pakistani in Southeast Calgary—had the winning ticket. On the way to the airport, she nudges Feather's arm. "It was fixed. I'm sure I had the winning number."

Feather shakes her head and rolls her eyes. "Please! They can't fix a lottery."

She frowns. "Don't worry. They can do it. I've had the same thing happen at bingo. I'll have all my rows filled, and someone calls 'bingo' when it should be mine. I always win. You know that."

Feather laughs and pats her arm. "You can't lose. They're either senile or have Alzheimer's. You're the only one with all her marbles."

Bubbles gets a hurt look on her face and stares out at the foothills. "You make it sound like I'm cheating. I win fair and square. They cheat me half the time."

"They?"

"You know, the ones who run the game. They have it in for me because I'm lucky. I just made three hundred dollars the other day at the Bay. I won the lottery again."

"Yeah? How many tickets did you buy to win?"

Her face turns red, and she spits out, "You want to spoil everything. You can't stand to think your mother's just naturally lucky. I wouldn't have been around all these years if I didn't have more than a little luck." She presses her lips tightly together and crosses her arms over her breasts. She's not going to tell Feather what happened the previous week at bingo.

Helen, one of the women who lives at the lodge, noticed Bubbles hadn't put up ten cents for one of the cards she was playing and called her on it. She shook her fist in Helen's face and said, "You're a lying

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bitch. You're just trying to get me in trouble. Here's my dime." And she threw it at Helen.

The dime popped into her open mouth. Helen spit it on the floor. Bubbles shoved her bingo cards across the table. "Here, take these, too. Maybe you'll be a winner this time with my cards."

One of the attendants called the matron over, and she told Bubbles she couldn't play bingo for the rest of the summer. To teach her a lesson. Some lesson. She wasn't going to hang around the lodge all summer and brood. Anyway, if she wanted to, she had other places where she could play bingo.

She stares at Feather's face, trying to figure out who her father might have been. That girl doesn't appreciate all she's done for her. Bubbles should have given her up. That's what everyone had wanted her to do. "You can't keep a baby out of wedlock," they'd said. They could keep their wedlock. Who ever thought of that word? Some busybody who didn't have anything better to do.

No one was going to tell her what to do with her daughter, illegitimate or not. It hadn't been easy, though. She had to lie and tell people Feather's father was dead. Well, it was as good as true. He'd taken a powder fast when he found out he'd knocked her up. She never saw him again and can't even remember his name.

She's so mad now at Feather that she has a good mind to call off the trip. Except she can't let her mother down. It's the least she can do for her. See that she gets a decent burial with her own people. Back in Scotland. The Isle of Skye.



The only thing Bubbles likes about flying, besides the food, is the ride in the wheelchair from the plane to the car. She doesn't need a wheelchair, but it makes her feel like a queen to be treated that way, pushed by an airport employee past everyone. She waves at the others from her flight, remembering how the Queen Mother did it

when she visited Calgary, just a slight movement of the hand, as if giving a benediction.

And then they reach Feather's car, a 1965 white Volvo. Bubbles scowls. "You haven't bought a new car yet?"

"Too attached to this one. It's *real* steel."

To Bubbles, it looks like an army tank. It has no style. Not like the Ford Bronco she'd wanted to win. Pushing the airport attendant's hand off her arm, she climbs inside, swallowed by the Volvo, a fringe of white hair barely visible through the window. The leather on the seats looks shabby, worn. She doesn't want old things around her now. She likes new, shiny surfaces—unmarred, unlined.

A young man would suit her fine.

Of course, Ernie had been nine years younger. She had thought they were made for each other until—at Feather's urging—Bubbles made it clear to him that her kids would inherit whatever money she had. She had never seen anyone change so fast. One minute they were lovey-dovey, and it was "honey this" and "honey that." The next minute he was growling at her from his chair in front of the TV. And he never stopped the whole twenty years they were married. But it was worth it just to be called Mrs. again. It made her feel legitimate, to have a husband. She'd give anything to find a man to love before she dies. She doesn't want to die alone.

Feather unloads her mother and the luggage at her house in San Geronimo and is off again. "Back in an hour or so, Mamacita. Need to check my mail at the college and pick up my paycheck."

Bubbles doesn't mind being left alone, but she wishes Feather didn't live in the sticks. She can't get on a bus and head to The Bay. She makes the best of it, poking around the house and studio, opening closet and cupboard doors, rifling through bureaus. She isn't snooping. She'd never do that. She has a right to look at her daughter's things. Some official-looking documents on Feather's desk catch Bubbles' eye. Divorce papers. She'll be catching up soon with Bubbles and all her husbands.

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Two cockatiels swoop down and land on her head, chattering in her ear. Their sharp little feet dig into her scalp, drawing blood, messing up her hair. She swats at them.

“Get away, you dirty things. Pooping on me.”

She doesn't like this zoo Feather lives in. Thank God she got rid of that monkey. It peed on everything and was always playing with its pecker. It got Bubbles going.

The birds follow her into the bathroom and perch on the shower curtain rod. She opens the medicine chest and finds a picture of Sage behind the Kaopectate. It's a shame that Feather divorced him. He felt like a son to Bubbles. He understood her the way her own sons didn't. He also wrote beautiful poems dedicated to her. It makes her weep just to think of him—a good-looking, wonderful guy. Feather never should have let him get away. It's won't be easy for her to meet someone, at her age.

Both of them are footloose and fancy-free now. Maybe they'll meet an unattached father and son on their trip to Mexico. Of course, Bubbles will get the son and Feather the father. Funny, feather and father sound a lot alike. Amazing what one little letter can do. Change the whole meaning of a word. She could have been a famous poet herself. When she's inspired, the poetry just flows from her like syrup from maple trees. When Ernie died, she'd written a poem to her dear husband:

Your love will always keep me warm,
as long as I'm alive.
And when I think of your tender voice,
it makes me want to cry.

Though you are gone and I am here,
we'll never be apart.
As long as roses bloom in spring,
you'll be within my heart.

She never shed a tear over Ernie, but it sounded good in the poem. Well, her life isn't over yet. There's still time to make her mark.

She steps into the backyard, clucking over the weeds and the flowers struggling to take hold. From the outside, Feather's studio looks like the barn they had on the farm—rough, weathered wood. A second level that could have been a hayloft. She enters Feather's workspace and looks around. Bubbles can't understand why her daughter spends so much time making unrecognizable things. If Feather sculpted horses or people, made them look real, that would make sense. But most of the sculptures don't resemble anything Bubbles has seen in her long life.

She walks up to one piece that towers over her. Knuckles leaps out from behind it and hisses at her, baring its teeth. She picks up a stick and swats at the cat, missing. Feather's cats give Bubbles the creeps. Sneaking around. Getting into everything. Taking over her bed. It isn't right. They should be in the wild where they belong. Bubbles and the cat stand there, eyeing each other. Knuckles backs down first but makes one last jab in the air with its paw, claws exposed, before climbing into the loft and watching her from above.

Bubbles examines the sculpture she was looking at before the damn cat accosted her. It seems to be hanging from a cross. A kind of mummy, all wrapped in plaster and gauze, words winding round and round it. She tries to make out some of them, but they're all written in French.

Feather's being secretive again. She'd kept a diary written in French when she was little that Bubbles had tried to read. She even borrowed a French dictionary from the library, but it took her forever just to figure out a few words. It wasn't worth it. Now Feather's doing the same thing again. Keeping her mother out of her life. And after all she has done for her.

PUERTO VALLARTA, 1996

Feather pants, trying to keep up with a young Mexican with muscular, brown arms, who whizzes her mother's wheelchair past all the other passengers at Puerto Vallarta's airport. Bubbles gives her Queen Mother wave, just a slight movement of the hand. They speed through a vacant hallway, down a steep ramp, and up another one, until they finally arrive at the baggage area, bypassing customs and the long lines. Soon they're outside the terminal, waiting for a taxi. It's hot and humid—sultry.

“Hey, Mum, we did it. We're in Me-he-co!”

“Is this where Mother's ashes are?”

“Granny's in Mexico City, not Puerto Vallarta. Remember? I already booked this condo before my trip to Calgary. Part of my Mexican summer plans. This is my R&R week.”

Her mother tries to say Puerto Vallarta, but it comes out Perdo Varta. Feather laughs. “You've never been very good at pronouncing foreign words.”

“Never mind. I can knit circles around anyone. That counts for something.”

Feather feels a sudden wave of affection for her mother, reminding herself that Bubbles is still a fourteen-year-old girl psychologically, one of the insights Feather got from her many therapy sessions over the years. Physically, Bubbles left the Isle of Skye at fourteen with her

mother and brothers to join her father in Canada after WWI ended. A Scottish schoolmaster, he had traveled to Calgary seven years earlier to seek his fortune, and the family had to wait until the ocean was safe to cross. But emotionally, her mother had remained in Scotland. So much of her is unformed, making it difficult to be around her. Feather wants to admire her mother, to respect her, to value her gifts. It's just difficult at times to see them. So she keeps searching for her real mother, lurking somewhere under the layers of fat and perfume.

Feather pats Bubbles' arm. "You're right. It counts for a lot."

"What's that noise I hear? Is there something wrong with the jets?"

Feather laughs. "They're birds. Loud, aren't they? We're in the tropics. All jungle around here. Everything's more intense." She often wonders how she's carved out an accurate sense of reality, given her mother's ability to distort things. She seems to view the world from inside a plastic bubble that warps her perceptions.

Feather hands Bubbles a bag of peppermints, her favorite candy; she pops one into her mouth and sucks the sweet mint with pleasure, squinting her eyes against the late afternoon sun.

Bubbles says, "You mean they have lions and tigers here? Snakes?" She shivers. "Look, palm trees. The leaves remind me of the wig Ernie wore when he went dancing." Bubbles frowns. "I'm thirsty, and I want to get out of these duds. They bind me." She snaps her girdle. "This elastic makes me sweat."

Taxi drivers call out, "Señora, por favor, señora, taxi." Ragged boys offer to take their bags. Bubbles slaps at one boy's hand when he reaches for her suitcase. "Get away with you!"

A woman tries to sell them jewelry. Another, holding a baby in a dirty sling, holds out her hand for money. Bubbles digs into her purse and pulls out a dollar bill, handing it to the woman, tears welling up in her eyes. "The poor thing, having to beg. It could be my mother." Feather pats her arm. It feels like the crepe paper they used to decorate the hall for the ninetieth birthday party.

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"Careful, Mamacita, or you won't have any money left."

"Don't worry. I have plenty more stashed in my bra."



On their way to the condo, Bubbles pops another mint in her mouth and stares straight ahead, ignoring the nagging pain that's attacking her stomach again. Just gas, she thinks, pretending she's blind so she doesn't have to look at the bright sun and all the poverty. Bumping around on rough streets in a rundown taxi and being pursued by beggars is too much at her age. "Couldn't they fix up the roads?"

"It's the old part of town. They want to preserve it."

Bubbles frowns and stares at the meter, its numbers racing. "I like modern things—and smooth roads."

"You won't find much of that here."

She pops another mint into her mouth to keep from saying anything she'll regret. Feather forgets that her mother won't be around forever. She's been to Perdo Varta before and should have told her it isn't like the pictures in magazines of big new hotels with white sands and an aqua-colored ocean.

They're passing through another neighborhood. Donkeys and horses wander through the streets, appearing in the same doorways where people live, and no one cleans up after them. Sidewalks are broken and the roads dusty. Men, women, and kids are selling a bunch of junk on every corner. Street urchins no bigger than her great-grandchildren beg for money. People live in hovels made of cardboard. She even sees a man with a fruit stand watching a TV he's set up among the bananas. It makes her homesick for *The Young and the Restless*.

Bubbles misses her scratchies, too. She's used to getting them every day at The Bay and winning a few bucks. It's a pick-me-up for her, something to look forward to. She never knew when she'd win big-time. The thought keeps her going.

Her attitude changes when she steps into the penthouse on the seventh floor of the condo Feather ushers her into. She's never stayed in such an elegant place. While Feather directs the bellman to put the suitcases in the bedrooms, Bubbles does a modified Highland fling before sinking into an overstuffed white sofa. "It's like a Hollywood palace," she cries.

Feather draws the drapes, exposing floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook Banderas Bay, the ocean beyond, and a portion of the town. The building is on the beach, south of the Cuale, and the wraparound balcony has the same white coral tile as the rest of the apartment. Feather opens the sliding glass doors, and a breeze wafts over them. Bubbles heaves herself off the sofa and patters from room to room, stopping to stare at the big bath with a sunken tub in the bathroom off her bedroom. The bed is big enough for a family to sleep in. "I feel like a princess," she says.

Feather laughs. "You are one! Better still, you're a queen, at least for this week."

That night, they sit on the balcony and watch the sun set. Feather points to the cowhide chairs. "Don't they remind you of the farm? Remember those rugs we made from cow and sheep skins?"

Bubbles nods, a faraway look in her eyes. Teary-eyed, she sings, "'Red sails in the sunset, far over the sea, please carry my loved one, home safely to me.' This place is too romantic to be without men." She reaches into her pocket for a caramel, offering one to Feather, who shakes her head. and says, "All that sugar's bad for you."

Bubble ignores her. "Where are we going for dinner, dear?"

Feather lights up a joint.

"I thought you stopped smoking. You're so careful about your health."

"This is sacred smoke. I only have one now and then. Clears my vision."

"Can't you afford eyeglasses? Pew! It smells like burnt rubber. Must be an American cigarette. You should get a good Canadian brand. Players or Exports. They don't smell like that."

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Bubbles can feel her bones drying out already. She's light as air, like the papier-mâché masks she saw at a shop on Insurgente during a late afternoon stroll. She wants one for herself. Maybe a wolf or a cheetah. Something different to take back to Canada, not just her mother's ashes or the cheap souvenirs she usually buys. Something wild she can wear to bingo and give them a laugh or put up on the wall like Feather does—a jackal or a hyena.

She recalls her granny's stories about animals concealing spirits. Bubbles can believe that. Their eyes glow as if they're aware of something she isn't.

At least she can get warm here. This last winter was the worst in a long time. For weeks on end, the temperature was below zero. Still, she didn't let the snow and cold stop her from playing bingo at the lodge or visiting The Bay. She just wrapped herself in layers of clothes, her fur coat on top—the hide as good as any animal's. If they could go out in cold weather, so could she.



Every day, Bubbles leans over the balcony railing, watching the action below, occasionally doing her queenly wave when someone from the beach looks up at her. She feels like the mother of them all, a queen bee watching her workers. And work they do, from morning until past dark—sweeping streets, raking the beach, making tortillas, washing down the sidewalk, selling trinkets and crafts. All of the activity makes her dizzy.

So does the ocean. Its continuous thrashing and breaking on shore sounds like thunder. During the day, she can see as far as the horizon, the line occasionally broken by a boat. Everywhere she looks, she sees the sea and surf. It's like being on an ocean liner. The condo itself seems to be moving.

The first time someone drifted past the balcony, heading for the beach, she thought she was dying—that angels were floating in the sky.

“They’re parasailers,” Feather said. “A boat pulls them out over the Pacific and then back again.”

If she were younger, Bubbles would try it herself.

“Go on, Feather. Why don’t you go up?”

“What if something happened to me? How would you get back to Calgary?”

That shuts up Bubbles. Her body doesn’t always mind her as it used to. She has trouble walking alone on the cobblestone streets and uneven sidewalks. She never knows when they’re going to dip or disappear altogether. And all she can say in Spanish is “moochus grassias.”

A bird hovers over one end of the balcony, the wind holding it aloft, and Bubbles squeals. “Feather, look, an eagle.”

She glances up from the book she’s reading on Aztec art, coiling her long hair around a finger. “It’s a seagull.”

“We have hawks in the parks in Calgary. They’re mean devils, vicious things. They can kill a human, you know. Do these seagulls bite?”

“Only when they’re hungry.”

Later, Bubbles is sure she sees her dead mother drift into the bedroom off the balcony. But when she tries to grab her arm, it isn’t there. Yet the image stays with her, and she’s certain her mother is nearby, watching, waiting.

When Bubbles tells Feather about it, she nods. “I know. It feels like she’s not far away. Reminds me of being a kid. You and Grandpa reminisced about all the relatives—dead and alive. I swear I could feel their presence in the house.”



That night, an orange-colored crescent moon hangs suspended in the sky, as if from a string. Feather and Bubbles are sitting on the balcony, sipping piña coladas. The pelicans glide past in formation. Bubbles reaches out a free hand, trying to touch them, but they continue on

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course and dive into the sea. The women shift their gaze to the horizon, its line broken occasionally by ghostly ships passing by.

The image reminds Feather that she's in Mexico, the land where the dead live on. Like the Scots, many Mexicans assume there is more to reality than what can be discerned through their limited vision. Magic and reality coexist. The Day of the Dead is a major national celebration. Memories of an early Halloween fill her with nostalgia.

"Do you recall that Halloween I dressed as a bumblebee?"

"You always had odd taste in clothes."

"I wanted to go out trick or treating, but you made me wait till we tried the Ouija board." She mimics her mother's gestures: "You said, 'Look, dear, we can use it to talk to the dead. Granny and Granda believe they're nearer to humans on All Hallow's Eve. They roam the earth then. Looking for relatives.'"

Bubbles slurps the last of her piña colada. "I said that? What a memory you have."

"Remember what happened then?"

She frowns, trying to recall.

"You asked the board if your mother was nearby."

"I did?"

"You sure did. I closed my eyes, and our hands began moving as if someone were lightly guiding them. When I opened my eyes, the planchette had moved to beneath the word 'YES.'"

Bubbles leans forward in her chair. "What happened then?"

"Our fingers flew over the board, picking out letters. You jotted them down, but you couldn't make out what the words were. They were in another language: 'una cerveza, por favor.'"

"Oh, I remember now! She was talking Spanish. I knew it was Mother then. What was she saying?"

"She wanted a beer."

Feather doesn't care for a beer, but she could use a smoke. She takes her empty glass into the kitchen and sets it in the sink. Then she opens the fridge, grabs her bag of grass, rolls a joint, lights up, and returns to

the balcony, sucking the smoke deep into her lungs. She slides into her chair, the joint already working its magic, making her limbs feel liquid. Resting her head against the chair back, she focuses on the peaks that shelter Banderas Bay.

“Maybe Granny’s spirit is part of the Sierra Madres now,” Feather says dreamily. “It means ‘the mothers,’ you know? They’re the mountains you see all around here.”

She waves her hand and then watches it float down to her lap. But Bubbles’ eyes have closed. Her mouth falls open, her head nods, and she begins to snore—softly at first, but then at full force. The shrill sound gets drowned in the thundering surf. Feather gets up and covers her with a light throw. Then she leans over and brushes her forehead with her lips, the first time in ages she’s done so.

That night, Feather dreams of a spinning dandelion fluff that chases her. She keeps it away by blowing at it, but it doesn’t stop the thing from following her. Someone in the dream says “these objects can be poisonous,” so she’s afraid of it touching her. Then she’s looking at a flower coming apart, connected in some way to the whirling object she’s been avoiding.

Several women are in the house where she’s staying in the dream—all Mexican, busy cooking and cleaning. Feather offers to help one woman, who is washing the floors, and tucks her peasant skirt into her panties like the woman does so it won’t drag in the water. But when Feather gets down on her knees, the floor drops away, and now she’s spinning through space, the same dream of falling she had as a child, afraid she’d die before hitting bottom.

But she doesn’t die. Nor does she hit bottom. A passing caballero swoops her up in his arms and gallops off. Then she’s riding alone and can feel the horse straining beneath her, racing toward a nearby mountain range. She stands at the foot of the Sierra Madres in the eerie nighttime landscape and calls out, “Mother?”

No one responds.

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The next morning, Bubbles preens in front of the mirror in her room, wearing her new dress, preparing for the bus trip Feather has arranged into the jungle. Light cotton—the color of tea with cream in it—floats over her skin, caressing it. She doesn't wear a girdle or slip under it. Too hot for underclothes, she insists, almost skipping her panties and bra as well until Feather says, "No way, Mum. You'll drive the men crazy."

Bubbles laughs. The sensual feel of the dress fabric distracts her from what's going on in her belly, making her aware of the heat that's been building between her legs. It's been a long time since she's wanted sex. Mexico has awakened the urge again.

When she and Feather step out of the condo, a dozen Native Mexican men rush up and bow in front of Bubbles. "Señora, Señora. Para usted." And they wave things in front of her—mangoes and papayas and even some jewelry made from seashells. "We just want to touch you, Señora. Por favor? It brings luck."

Some of the men kneel in front of her, kissing the hem of her skirt. She giggles and coyly does a little dance step, tipping over a little, the weight of her shoulder bag pulling her off balance. Feather catches her before the men can, pulling her back inside the entrance. "What's gotten into them? You'd think you're a goddess or something. No one even notices me."

Bubbles smiles graciously, steps outside, and holds out her right arm, but Feather grabs her. "For Pete's sake. Don't encourage them. They'll never leave. You're the one who always said, 'Give 'em an inch, they'll take a mile.'"

Bubbles pulls away from Feather and stuffs the gifts into her new handwoven shoulder bag. "I wasn't talking about men. It was those French Canadians you were hanging out with. They're out for all they can get."

“You’re such a bigot!”

“I know I’ve put on weight, but you don’t have to rub it in.”

“I’m just trying to protect you. This isn’t Canada, you know. You’ve got to be careful.”

Bubbles glares at Feather. “You’re too suspicious.”

“Maybe they’re looking for a mother.”

“Maybe they’re not!”

She follows Feather out of the condo complex, avoiding the men and almost stumbling over a wiry brown-skinned gringo on the sidewalk. He’s wearing only shorts, his body tied into knots in a yoga position. Legs wound behind his head, long fingers tapping on the concrete next to his tin cup, he indicates he wants money.

Bubbles looks away. She’s never seen anything like it in her life. Feather does yoga, and Bubbles has tried it herself. She can do the mountain, but she’s never seen someone make a pretzel of himself before. And all for money. Well, he won’t get any of hers. She bounces past, eyes averted.

The bus leaves from the Hotel del Sol where Feather bought the tickets. Oscarito, their guide, wears khaki shorts and a blue shirt splashed with big yellow sunflowers. He welcomes them aboard. “Hey, Mamacita, give me your arm,” he says and hauls Bubbles up the stairs, seating her behind the driver. “A good seat, no? You can be a backseat driver, keep him awake.”

Bubbles smiles up at him, noting he isn’t wearing a wedding band, and he has good legs. She should have worn shorts herself.

“Señoras, señoritas, and señores. Prepare yourselves for the time of your life. Oscarito and his famous driver Pancho want you to see the real Mexico.”

All Bubbles can see in the rearview mirror are Pancho’s teeth. Hanging from the mirror are six rosaries, two crosses, a sack of tobacco, a picture of the Virgin Mary, and a statue of Mickey Mouse.

Bubbles leans over and whispers loudly to Feather, “He must have a lisp, just like Buddy did when he was a boy. He can’t say Mexico right.”

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“Shhh, Mum. They don’t pronounce the ‘X’ in Spanish. It sounds like an ‘H’: Meh-he-co.”

“It sounds like a lisp to me.”

“We’ll be going into the jungle, we’ll visit a ranchero, and there’ll be lots of surprises as well. Wait and see.” Oscarito smiles, looking right at Bubbles. She’s sure of that. Her friend Joyce, who is seventy-five, has a boyfriend who’s fifty-two. They play house together all the time, making Bubbles envious. Oscarito might be in his sixties, and Bubbles can pass as seventy or so. They could make a fine couple.

“We’re passing the famous street where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton lived after he made *Night of the Iguana*, mis amigos. Their individual houses were connected with a passageway. They spent a lot of time in the passageway.” He winks and laughs.

“Did you hear that? Liz and Richard are here.”

Feather shakes her head. “Richard’s been dead several years, and they were divorced for a long time before that.”

“You never know. Stranger things have happened. I see it on TV all the time. Look at Mother’s ashes turning up after all these years. You can’t tell me something funny isn’t going on.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think she’s still alive. This is a different country. Mexicans might have their own way of keeping time. Seventy years in Canada might be only a few years here. You’re always talking about Mexican time. Get it?”

Feather rolls her eyes and tries not to smile. “Never thought of it that way before.”

“I have ideas about things, too. I could’ve been a teacher, like my dad, if I’d put my mind to it. You’re not the only one with a brain in this family.” Bubbles fluffs up her hair and digs into her purse for her face powder. She checks out her image in the compact’s mirror and touches up her nose.

The bus rattles to a stop in front of some grass huts.

“Here we are, señors and señoras. The movie set for *Night of the Iguana*. If you look close, you might see the original iguana, nibbling some leaves.”

Bubbles whispers, “What’s an eegwana?”

“They look like baby dinosaurs. They get as big as a cat or a small dog.”

Bubbles stares out the window, eyebrows pressed together in concentration, hoping to see one. Maybe she can take it home with her for a pet. A little dinosaur. Won’t her neighbors get a bang out of that? This proves her idea about time. If they still have dinosaurs in Mexico, then her mother could still be alive.

She likes this country.

The driver starts up the bus again, and they rumble over the potholed roads. Oscarito hangs onto the railing:

“Now I give you a little social history. This is how social unrest starts, amigos. Some rancheros went to Puerto Vallarta to work in the hotels and make money for boom boxes and televisions. They were no longer satisfied with three meals a day of corn, tortillas, beans, and rice. They didn’t want to work the land anymore—raise guava, papaya, coconut, or fatten a pig to use at fiestas. Now they drank more and lost the easy ways of the ranchero. Having a siesta. Enjoying themselves . . .”

It reminds Bubbles of the Isle of Skye when she was a girl. The whole island was one big family. People did handcrafts and worked the land, just like the Mexicans. They were always making things, enjoying food and drink and good times, until some of them spent time on the mainland. When they returned, they’d changed. Just like Oscarito said.

Bubbles would make him a good wife. She feels like she’s come home. Since being in Mexico, she’s felt the years peeling away from her bones. No wonder her mother wanted to come here. She knew something. Her mother always was a smart woman. Ahead of her time. This proved it.

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On the last day in Puerto Vallarta, Bubbles asks Feather to take her to their beach, Playa Los Muertos. “I want to dip in the sea again. I used to swim in it when I was a girl, you know. The Atlantic.”

They trudge across the scorching sand. A vendor shuffles past, ten sombreros stacked on his head. “A hat, señoras?” Behind him strolls a Native Mexican woman, reams of silky flowered material draped over her body. “A skirt, señoras? Look, it wraps like this. Fits any size.” And she demonstrates, tying a strip of fabric around her hips.

Fish carved out of wood, mobiles trailing vividly colored fish and butterflies, jewelry, blankets, charbroiled fish on a stick—all these things swirl around Bubbles at once. And the masks, just like the ones she saw in the shop. Bobbing up and down. Alive.

She moans and momentarily doubles over.

Feather asks, “You okay, Mum?”

Bubbles straightens up. “Just a little gas, dear.”

“You sure?”

She plows ahead, ignoring Feather, the soles of her feet burning with each step. She should have worn her shoes. Suddenly, the sand turns cool, damp from where the waves recently washed it and a darker shade of beige. Her footprints look strange, her feet bigger than she thought, but the indentations seem temporary. Another wave rushes toward them, froth bubbling over their feet, and washes away the imprints.

“Do you want to go farther, Mum?”

“A little. I’d like to get a good soak.”

Back slightly bent and skin sagging in folds, she clings to Feather’s arm as they walk slowly, stopping when another wave rolls toward them, slapping their bodies and almost knocking them over. She screams, “My shoes, they’re gone!”

The sun blinds her, reflected off the ocean. Salt water splashes in her mouth. Everything seems to be spinning—the vendors, the sun, the beachfront restaurants.

Feather hangs on to her and laughs. “It’s okay, Mum, you aren’t wearing shoes.”

The wave drags sand from under her feet, leaving two small graves, and she hears a whooshing sound, the surf grabbing at her again. The Atlantic that surrounded Skye never was this wild.

PORTREE, ISLE OF SKYE, 1916

Bubbles' father, Norman MacDonald, dragged her and her brothers to the Free Presbyterian Church (the strictest on the island) every Wednesday (evensong and prayers) and in the morning and evening on Sundays.

Scowling, he said, "I won't have heathens in my family."

After he left for Canada to seek his fortune, Bubbles' mother continued the practice just to keep face, though it was clear her heart wasn't in it.

During prayers, while her mother yawned and snoozed, Bubbles crawled under the pews and slipped away into the night. She flitted through the village, eavesdropping in people's attics and basements, or showing up at the widow's house near the pier where sailors—and others—stopped for refreshment.

Many nights she also visited the Portree cemetery with other young villagers, who gathered there to smoke and hide from their elders. They played a game of who could find the oldest grave, the cemetery a village itself of decaying flesh and bones. Bubbles liked to read inscriptions on headstones. Some of her own family were buried there. She was especially interested in a girl named Lilian, who had died at seven.

Granda Malcolm had painted Lilian before she died. In the picture, she stood in an open doorway, the Atlantic behind her, wearing an ankle-length yellow dress, sleeves puffing out at the shoulders. In

one hand, she concealed something in the folds of her skirt, a look of surprise on her face, as if caught in the act of stealing. The picture hung in the entrance hall, and Bubbles had to pass it whenever she visited her grandparents' croft. She wanted to know what Lilian was concealing in her hand. She had asked her granda, but the old man said, "Ach, you're imagining things, lass. The fairies have gotten to you. She has nothing in her hand."

But Bubbles could see it.

The graves that sprouted flowers attracted Bubbles the most. She plucked a bluebell and stuck it behind her ear, clicking two rocks together between her fingers, as if she had castanets and was dancing on the tombstones. The buckles on her shoes glinted in the constant twilight that hovered all night in the summer.

Her presence in and around Portree became as familiar as wild heather growing in the glens. After school—which she skipped often as not, claiming she had work to do at her granda's croft—she loved to follow her uncles Callum and Ian to the pub. They were the local tailors and her mother's brothers. She sneaked in the door and crept under the tables, sitting on the floor between her uncles' legs and listening to the talk. The family history raveled and unraveled each day.

The men also spent many an afternoon discussing all the work they had waiting for them back at the shop, the women there doing most of it. Her uncles made the patterns and cut the fabric; their wives, daughters, and nieces did the sewing. Bubbles was supposed to be learning the trade, but she had no skill then with a needle and thread. Her stitches were uneven, and she couldn't read patterns. A waistcoat she had made out of MacKenzie tartan looked promising until she stitched together both armholes.

The older women, tired of tearing out her work and redoing it, shooed her away when she did show up in the shop. "Off with you, lass."

Bubbles thought the women were saying "Off with your ass," and she imagined them taking scissors to her rear and snipping away, treating her flesh like so much fabric that could be trimmed and tucked.

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She much preferred to be with the men anyway. She liked their stories and the homey pub smells—the sour, malty odor of stout or ale, the stew simmering on the stove to be served at lunch or dinner so the men had no need to stagger off home until bedtime, the cigarette and cigar smoke cloaking everything in a misty haze, softening the edges. She inhaled it deeply into her lungs until she felt dizzy.

Callum and Ian could take the same story and give it a new twist each time, so she never grew tired of hearing them talk. They gnawed on scraps of family history, nuzzling them, turning them over and over, always searching for another angle. The changeability of their stories made her doubt more and more the history she was learning in school. What was the truth?

One day Bubbles heard Callum mention Lilian. Her heart beat faster.

“She was a fine looking wee lass, that Lilian.”

“It’s a shame what happened to her.”

“Aye, she looked like an angel in the coffin. She was a beauty, just like her mother, Fanny. But she was marked, just as sure as Cain, from the day she was born.”

“Oh, so it’s God now that’s responsible for this mess.”

“Go on, man, we suckled at the same breast. You’re just as much a Christian as I am.”

“You got the Christian breast, but Mother has two, don’t forget, and she also has two minds. She only pays lip service to the church so her father doesn’t rattle his bones in the grave. She isn’t really a believer.”

And they were off, arguing about religion, Callum insisting that there was a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—and Ian scoffing, blowing puffs of cigarette smoke into the air and saying, “There’s the holy ghost for you.”

Callum jumped up and pounded the table with his fist. “You’re mocking my religion and taking the Lord’s name in vain.”

“If he’s fool enough to split himself in three, he deserves to be mocked.”

“You’ve always had a hard head. How could you possibly understand the Trinity when you can’t even figure out your own taxes?”

“What’s that got to do with religion?”

“A fool and his money are soon parted.”

Bubbles stared at her uncles’ boots, dried mud flaking onto the oiled wooden floor. They had been talking about her aunt Fanny. What had happened to her?

Callum raised his glass to Able, the barkeep. “Just one more stout, and we’ll be off.” Hours later he said, “Gimme another toddy, my good man. One for the road.” And even later, they toasted the walls and the lanterns, the barkeep falling asleep, reading his paper behind the bar, glasses perched on the end of his nose.

Bubbles had slipped away much earlier, ears ringing with the sound of her uncles’ voices. They had started talking about her father, a schoolmaster and staunch Free Presbyterian. Every Highland Scot knew the natural world connected earth and spirit, even those who called themselves Christians—everyone, that is, except her father. Even Callum found his brother-in-law overly rigid and narrow, unable to tolerate anything but what the good book approved.

Bubbles’ mother pretended to share her husband’s beliefs, but her heart was still with the old religion. Her own mother, Annie MacGregor, had taught it to her. Annie’s mother before that had learned it in the same way, passed down generation after generation.

When the children had grown, Annie and Malcolm gave their Stormy Hill house to their oldest son Callum as a wedding gift—the custom at the time—and moved to a croft just outside of Portree. Bubbles visited her granny and granda’s place whenever she could after school, taking her shoes off when she left the village, hiding them and her books under a rowan. Then she called her grandparents’ cows from the common area where they grazed and chased them to the byre.

Wearing an apron and a long skirt tied above her knees, Annie stood in the doorway of the cattle shed, shaking her finger at Bubbles. Annie had told Bubbles many times not to chase the cows. “You’ll get them so excited they’ll only give curdled milk.” She shook her head, muttering under her breath, “That girl hasn’t an ounce of sense.”

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After milking the cows and skimming off the cream they'd later churn into butter, Bubbles and her granny were about to set off together over the glens. "Where the devil are your shoes, lass? You can't run around like a wild thing."

"But Granny, you don't wear shoes all the time."

Annie grabbed a stick and shook it threateningly. "Off with you. We'll not go till you're properly dressed."

Later, they trudged up a rocky hill, searching for sheared lambs, the Cuillin Hills shrouded in clouds. Light glinting off the buckles on her boots, Bubbles stopped to catch her breath, her granny plowing ahead. "Hurry, dear. They'll get their death of cold, poor wee things." When they finally reached the grazing sheep, Bubbles held the bleating lambs while Annie pulled the sweaters she'd knitted over their heads.

Annie knitted the way some people breathe. She could do it while she was sleeping, churning butter, milking cows, and cooking. Nothing stopped her from making garments that could be seen on the backs of animals, bobbing around the countryside.

She dyed the wool that she'd spun from their sheared lambs—jaunty yellows and blues and reds competing with the bluebells and hyacinths. Clothing the animals didn't make much sense, but Malcolm had given up trying to understand her.

"Why on earth, Annie, must you make sweaters for every creature on Skye? I'm not a rich man. We could be selling this wool and clothing ourselves. What possesses you, woman?"

Annie lifted her nose higher and sniffed, making a wide circle around him, carrying an injured cat that was wearing one of her sweaters. The spare bedroom was an infirmary. A rat, two lambs, a cat, a fawn, and a fox were making their home there. Annie had a holy mission, caring for the Tuatha Dé Danann, making their life on earth a pleasant one, though she did wonder about her vocation when the fox attacked the fawn, and the cat cornered the rat, causing her to step in and break them up, scratches and bites her reward. Aye, it was a hard life, and no one knew it better than she.

Annie also tried to care for the little people, the fairies. After rounding up the lambs, she said to Bubbles, “Come, lass, we’ve work to do.” She settled in front of the fireplace, patting a stool next to her, digging around in her braided hair for her needles and then finding them tucked into her apron. “It’s time to sew for the little people. The village ladies have decided they can’t go around in their birthday suits any longer.”

“How do you know what sizes to make?”

Annie gave Bubbles a disgusted look and leaned over to stir a pot hanging over the fire, steam drifting out from under the lid. “What a question to ask! I know them as well as I know my own children.” And she dug into a bag made of sheepskin, pulling out scraps of fabric she’d taken from the tailor shop. “They’ll be the best-dressed fairies in all of Scotland. Here, lass, sew these seams.”

Bubbles took a needle and some thread from her granny, as well as the tiny dresses and jackets she handed her, eyes straining in the dim light to see. “Granny, I heard Uncle Ian and Uncle Callum talking about Aunt Fanny and her daughter. They said her daughter Lilian died. Is that the girl in the painting Granda did—in the yellow dress? Why did she die?”

“What are they doing putting such ideas in your head? Don’t you mention this to your granda, hear? He hasn’t been in his right mind since . . .”

“Since what?”

“Never mind. You’re too young to be bothering yourself with these things.”

“But why doesn’t Granda want to talk about it? He painted her, didn’t he?”

“Hush. That’s enough. Children are to be seen and not heard. You’ve always asked too many questions.” Granny squinted her eyes and pressed her mouth into a grim line, concentrating on cutting out another pattern for some wee trousers.

Bubbles bit her lip, but her granny’s behavior made her more curious than ever.

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Malcolm, six inches shorter than Annie, constantly wore his dented pith helmet from the Boer War to cover his baldness and so he'd appear taller. He even wore it to bed, making him look like an oversized baby.

As he often did during the spring and summer, he put on Annie's wedding veil to protect him when he went outside. It kept the midges from biting. He was so used to seeing the world from behind his wife's veil, it was a shock when he took it off. The clarity of things. The lack of fuzzy edges. He much preferred wearing the veil.

When he wasn't in the cups, or at the tailor shop, Malcolm dug in his potato patch and sheared the sheep. Or he stood in front of his easel in the garden, slapping paint on an old board he'd prepared, washed up from the sea, a remnant of a shipwreck.

She liked watching him paint. He'd study something in the distance, flipping back the wedding veil and revealing his ruddy face with long, bushy eyebrows curling down into his eyes. He peered through a square he made with his hands. Then he attacked the canvas, grunting and cursing, blue eyes glinting with excitement and watering with emotion.

"Every time I put a color down, I'm getting a wee bit of the world into the painting. I want others to see the spirit of the place."

Bubbles—her long, brown, wavy hair tied back with a ribbon, freckles popping out on her pale face and arms—nodded. She studied the images, pretending to understand. Sometimes she handed him the brushes, first dipping them in paint. They worked effortlessly like this, as if one body—she sensing what he needed, and he trusting her judgment.

"Aye, lass, I mixed hunter green with scarlet and got you. Just a few swishes of the brush and there you were, twirling on the canvas." And he did a little jig among the potatoes.

Bubbles didn't tire of the stories he told about her arrival. She'd heard them so often, she was convinced her granda had created her,

not her parents. With her father gone when she was just seven, she could imagine not having a father at all. Anyway, she hadn't figured out yet how babies were formed, so this explanation made sense. If he could cause wood anemones, rowans, beech, and oak to come alive in a painting, then why couldn't he make humans?

In her wanderings around the village, she was constantly staring at people, wondering what artwork they'd tumbled out of, hoping to catch a painting in the act of giving birth. She stood for hours one day, watching a still life in the town hall until her eyes started to cross and she became dizzy. Her granda had warned her, though, that not everyone started life in a painting. Some began as sculptures. Some as pieces of furniture. Some came from animals. Others simply arrived the more normal way, from a woman's body. It all depended.

"What does it depend on, Granda?"

"On the fairies, lass. They decide our futures and how we'll be born."

Of course, Bubbles' father had told her there was only one God, and he had made himself visible in his son Jesus Christ. Sometimes Bubbles confused Jesus with the little people, mixing it all up in her mind—Mary was the mother of Joseph, and Jesus was the father of Mary, and they all lived in the glens, running naked in the spring around the fires, riding their donkeys into the village every year at Christmas to put on the pageant.

She much preferred the tales her granda and granny told her. They didn't come out of a book, so she didn't have to memorize them as she did the Scriptures. Her own imagination helped create the stories—they were part of her. She lived in them, remaking them slightly each time. But the Scriptures couldn't be changed.

Bubbles' granda talked while he worked, sweating and panting, swatting at midges. "Get away, you blasted beasties. Ah, lass, there never was a worse creature made. God put midges on earth to test us. The very devil lives in Skye midges." He swung around and tiptoed toward her: "They creep up on you like the devil does, too tiny to see,

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and then they attack. It would be a grand life if it weren't for the midges. They drive a man to drink."

And he reached for the pint of ale he tipped while he painted, slipping it under the veil and guzzling, absentmindedly handing it to his granddaughter. She took a sip, licking the froth off her lips.

Annie—her long chestnut colored hair braided and wrapped around her head like a crown—tramped down the path, carrying a basket of laundry. "There you are, putting crazy ideas in your granddaughter's head again. The devil's in *you*, old man, not the midges. Look at you, half drunk already, and it isn't even noon. Don't listen to a word he says, lass. He's loony as they come. I woke up the night before last, and he was standing over me, holding a chair above my head. Now what on earth would he be thinking of? A chair, mind you."

"I was having a vision."

"Aye, a vision of hitting me with the chair! You expect me to believe such stories? You're not in your right mind when you drink. I have to sleep with one eye open or I might not wake up."

"Annie, I wouldn't hurt you for anything. You make me sound like a bloody fiend."

"Well, the drink makes you into one. I've been telling you that for years. What about when the gilleán* found you wading out into the sea at midnight? You'd be gone for good if I hadn't sent them out looking for you."

"I was just communing with Manannán Mac Lir."

"Aye, and what message did he have for you?"

"It was a private conversation."

"Get away with you! The only spirits you commune with are in a bottle. Manannán Mac Lir would have to be drunk himself to talk to you."

Bubbles didn't understand completely what her granny and granda were arguing about. She knew that he drank most of the time, but it just made him jollier.



One night, after everyone was asleep, Bubbles crept out of the house carrying an empty ale bottle, a full moon lighting her way. She had filled the bottle with messages—some to the King of the Sea and others to her father in the new world. She dreamed of someday boarding a boat and sailing there. She'd included descriptions of Skye and its people, as well as stories her granny, granda, and uncles had told.

Staying in the shadows, she raced to the harbor, a mist covering everything with a fine spray, her favorite weather and time of day. She had the second sight like her granny. It was easier to see into the other world then, fog wrapping around her, masking the boats in the harbor and the shops and houses lining the street. Thinking about it made her shiver slightly with anticipation—and a little fright.

At times she wanted to follow the little people into the trees and glens and into the sea. But she feared if she did she might not return. Her granny had told her of others who'd crossed over for good, slipped through the veil separating the two worlds. "If you go, there's no coming back, lass. You have to remember that. Look at your aunt Isabella. Poor soul. She tried to follow them and hasn't been in her right mind since. Sitting all day at her window, looking out to sea. It's a pity."

Standing on the dock, Bubbles leaned over, made a wish, and dropped the bottle into the ocean. For a long time she stood there, watching it bob on the waves, drifting farther and farther away.

MEXICO CITY, 1996

Feather glances at her mother, who is quiet for once, knitting, sitting in a wheelchair provided by the Puerto Vallarta airport, looking around occasionally to see what others are doing. Feather squirms in the hard plastic bucket seat, one of several attached to the same base, jiggling every time someone gets up or sits down. She's reading the magazine *Yoga and Health*, going over and over the same words, trying to understand how different yoga postures can correct problems in various parts of the body.

She feels out of whack with herself, in need of rebalancing. Being with Bubbles always makes her feel that way, as if she's a satellite slightly off course. Or a moon orbiting around a planet. She's never been able to account for her mother's energy and charisma. Feather always feels invisible next to her. Even the Mexican men treat Bubbles like a great white goddess. Feather always feels tired and limp when they're together, whereas Bubbles seems indefatigable.

Every afternoon in Puerto Vallarta, Feather suggested a siesta after lunch. "Why don't *you* take a nap, dear. I'm going to knit," Bubbles would say. An hour later, Feather would find her prowling the balcony, watching the parasailors and the vendors on the beach. "Can we go shopping, dear?" Feather just groaned, not wanting to leave the cool sea breezes that flowed through their penthouse for the higher temperatures on the street.

She groans again now and considers doing some yoga postures to center herself. But if she did, Bubbles would want to join her. Anything Feather does, she also wants to do, as if the two are still connected by an umbilical cord. It's been a longstanding problem for Feather, who decides she'll have to live for now with being out of whack. As long as her mother is alive, she may also have to put up with feeling second-rate.

As if reading Feather's mind, Bubbles lets out a hefty sigh, a signal she's getting impatient and wants action. "What the dickens is going on? Can't we get out of here? It's been hours."

Feather shakes her head. "Not yet. There's a severe thunderstorm."

She hates constantly needing to be the mother—the one in charge. A part of her longs to be dependent. She doesn't feel she's ever been able to fully rely on her mum. Ever.

She tells herself she should be grateful to have this time alone with Bubbles. She might not be around that much longer. Feather is worried about these "gas" pains she gets regularly. And all that bloating. But Bubbles refuses to discuss her health with Feather—or anyone. Nothing will sway her. She believes she can will herself well, and if that doesn't work, then she'll just ignore whatever is bothering her.

It's gotten her this far.

"For Pete's sake," Bubbles says, frowning. "We should be flying on a Canadian airline. They don't let storms stop them. They don't know what a real storm is here." She halfheartedly fans her face with a limp, lipstick-stained hanky. The airport has air conditioning, but it doesn't work very well. The ninety-plus degree heat makes both of them sweat.

Feather worries about Bubbles getting heat stroke, and she's also troubled about arriving in Mexico City after dark. It's unsafe in daylight, thieves grabbing visitors' bags—or anything else that isn't nailed down—at airline counters. What would it be like at midnight? Maybe they'll be kidnapped. Maybe her mum will be kidnapped.

Feather squashes the malevolent thought. It's immediately followed with a memory of Bubbles taking off with Manny, leaving Feather to

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care for her brothers and her stepfather, Floyd. She quit school just after starting grade eleven, planning to take over her mum's role. She did the shopping, cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Then she had a run-in with Floyd.

He sat slouched over the table one night after dinner, still covered with dust from his job laboring in the gravel pits, eyes reddened from the beers he'd drunk before coming home. Feather was carrying dishes to the sink when out of the blue, he said, "You're just like your mother. Out for my money. Trying to turn the boys against me."

She dropped a plate. It shattered on the linoleum, one fragment nicking her ankle and drawing blood. "What're you talking about?"

"You heard me. A whore, just like Bubbles."

Feather ran to her room. It didn't make sense to her. She was nothing like her mother, in appearance or otherwise. But a few days later, when Floyd began staring too long at Feather's breasts, she realized it was time to move on. She didn't want him confusing her with Bubbles some night and forgetting he was her stepfather, not her husband. So she moved out and never returned.



A female voice announces in Spanish and then English, "Mexicana Airlines flight two hundred for Mexico City will be boarding in twenty minutes. All travelers holding tickets should go to gate ten."

In the air, Bubbles knits to keep her mind off the storm outside. Lightning rips open the night sky, ragged edges illuminating patches of earth below. She tries to ignore the severe turbulence. It reminds her of riding horses on the farm. She never knew what to expect from them. She could be going along, enjoying the ride, when suddenly all hell would break loose. They'd shy at something, or stumble, and she'd almost be thrown. But then, life is like that. Everything seems fine. Then, suddenly, it isn't.

Unwilling to think about anything unpleasant, she reminds herself she's on vacation with her daughter, and soon she'll be reunited with her mother. She watches their pilot through the open cockpit door. He looks like a cowboy riding a wild bronco, hatless, the first few buttons on his shirt unbuttoned. A cross hangs off one of the instruments, a picture of the Virgin covering a panel filled with numbers. He crosses himself, so Bubbles does also, going from right to left and left to right. She needs all the protection she can get.

Pushing carts down the aisle, ignoring the plane's lurching motion, the flight attendants appear green, their smiles strained. One young woman, wearing a brown skirt and flowered blouse, stops next to Bubbles and asks in accented English if she wants a drink.

She says, "Rum and coke, and double up on the rum."

Feather raises her eyebrows but requests the same for herself. "What the hell, Mum. If we're going down, we might as well go down feeling high."

Bubbles nods.



The plane doesn't go down. It lands safely at the Mexico City Airport. Loaded down with carry-ons and all of the things they bought in Puerto Vallarta, Feather groans and follows the airport attendant, pushing Bubbles' wheelchair through the crowds of people. She almost loses sight of them, the place packed with travelers, even after midnight. A few sombreros bob up and down like buoys in the sea of voyagers. Feather runs to keep up. It's a madhouse, and she wishes she were in that chair, not her mum.

The toe of a lavender sock Bubbles is making pokes out of a satchel hanging from one of Feather's shoulders. The knitting takes up a whole bag by itself, a collection of checkered slippers and socks that seem to appear whole from her flashing fingers—Christmas and birthday gifts for all her family and friends. The more nervous she is, the more she knits.

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Feather feels nervous, too. She's read that green VW cabs aren't safe. What's to stop someone from running off with two women alone? She notices the attendant, a man in his forties with thinning hair and a paunch, eyeing the ring on her mum's pinkie, one she picked up at a vendor in Puerto Vallarta that looks like the real thing. Feather should have warned her not to wear any flashy jewelry. Even the cheap stuff can give people ideas.

For a moment, she wishes she were safe at home in San Geronimo with her cats and birds. She wonders if she were a bird in a former life, something splendid like the quetzal. Certainly not some barn swallow or crow. The last psychic she consulted said she'd been an eagle in one of her reincarnations. Maybe that's why America attracted her. That and having one thousand miles between herself and her family. Being around Bubbles and her half brothers for any length of time makes her feel caged. Trapped in destructive family dynamics, her therapist told her—and old tensions.

The oldest, she feels she let down her brothers by running off the first chance she got and not making up for Bubbles' absence. Maybe Buddy wouldn't have gone off the deep end if Feather had stuck around. Maybe Abbot wouldn't have quit school after eighth grade. Maybe! Maybe! Maybe!



It's almost midnight before they get their luggage and arrange for a rental car, finally climbing into a new, flaming-red Honda Civic. Bubbles had insisted on a red car.

"I don't want mother's ashes carried in something that looks like a hearse. She should travel in style."

Feather hadn't planned to rent a car until they were ready to leave Mexico City. Driving in Mexico doesn't sound safe for a man, and it must be worse for women. Still, it seems a better alternative than taking a taxi at this hour.

The Avis rental car agent went over the city map with her, giving directions to the Sheraton in the Zona Rosa. He fluttered his hands over the map, like a priest giving absolution or a magician conjuring up the unknown. She had trouble understanding him, a mix of Spanish and English words not quite matching her own limited vocabulary.

“¿Cómo estás?” he asked.

She said, “Bien, gracias. ¿Está aquí ya?”

“Todavía tendrá que esperar un poquito más.”

She understood “que” and “un poquito más,” but she barely caught a recognizable word before he was off again in Spanish, leaving her far behind and needing to figure out his meaning from the mysterious gestures he gave.

Feather drives away from the airport in the dark, waving goodbye to the rental car attendant and grinding the unfamiliar gears. She glances out the window at the sky. A few stars glitter overhead, escaping the smog she’s heard about. At least she has pepper spray in her handbag. She bought it when she was hiking in the Rocky Mountains once, a protection against bears. On that trip, all she’d encountered were mosquitoes and black flies. They’d ignored the pepper and zeroed in on her, biting right through her clothes.

Unable to think of an Indian prayer, Feather tries crossing herself, though it feels like a betrayal of the aboriginals whose tribe she joined after her experiences in their sweat lodge. But she needs some protection. If the Christian God can help, she won’t refuse. She and her mum have gone from someplace small and safe and known—Puerto Vallarta—to the belly of Mexico. Or some would say its heart. Close to twenty million people live here. It’s overwhelming.

Feather nudges Bubbles and says, “Your mum must’ve flipped when she saw this place. Even seventy years ago, it was a big city. At least a million.”

“Oh, Mother had been to Glasgow and Montreal. She’d been to big cities before.”

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“Yeah, but nothing was like Mexico City. It was booming then. People visiting from all over the world. Hoping to make their fortune.”

“The size wouldn’t bother Mother. She liked seeing new places.”

Feather turns down a street that the agent said was a shortcut to the hotel. She slams her foot on the brake, and they screech to a halt. The headlights expose a sign that says “**ALTO**” hung on a couple of sawhorses. A roadblock.

“Watch it!” Feather instinctively puts out her right arm to shield Bubbles from hitting the dash with her head. Then she turns on the interior light and glances at the map. Did she take a wrong turn?

Two figures approach from the shadows, one on each side of the car. Feather has heard of people being kidnapped and held for ransom. Never seen again. She looks in the rearview mirror, planning to back up, and shifts into reverse. How did she let her mother talk her into visiting Mexico City? It’s crazy.

“I’ll do the talking,” Feather says. “But hold on. I might have to get out of here fast. Got your seat belt fastened?”

She knows Bubbles hates seat belts. She claims they press against her heart and pinch her stomach. While she pretends to use them, she just holds the metal catch in her hand. But tonight she didn’t even go through the pretense.

Bubbles opens her window a couple of inches before Feather can stop her.

“Careful. We don’t know these dudes.”

She ignores Feather and calls out “Mama,” dropping one of her knitting needles. The carpeted floor absorbs the sound.

Feather reaches for her handbag and grabs the can of pepper spray. “Jesus Christ, close the bloody window. These men are dangerous.”

“It’s okay, dear. It’s Mother.”

“Are you off your rocker?”

Feather stares out the window. Maybe her mum is right and Feather’s grandmother is here, waiting. She’s reminded of Halloween, expecting ghosts and goblins to pounce from the shadows. Skeletons

rattling. Grabbing a knitting needle from Bubbles, she checks the lock on her door. They'd not get the two of them without a fight.

"Buenas noches, señoras," a man wearing a police uniform says, flashing his light through the window, shining it on their faces and the backseat.

Her mum blurts out, "That isn't Mama!"

"Buenas noches, señor." Feather gropes for the right words. "Habla inglés?"

"A leetle. You lost? No la carretera. Vamos!" And he waves his arms in the air.

Everyone has told her not to trust anyone in Mexico City, especially policemen. They're more crooked than the criminals. She floors the gas pedal. "Hold on, Mum. We're getting outta here."

She aims the car for the tunnel of lighter sky she sees behind them and backs up, tires squealing, the car's headlights holding the policemen—shocked and frozen in front of the roadblock—in their glare.

Propelled by fear and a rush of adrenaline, Feather puts the car in first as soon as they reach a cross street, grinding gears in her rush to get away. The car roars through the unfamiliar streets. Night owls scatter in front of the onrushing vehicle. She thinks she sees a raven out of the corner of one eye, trying to keep up with them, black wings flapping frantically.

Bubbles grips the door handle, map of Mexico City forgotten underfoot on the floor.

CALGARY, 1955

On the day Feather officially dropped out of school, there was no eclipse of the sun or moon. The color didn't drain from the expansive prairie sky. No one rushed up to her and shouted, "You're making a serious mistake you'll later regret!"

Shortly after starting grade eleven, during mid-November snow flurries, she fled Crescent Heights High School. No more three-mile treks each way in sub-zero temps. No more rising at dawn and shivering through the morning rituals of dressing, eating, and fighting with her two younger brothers before leaving the house.

It was 1955, and she had her first taste of freedom. Just fifteen years old because she'd skipped grade three, she resembled The Fool in the tarot deck, about to step off a cliff but unaware of the danger. Innocent of the hazards that might be waiting for her in the world, she decided school was the problem—especially sitting in classes and being required to do homework. Behind in everything, she was getting low grades. Clearly, she wasn't the problem. It had to be school that was holding her back from a more successful life. The gray wool skirt she wore the day she dropped out kissed the tops of her white ankle socks, and her feet were enclosed in scuffed, blue-and-white saddle shoes. But she was ready to trade in this school outfit for something else, something she couldn't yet imagine.

She left her books in the school locker, sneaking glances at the other kids chattering nearby in clusters, a little ashamed of her defection. She didn't want to call attention to herself, but she needn't have worried. No one noticed she was leaving for good. A three-ring binder, the only thing she took with her, was filled with different cursive signatures she had tried out. Something snazzy that would set her apart from the other girls.

What else did she record on those blue-lined pages? She doesn't remember exactly. Not a big note taker, she would have doodled whatever came into her head. She also loved to draw caricatures of her classmates or her teachers. Or she wrote notes to friends about how bored she was with math or how cute the guy in the front row was. She also may have used the invented language she created when she first started keeping a diary at thirteen, afraid someone might discover it.

That school binder no longer exists, except in Feather's imagination. She made it distinctive by creating a unique cover page, a drawing of her former horse—a connection to the farm that she had loved. Nor does the diary. But Crescent Heights still stands, as sturdy as it was then—red bricks stacked in orderly progression, offering a pathway to something more. The rim around the top resembled a castle's battlements.

When she stepped out the doors for the last time, she didn't look back. She didn't think about the things she would miss at school.

The Friday noon hour dances when they practiced being adults and twirled around the gym, buzzed out midday by this proximity to the opposite sex.

The basketball or football games, followed by more dances or parties.

The English classes she excelled in.

The drafting and printing classes she took, signing up for them because she was the only girl and would have all the boys to herself.

The girl and guy friends she made whose lives were on track and whose mothers wouldn't want them hanging around with a dropout.

She didn't know that she had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

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Floyd didn't try to stop her from quitting school. He had only completed the eighth grade, and he didn't think women needed much education. It was wasted on a girl that would just get married and have kids. Feather believed him. Heaven forbid that kids might have mothers who could read, write, and converse beyond a few grunts at the dinner table. So she knew he wouldn't be angry with her for dropping out. And he wasn't.

His lack of higher education had locked him into a laborer's life, first as a farmer and then as a rock crusher at the local rock-crushing plant. On some nights, he came home so exhausted he couldn't eat dinner. He crashed on the floor, later rousing himself long enough to crawl into bed and do it again the next day. This should have set off rockets in Feather's mind that signaled Floyd's life lacked something.

It didn't.

Not then.

It seemed normal to live a prescribed life.

And Bubbles' response to her dropping out of school? Was she waiting for Feather in their duplex that day, a plate of steaming scones sitting on the dining room table? No. She had recently dropped out herself, though not from school.

Not long before Feather made her big move, her mum took off for Vancouver to join her lover, Manny, throwing everyone into turmoil. A few days before she left, Bubbles was sitting at the kitchen table, smoking and drinking coffee while Feather made herself breakfast—some toast and jam. The boys had already gone to school. Usually, Bubbles talked constantly about whatever came into her mind. But on this day, she was strangely silent, and her eyes avoided Feather's.

Finally, as Feather was putting on her coat and shoes, ready to go to Crescent Heights, her mother croaked, "I'm leaving on Friday. I'm meeting Manny at the coast."

The coast? That explained her whispered phone conversations. Stunned, Feather couldn't voice the many questions that flooded her brain and felt like a sledgehammer had hit her. Bubbles may not have

been the most attentive mother, but the household orbited around her. She would leave a crater behind they all could fall into. It scared Feather to think of being left with a stepfather and two half brothers to care for when she was just a kid herself.

Without saying goodbye, Feather walked out the door and followed her usual path to Crescent Heights. Only this time she noticed nothing. Not the birds giving their morning serenade. Not the cumulous clouds flitting across the sky. Not her heart pounding as if it would flee from her chest. Her mother's words temporarily turned her to stone.

Feather moved through the day like a sleepwalker, unable to shake the terror building inside her. This fear had always hovered close to consciousness, but until then, she had been able to squash it. Now she couldn't. It felt permanent. As her mother was moving out, this dread took up residence without asking permission.

At least she gave a little advance warning, time to digest what was happening—a slight consolation. Feather tried to convince her mum to stay, but she would have none of it. "I feel like a slave here, cooking and cleaning. I need a life."

"So do we," Feather said, slamming out of the house.



On the morning Bubbles took off in a taxi, lugging two suitcases, she handed Feather a piece of paper.

"Give this to Floyd," she said and brushed Feather's cheek with her lips before climbing into the cab.

Through her tears, Feather could make out an address and phone number where Bubbles could be reached, so she didn't feel totally abandoned. Though she knew in advance her mother was leaving, it still had a major impact on her. She felt a void, not only in the house but also in herself. While her mother could be self-absorbed, at least she had been a constant in Feather's life and a physical, lively presence. No longer could she count on it.

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Feather has never forgotten the look of stunned surprise on Floyd's face when she told him her mum had taken off. He resembled a suddenly deflated balloon, his body crumbling. He bent over, as if protecting his stomach from an attack. After some of the cruelties Feather had experienced at his hand, she could have felt some satisfaction at inflicting this blow. But she didn't. Just as devastated as he was, she also felt part of the infidelity, but angry, too, at being left with the mess. She had to clean up after Bubbles. She had to witness the wreckage her mother left behind. She's never really forgiven her for that burden.

Yet another part of her cheered Bubbles' escape, the courage to follow her dreams as her mother had. It also emboldened Feather to make her own break with her studies and all they involved. Her mum had chosen to change her life. Why couldn't Feather?

PORTREE, ISLE OF SKYE, 1920

Near Bubbles' fourteenth birthday, she felt as if the whole world had turned upside down and inside out. At odds with everything, including herself, she ended up in unusual places and in the strangest circumstances, wandering around in a dreamy daze. One morning she awakened in front of the flour bin, covered from head to toe with flour, unable to remember how she'd gotten there—or why. Had she walked in her sleep? Had the little people played a trick on her? And why the flour bin?

She never found out. But it took her days to get all the flour out of her hair and off her body. She felt like puff pastry. Or a tart.

That's what her granny called her. A tart. "Putting rouge on your lips and powder all over your face. You're turning into a tart. Don't worry, I see you hanging around the boys and mooning after them."

Bubbles couldn't help it. She felt drawn to men, as if she were a horse after oats. Unable to control her impulses, she pressed flower petals into her skin, hoping the scent would linger and turn *her* into a flower that men would pluck. She certainly felt like one, all the folds of her body opening out, swelling and contracting. Begging to be smelled. And touched.

Every Sunday the minister preached about the sins of the flesh and warned against fornication, making her even more aware of her own

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body. She seemed not to have a mind at all. Only nerves that ran from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. She was ripe for the taking. Ready.

But for what? Her body was telling her one thing, but she still believed her granda had given birth to her in his painting. Of course, she watched the sheep and cattle mating, but that didn't explain what humans do. Nor did she attach the animals' behavior to her own desires.

She had no words to describe the yearnings inside her, the itching and excitement that kept her awake most nights until dawn. Her body had made its own discoveries, and she found herself rubbing her genitals against hard things, like a horse wanting to be scratched—the bedstead, the corner of an open drawer, a fence post. These things happened secretly, and Bubbles hid her intense pleasure.

She even sucked on her fingers, but her granny complained, "Ach, lass, don't I feed you enough? You're worse than a baby."

Yet it wasn't food Bubbles was after. She wanted something in her mouth, the sucking sound, the sensuous pleasure her lips gave. They seemed made to be used, and not just for talking and eating.

At times she stood staring through the pub window, watching the men inside drinking and talking and laughing. She no longer crawled under the tables, listening to her uncles' words floating above her head. She'd grown too big for that. But she still felt drawn to the place, to the heady male smell mixed with malt.

One day while standing there, she got the idea for changing her name, wanting her own name now, not her mother's. There were far too many Heathers in the family, anyway. And heather was so common, growing wild everywhere in Scotland. No, it was time to rename herself.

While watching Able pour a glass of ale, she remembered the taste and feel of the foam on her lips, how the bubbles chased each other in the glass and then popped in her mouth. That's how she found her new name. "I christen myself Bubbles in the name of the father, the son, the

holy ghost, and the little people. Amen.” And she crossed herself, just in case, as she’d seen a couple of Anglicans do. To be safe.

Then she started her new life.



As Bubbles’ interest in men increased, so did her awareness of a colorful village woman who didn’t seem to have a name. Everyone just referred to her as “the widow.” Not only did she powder her cheeks and rouge her lips, but she also darkened her eyelids like Egyptian mummies and wore slinky clothes that revealed her body.

She strutted through the streets of Portree, shrugging off catcalls, nose in the air, appearing not to mind the villagers’ stares or whispers. They called her a loose woman and even a witch since she often was seen wandering the glens at night, a lit candle in her hand. What would a single woman be doing out alone after midnight if she weren’t communing with the devil?

Men from the pub wandered in and out of the widow’s place at all hours of the day and night, the house an eyesore, walls darkened from peat so they always looked in shadow. Some called her an outcast, but the idea excited Bubbles. An outcast! Cast out like Adam and Eve from the garden. Like Cain who had killed his brother Abel. If Bubbles became an outcast, she’d be forced to find her own way.

Of course, she’d miss her grandparents and her mother. She could hardly remember her father, who left when she was seven, so she wouldn’t miss him. Nor would she miss her brothers; they lived in their own world, pushing her around and acting superior. But the villagers were different, and she couldn’t bear the thought of leaving them. Their lives intertwined with hers like stitches in one of her grandma’s knitted garments. She couldn’t imagine being shut out of their lives or not stopping for chats and updates on the latest family crisis.

Still, the temptation was great.

Bubbles was especially envious of the widow’s access to men.

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One night, she crept up to the widow's two-room shack. Shielded from the street by a rowan, Bubbles stood to one side of the kitchen window, sneaking looks. Two men sat at a table, leaning back in their chairs, lifting jugs of ale to their lips. In the oil lamp's glow, their teeth gleamed when they laughed, the only part of them she could clearly see. A third man staggered into the kitchen from the other room, winked at the men, and dropped a coin on the table before lurching for the outer door.

The widow drifted into the room, swaying her hips, wearing a low-cut blouse she'd made out of tartan. "Aye, lads. Let's liven things up. It's time for some music."

One man reached under the table for his fiddle, tucking it beneath his chin and playing a jig. The music made Bubbles' feet move independently. They took her to a nearby oak tree, kicking and tapping, dancing around it. Aye, it was grand to be the widow. Grand to be fourteen. Grand to be alive!

The music stopped, and she crept back to the house, moving to the other window just as the widow appeared in that room, carrying a lamp she handed to the man following her. He raised it to his face and was about to blow out the flame when Bubbles cried out. In that instant, her uncle Callum's eyes met hers. "Oh, my God," he bellowed. "It's me niece."

He thrust the lamp at the widow, who fell back on the bed, dropping it. The flame bit into the comforter, flaring up and feeding on the feathers, leaping and devouring anything in its path.

Callum finally found his legs. He picked up the widow and threw her out the window, following close behind. Ian tore out of the door screaming "Fire! There's a bloody fire! It'll burn down the town!" People clambered out of doorways, wearing their nightclothes, screaming and running into each other. A fire brigade formed, and a stream of men and women passed water buckets, eventually drowning the flames, though the house was nothing but cinders.

Bubbles watched from on top of The Lump, a hill near the center of town, finally understanding the meaning of the words *holy smoke*. She remembered the minister's sermons about the sins of the flesh; now she understood his words. Some divine force had made the widow pay for her outlandish behavior—a lesson for Bubbles, less eager after the fire to pursue men. Now the widow really was an outcast, cast out of her home, left with nothing but the clothes on her back. Bubbles wasn't keen to follow suit.

She puzzled over this incident for days afterward. Callum and Ian were heroes for saving the town. They had passed by the widow's at just the right time, noticing the fire before it had a chance to spread. Their words sounded so believable that Bubbles doubted her own perceptions. Her uncles had often laughed at her wild stories of visions she'd had—of Vikings landing at the Portree harbour, of elves and fairies dancing over the glens.

"Ach, you were just dreaming again, lass. You have an over-active imagination."

Had she really seen her uncles inside the widow's place? Her own kin, married and respected in the town? They'd carried her around when she was a baby and played with her when she'd gotten older, trying to make up for her father's absence.

She felt betrayed, yet the widow also felt like kin now. With that kind of reasoning, the widow was kin with most Portree residents since so many of the men visited her secretly in the night. But during the day, they were as vocal as their wives in blaming her for all the town's ills. Bubbles disliked the hypocrisy. How could they do one thing at night and act another way during the day?

Out wandering on another night, pressured by her urges, on the prowl like a cat, Bubbles passed through the cemetery, a shortcut into town from her grandparents' croft. She tripped, falling headlong over two bodies intertwined on a grave, and found herself face to face with the widow. Bubbles screamed, confused. Was the widow dead? A ghost?

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The widow said, “You sound like a bloody throttled calf. You’ll wake the dead *and* the living with that bellowing.”

Someone squirmed out from underneath Bubbles and ran off through the gravestones toward the woods on the edge of town. The widow sat up, brushing leaves out of her hair, slapping at midges, and tugging at her skirt, trying to cover her fleshy white thighs. “You’re ruining my livelihood, you bloody brat. What’re you doing out at night? You should be home knitting, not putting your nose into others’ business.”

Mid-July, the light was only slightly darker than twilight. It hovered most of the night. Not propped up by powder and paint, the widow’s face sagged, and her eyes had bags under them. Bubbles watched her reach for a satchel that leaned against the headstone and dig around in it, groping inside. She grunted, having found what she was looking for, a deck of cards that she gripped in one hand, the other holding a candle she stuck into the mound covering the grave. After lighting the candle, she shuffled through the well-worn cards, edges frayed, ignoring Bubbles. “Off with you, you little wretch. I’ve nothing you want. Stop staring. Away!” And she waved her arm imperiously.

But Bubbles sat there, mesmerized, watching the widow’s fingers flip over the cards, images coming into focus in the candlelight—a skeleton leering out at her; a young boy with a knapsack on his back, walking down a lonely road; a naked woman sitting under a star, pouring something from a pitcher; a chariot rumbling over rocks; and several cards displaying numbers and symbols, like swords and sticks. The images formed a pattern on the grave, and the widow studied them silently, shaking her head and clucking her tongue.

Bubbles’ mother read teacups for the ladies in town and had even read Bubbles’ tea leaves a few times. But she’d never seen anyone with cards like this. Fortunetelling.

The widow muttered to herself. “I don’t know what to make of them. I don’t like that bloody death card turning up here in the cemetery. It’s a bad omen.”

Bubbles just nodded, as if she understood.

“And the chariot showing up doesn’t make sense, unless some dark, handsome man is going to appear and sweep me off my feet. Carry me away from this godforsaken place.”

Until then, Bubbles hadn’t allowed herself to think such things. Dark, handsome men existed only in the romance magazines she occasionally saw her mother read. And why would Bubbles leave Skye? It was everything to her. She loved the mist that moistened things, a delicate veil that parted at times to let the sun break in with its penetrating light. She loved the sea, visible from anywhere on the island, the fish smell following her wherever she went, and the deep rhythms of the Atlantic. She loved the glens, their gently curving shapes contrasting with stone and jagged cliffs. She loved the music that filled the air, old Scottish tunes played on bagpipes and flutes and fiddles, floating out of houses wherever she went in town. She rarely just walked, the music plucking her own strings so she danced through the streets. Her father had gone off to make his fortune in Canada, but surely not because he was dissatisfied with Skye.

The widow was still lamenting. “The naked woman? Aye, that’s me. Nothing to protect me from the elements. Just the clothes I have on me back and the stars in the sky to speak to. What kind of life is that for a woman? No life at all. No family . . .” And the widow started blubbering, her tears snuffing out the candle, tugging at Bubbles’ heart. Then the sky opened up and rain pelted them. She couldn’t leave the poor woman here to drown.

Bubbles thought of the sick animals her granny kept in the house. Surely Granny wouldn’t want her own kind to go without shelter. “I’ve a place where you can stay.” Bubbles picked up the widow’s bag and grabbed her arm, dragging the woman over the graves to her grandparents’ place.

When they got there, everyone was still asleep. They crept upstairs to Bubbles’ room, and she gave the widow her bed, sleeping the rest of the night on the floor, awakened several times by the widow’s snoring.

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At six a.m., the door opened. Granny stepped into the room, carrying a candle, and glided over to the bed. She leaned over and kissed the widow's cheek, patting her arm fondly. The woman sat up, eyes bulging as if she'd seen a ghost, and glared at Granny. "Get your hands off me. I don't go in for that kind of thing."

Granny screamed, "Who's been fornicating in my grandchild's bed? Malcolm! It's bad enough that you come home drunk, but now you're dragging the scum off the street with you. Where are you, you fornicator?"

Granny got down on her hands and knees, using the candle to see under the bed, dust balls stirred by the movement and scattering across the old oak floor.

Bubbles headed for the door, not wanting to feel the full force of her granny's wrath, and almost knocked over her granda, sober for once, rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands.

"What are you screaming about, woman? Can't a man sleep in his own home?"

The widow sat up in the bed and growled like a she bear. "Where's me money, old man. You still owe me a tuppence."

MEXICO CITY, 1996

The morning after arriving in Mexico City, while Feather is doing yoga in their room, Bubbles disappears. Later, Feather finds her not far from the hotel entrance, surrounded by merchants trying to make a sale. “¡Señora, mira! ¡Por favor! ¿De dónde es?”

Bubbles ignores the hands reaching out, dangling necklaces and garments, and waves her own hands as if in blessing.

Feather shakes her head and grabs her mother’s arm. “Hey, Mamacita. You’re asking for trouble.”

She pushes her away. “Don’t treat me like a child. I can take care of myself.”

“This is Mexico, Mum. Shit happens.”

“Watch your language. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

Feather shrugs and signals a passing taxi. She’s decided to leave the car parked at the hotel. Driving in the city is worse than the alternative, being kidnapped. Mexican drivers have their own code, and she hasn’t learned it yet. Each one assumes he owns the road, and no one else belongs there. They also make up their own laws—as they go.

Night and day, the streets swarm with people, reminding Feather of a beehive. Men, women, and children sit on the sidewalk, begging, or they sleep in corners. Vendors are everywhere—selling watches, jewelry, embroidered blouses, piñatas, nail clippers, purses, wallets, shoes, paper flowers.

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A taxi skids to a stop, black smoke spurting from the exhaust. Feather helps Bubbles climb into the backseat and tells the taxi driver to take them to the National Museum of Anthropology. He's so short he sits on several cushions to see above the steering wheel.

Weaving through the heavy traffic on Insurgentes, the driver presses his hand on the horn, which sounds like a bleating lamb, and jams his foot on the gas pedal. Feather grabs Bubbles' hand, trying to reassure her. For a moment she feels like a child again, clinging to her mother, afraid. The car swerves around a corner. Bubbles crosses herself up and down and back and forth. Finally, the driver stops in front of the museum.

"¿Cuánto costará?" Feather asks.

He climbs down from the car seat and fumbles at their door. Feather finally opens it herself, the handle breaking off in her hand. She passes it to the driver, and he drops it into his pants pocket.

"Dieciocho pesos, señora," he says.

She gives him some bills. "Gracias, señor."

Bubbles frowns and whispers loudly to Feather, "Why did he say 'death pays us'?"

"He didn't. He said 'eighteen pesos' in Spanish."

"Well, why didn't he say that? It sounded like death to me."



They're walking toward the museum entrance when Bubbles stops, staring, her eyes bugging out at a massive statue standing there, as high as a two-story building. Its stocky shape is reflected in the pond beneath it. Everything in this city overwhelms her: The boulevards take half a day to cross, people throng the streets, and now this—a sculpture that looms over them like a dark cloud, blotting out the sky and absorbing everything around it. She can't walk past and ignore it. It shouts, "LOOK AT ME!" In fact, the whole city reaches out and

grabs her—murals clamoring from walls of public buildings, vendors' booths creating splashes of color everywhere.

She reaches over and dips her fingers into the pond, touching the statue's image reflected there, wiping her hand on her dress. For once in her life, she's almost speechless. "Holy smoke, where did it come from?"

Feather reads the plaque next to the statue: "It's called Tlaloc."

"What's that mean?"

"What's what mean?"

"The lock."

"You mean Tlaloc. Haven't a clue. Comes from Coatlinchán. Wow, it weighs one hundred sixty-eight tons. It's the pre-Hispanic rain god everyone used to worship."

Bubbles doesn't understand much of what Feather is saying. Rain gods. Hispanic. The words sound foreign. All she can do is stare.

"Look, Mum. The Coatlinchán villagers didn't want the statue removed. They thought the rains would stop and their lives would end."

"It looks like it's standing in its own pee. Do you think it caused the storm the other night?"

"Could be," Feather says. "The night they brought the rain god to the city, they had the heaviest storm ever recorded at that time of year."

She just nods her head, mouth hanging open, eyes riveted on the statue, waiting for pee to spout forth.

Feather takes her arm and nudges her toward the entrance. "Come on, Mamacita, there's lots more to see."

They enter the first section, the Olmec period. Bubbles gets irritated with Feather, who stops for long periods in front of the glass cases that hold the ancient art and artifacts.

Some of it reminds her of the modern stuff she's seen in Feather's studio. It gives her a stomachache and gas. At least she thinks it's the art that's causing her pain. She doesn't know how Feather can stare at it for hours. It must have an effect on her mind. Bubbles' head hurts after she's been around it for a while. Such mumbo jumbo. "I'm

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going to wait out here for you, dear,” she says, pointing to the benches in the courtyard.



An hour later, Feather stumbles on her mother in front of excavations taken from a Mayan cemetery. One skeleton sits flexed, head bent between its legs, tucked into a ledge, as if it has just sat down for a minute to relax. Below it, another skeleton rests on the ground, its frame extended, empty eye sockets staring out at museumgoers. A decorated urn holds the bodies of dead children.

Feather drapes one arm across her shoulders. “This is pretty morbid stuff. Why not look at the Aztec art with me.”

“Isn’t this art, too? It’s in the museum.”

Feather squeezes her arm. It feels frail, making her realize just how old Bubbles is. She could die any minute. Blinking back tears, Feather says, “Museums have things other than art.”

Bubbles purses her lips and shrugs off Feather’s arm. “I’m not a child. I know about museums. I’m living in one. My body!”

“Hah!”

“Hah’ yourself. Look. How do you think they got all those children in the urn?”

“One at a time.”

Feather leaves Bubbles in the courtyard again to rest and moves on to the Toltec gallery. Later, when Feather checks to see if her mother wants to use the toilet, Bubbles has disappeared. She finds her in the docent’s area, being watched.

The guard says, “The señora, your mother, she was in exhibit, talking to figures carved from wood. She look inside huts, touch everything. She even sit in seat of gods. That’s forbidden. Your mother, she’s a very fine lady, but we can’t allow her do these things.”

Bubbles sits on a bench, arms crossed over her chest, clinging to her shoulder bag, resembling a primitive sculpture herself.

A smile slithers across Feather's mouth. She wipes it away with the back of her hand and sits down next to her. "Come on, Mamacita. Don't give this poor guy a hard time."

"Don't Mamacita me!"

"Okay. Okay. But do you want them to throw us in jail? Who'll get us out? We're a long way from home."

"Buddy."

She laughs. "Not likely. He has enough on his mind. All those hallucinations."

"Well, Abbot then."

"Not with his tribe to take care of."

Feather could never sort out just who was living at Abbot's house. He always had extra people crashing at his place, even when his three kids were young. And not just people, either. It was a bloody menagerie—parrots, cockatiels, dogs, monkeys, goldfish. Worse than her zoo. He even kept a pet snake in a converted aquarium, but it was forever getting out, slipping beneath the sofa cushions, crawling under the carpet.

Her mum stamps her foot and scowls. "Mother would get us out."

Feather nods. "Yeah, sure. We'll just add water to her ashes and resurrect her—like dehydrated food."

She glances at Feather. "I hadn't thought of that before. Water comes from the womb at birth. Why wouldn't water bring Mother back to life? The ashes *are* like dried food. Remember the awful stuff you brought camping that time?"

Feather nods, ignoring her words. This brush with early artists has excited her. She's eager to leave for San Miguel de Allende's art school, the Instituto Allende, so she can try out some of the techniques she's seen. Images of animals and early humans and artifacts have so stimulated her that she's forgotten their main reason for flying to Mexico. But her mum hasn't. "When are we going to get Mother's ashes?"

"I'm going to take you back to the hotel and try to pick them up myself afterward. Tomorrow I want to see Teotihuacan and the

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pyramids. Oh, and the moon goddess at the Aztecs' Templo Mayor. I want to get more in touch with the goddess religion. It's what my art's all about."

Bubbles looks perturbed, her lips pressed tightly together, eyebrows meeting. "I could have been a goddess, if I'd put my mind to it. I'll just rest at the hotel while you sightsee."

"Okay, but promise not to leave the place. You could be kidnapped. I don't want anything to happen to you."

For all of her ambivalence at times toward Bubbles, Feather really doesn't wish her harm. After making her own mistakes with her son, Weed, she's developed more tolerance for Bubbles' failings as a mother and the damage she's done to Feather and her half brothers.

Bubbles grips her shoulder bag and stares at the floor. "I'll be fine."

CANADA, 1921-1924

At fifteen, Bubbles danced her way across the sea aboard the ship that took her to the new world, along with her mother and three brothers. Their destination was Calgary, where her father now lived. Storms came and went, waves surged, rain pounded the decks. But Bubbles ignored the danger, performing the Irish jig and the Highland fling above and below decks, shaking her skirts, giving everyone glimpses of her petticoat and sturdy legs. At night she collapsed into bed, exhausted. Applause echoed in her ears long after she stopped, shutting out the wind's roar.

No longer under the watchful eyes of extended family and neighbors, she flirted with the boys and men on board, wandering the ship from top to bottom, losing her way and calling on the crew to help her. The ship had many nooks and crannies, and she knew them all, slipping in and out of these spaces the way she did men's arms. So much kissing and squeezing left her lips and ribs bruised, but she didn't mind. She was at last getting a taste of being a woman.

The whole voyage seemed like a lark to her. She had cried when she said goodbye to her relatives, her friends, and her beloved Skye, but she hadn't really understood how far away Canada was or how much money it took to cross the seas. Nor could she foresee the twists and turns her life would take. She thought she'd return soon. To her, it was

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like going to Glasgow for a few weeks to stay with relatives. A romp. Waving from the ferry that took her to the mainland, she called out in Gaelic to the family she was leaving behind: “Beannachd leibh!”

If she'd known she wouldn't set foot on Scottish soil for another fifty years, she never would have left. If she'd realized the life she took for granted would end—the great Scottish tradition of higher education and ceilidhs and dances—she would have fled to the hills. If she'd understood how vast Canada is and how cold it can be, she would have hidden in someone's attic until the boat left. If she'd known she would bury three husbands, two stillborn babies, and many more lovers, she would have fled back to her mother's womb.

Instead, she flounced off the ship in Montreal with her mother and brothers, waving gaily to the ship's mates and other passengers, resembling a character from one of the stories she'd put in bottles and set adrift on the Atlantic, sending them off to the new world. The sea had tossed her onto Canada's shores.

Nothing seemed quite real there. The light was all wrong, giving things hard edges, not the soft, fuzzy borders she was used to in Skye, where a pearly-gray mist hovered, shrouding the land and everything on it. It had always made her feel wrapped in a cloak, cozy and protected. In Canada, she didn't feel any mystery. No little people. No suggestion of something beyond the mist. Just a blue sky stripped of any cover—a few clouds adding some contrast.

Bubbles and her family climbed onto a train heading west. Round face flushed, she dragged aboard her own suitcase and helped the boys haul on the trunks and boxes that had crossed the sea with them. Their name, MacDonald, stood out in bold letters on everything they'd brought, an island of familiarity amid all this uncertainty. They were joined by that name, and she found herself saying it over and over in her mind as the train left the Montreal station, clinging to the word, a buoy keeping her afloat.

Since arriving, Bubbles' mother seemed dazed, not herself, and Bubbles fluttered around her, tugging at her coat, holding onto her

hand, afraid she'd drift away and disappear completely. On the ship, her mother tried to teach Bubbles and the boys how to waltz, but Bubbles couldn't match her gracefulness. She had glided across the floor, face serene, long auburn hair trailing down her back, posture queenly. Bubbles had tripped over her own feet *and* her mother's. Bubbles could do a jig or the Highland fling or a sailors' hornpipe with the best of them, but waltzing was another matter. She couldn't master matching her steps to another's.

Now on the train, her mother was too serious. Usually full of fun and eager to talk to anyone, she moped, her spirit still in Skye. Her heart also seemed to be there. Like Bubbles, she'd left more behind than a family and way of life.

To distract herself, Bubbles started singing every Scottish song she could think of, in both English and Gaelic: "The Skye Boat Song," "Annie Laurie," and "The Rose of Tralee." All songs her mother and granny had taught her. Songs they'd sung together over the years.

She thought if she could get her mother singing again she might not seem so far away. By then, other passengers had joined in, but her mother just stared blindly out the window, locked in her own world. Bubbles kept singing, inspired by the captive audience:

*I cin you're the laddie that gave me the penny
The laddie that fought till the day that I dee
I cin you're the laddie that gave me the penny
That I would come with you to Bonnie Glen Shea.*

When Bubbles sang the next stanza, she lowered her voice, trying to sound like a man, arms crossed over her breasts:

*I would clad you in satin and make you a lady
And three of my best horses would I give them to thee
I would clad you in satin and make you a lady
If you would come with me to Bonnie Glen Shea*

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Then she became the female again, shaking a fist at an imaginary suitor:

*You can clad me in satin and make me a lady
And three of your best horses would you give them to me
You can clad me in satin and make me a lady
But I will never go with you to Bonnie Glen Shea.*

When Bubbles finished the last line, everyone applauded and shouted “Encore.” She bent over in a full sweeping bow, imagining herself on stage, so swept up by the applause that she didn’t notice her brothers’ spitballs until one splattered on her cheek.



The train rumbled across the new land, and winter arrived with full force, the wind howling around and through the chain of cars, snow swirling across the fields, now buried in white. A blizzard transformed the countryside into a ghost country. Snow-covered shrubs, rocks, and trees formed strange shapes that appeared to be burrowing under the heavy blanket covering them.

It gave Bubbles a good scare to see so much blinding snow. The sun made it glitter, a white wilderness, occasional rabbit or fox tracks leaving dark patterns on the surface. The marks resembled primitive writing, as if someone were trying to send a message to her. Occasionally, she saw smoke rise from a chimney, a courageous family trying to establish civilization in this wild, unforgiving land.

She’d seen snow before. That wasn’t new. But she’d never seen so much. It accentuated the flatness of the prairies they were passing through. The land went on for miles, interrupted only by the horizon. Everything seemed beaten down and flattened by wind and weather.

The train stopped for several hours before reaching Winnipeg so rail workers could clear snowdrifts from the tracks. Bubbles and the boys went outside and took turns becoming snowmen, snow in their

mouths and eyes and ears. It melted down their necks, creeping into their bones.

And then it was gone. The snow melted by the time they reached Calgary. A balmy breeze carried the scent of wild Alberta roses through the train, stubble in the fields resembling strands of gold. Paradise after so much snow. Bubbles hung out the train window, watching the city's skyline grow larger. She thought they'd reached the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, not realizing they had arrived during a chinook. She didn't even know what a chinook was.

A fellow passenger, an older woman who'd been visiting her son in Eastern Canada, told Bubbles that chinook is an Indian word.

"And there's a story explaining it. A beautiful Indian maiden became lost in the mountains during a snowstorm. A soft, warm wind blew from the west, traveling from the coast over the Rockies. An arch over the mountains announced its arrival, melting all the snow. The maiden found her way home, but she had fallen in love with the wind, which she named Chinook. Ever after, it visited her several times a year."

This story gave Bubbles heart. It reminded her of the stories she'd grown up with of Tuatha Dé Danann, the supernatural race. Maybe she'd find her own kind in this land after all.

The train pulled into Calgary's CPR station. Bubbles was the first to leave their car, eager now to see her father after an eight-year separation. In her memory, he was tall, robust, and handsome. But the man who met them had lost weight and seemed shorter than she remembered (or maybe she'd grown taller). He smiled grimly, brushing his lips across his wife and daughter's foreheads, acting as if he'd seen them only yesterday. Then he gathered their baggage, ordering the boys to carry the trunks to the taxi he'd hired. This stranger was the opposite of Bubbles' colorful granda, who had taken her father's place, feeding her imagination.

The taxi—bursting at the seams with seven people and even more luggage—stopped in front of an apartment building that resembled a prison. A dingy, gray sandstone exterior lined with indentations held

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small windows. They tumbled out of the car, the boys shoving Bubbles out of the way. The sign over the entrance read “The Armory Block.”

The place looked like an armory, and Bubbles expected to see soldiers bursting through the front doors, running down the steps, pointing rifles at them. She’d fall into their arms, begging for her family’s safety, and the leader would be so taken with her he’d escort them to their rooms, protecting her from any harm. Her brothers would think twice about picking on her then.

Lagging behind the boys, her mother, and her father, Bubbles followed them up two flights of stairs, looking anxiously around, still hoping to be rescued. They clomped down a foul-smelling hallway that hadn’t seen paint in years. Her father unlocked a door to one of the suites, and they filed into a dismal room, one of three they all had to share, the boys’ room located across the hall.

No one said anything. They managed to look anywhere but at each other, though there wasn’t much to look at. Everything seemed so bare, so devoid of life. No curtains hung at the windows. No pretty cloths covered the tables; no doilies perked up the chesterfield and chair. No home awaited them, and she had to sleep in the same room as her mother and father. Bubbles couldn’t hold back the tears and threw herself into her mother’s arms. Her father cleared his throat and ran a hand over the stubble on his face.

“Would you like some tea?”



Nothing came easy here. Chinooks came and went, unpredictable, unable to hold back for long the sub-zero temperatures and snow. And Bubbles could no longer take for granted she’d have a room of her own or nice clothes. Her granda had let her have anything she wanted from his shop. Everything cost, and her father constantly reminded them they had to be frugal—he had borrowed money to pay for their passage to Canada.

“Money doesn’t grow on trees.”

Bubbles could see that without him telling her. Nothing grew on any tree in the winter. Except for the pines. And she was pining.

A schoolmaster in Skye, her father had been respected there. Though paid only a pittance, he received a comfortable four-bedroom house for himself and his family. Believing the stories that floated across the sea of riches awaiting him, he felt he could do better in Canada. But his bad temper and willfulness prevented him from holding a teaching job there. His style had worked in Scotland. The Scots expected their headmasters to be disciplinarians. But Canadians had different ideas about education.

He still wanted to teach the Scottish way, using the classics written in Greek and Latin. King of the classroom, he smacked students’ backsides or hands if they didn’t obey. Her father wanted to make his own rules. The school authorities had other ideas. His hopes and dreams frozen, he now worked as a laborer for the Canadian National Railroad. His rigid pride forbade him from admitting defeat and returning to Skye. He’d sooner make his wife and children share in his suffering.



Bubbles started crying the day she walked into the Armory Block and didn’t stop for three years. She cried because she missed Skye—all the comforts, family, and friends she’d taken for granted. Heartsick at no longer having the Atlantic nearby, she tried to create her own sea of tears, to recapture some feeling of the sea-drenched port she’d left behind, to bring something of Scotland to Canada.

Her mother had found a job housecleaning in Mount Royal, where Calgary’s old money resided. Gracious estates spread out on generous hills. Bubbles helped her when she wasn’t in school. Being in Mount Royal made her stop crying for a while. Ashamed of her father’s work and of where they lived, she pretended they had one of the mansions. Bubbles didn’t mind the housework—it gave her a chance to be inside

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a real home again. She liked dusting the silver tea services and the delicate china cups. The hand-painted flowers made her think of Portree and their own garden.

Her mother also changed once inside the luxurious surroundings. She stood tall again, shoulders not rounded in despair as they were at the Armory Block. Lipstick and rouge gave color to her face, and her hair coiled around her head like a crown. Looking every bit the lady, she bustled from room to room, peering into drawers when no one but Bubbles was around, and lounging on the damask-covered chairs in the parlor.

Bubbles and her mother tried on evening dresses from the mistress's wardrobe, imitating her, parading past the floor-length bedroom mirrors, pretending they were off to a ball.

"Can I have this dance, madam?" Bubbles asked, bowing.

"It's 'may I,' not 'can I,'" her mother said, giving Bubbles her arm.

They polkaed around the room, dancing around furniture, skipping over stools, falling onto the four-poster bed in giggles.

"Your mother's a lady at last, lass."

"Aye, and so am I!"

But the tears started flowing again when they had to leave. They trudged along the wooden sidewalks in the slush and snow, shuddering as the Armory Block came into view.

She cried even harder when her mother left the family a year and a half after they arrived in Calgary. She had complained from the moment they'd stepped into their new home. It was never warm enough. There was no fireplace to huddle around. She couldn't feed a family of six on what her husband gave her each week for groceries. The stove didn't work properly. The children needed warmer clothes for the brutal winters.

Out of frustration and fury and impotence, Bubbles' father struck her mother. Bubbles didn't know how often he hit her, though she heard her mother cry out in pain on more than one occasion. Bubbles fled when the fights started, visiting her brothers' room across the hall

or just wandering the streets. But she was there the day her mother told her father that if he hit her one more time she would leave him.

And she did. “You’ll not lift a hand to me again, Norman MacDonald. I didn’t marry a coward, and I refuse to live with one. I’ll see the children when you’re not home, but I don’t want to set my eyes on you.”

Her mother took a live-in position at one of the Mount Royal homes. Bubbles spent as much time as she could with her, but she had to return every day to the Armory Block and her embittered father. She tried to cheer him up by cleaning and preparing nice meals, but her cooking, bad at its best, only made things worse. Burnt chops and over-salted vegetables and bread like stone made meal times grim. Not good humored, even under the best of circumstances, her father now went around perpetually scowling.

His manner turned from dour to forbidding when he learned his wife had left for Mexico with Jimmy, her employer and lover. They’d invited Bubbles to join them, but she felt sorry for her father. He also intimidated her, and she feared reprisals when she returned. After he heard the news, he paced their small living space, his face reddened from rage. Bubbles feared he would explode, splattering her and everything else around him.

Bubbles—the only one her mother had told—saw them both off on the train at the CPR station. She couldn’t stop the tears from flowing, afraid her mother might never return from Mexico, a country as distant and unreachable as the moon. Wearing her best dress and hat, she hugged Bubbles, said farewell, and stood by the train with Jimmy, waiting to board. She’d packed the same banged-up steamer trunk she’d brought from Skye. Black smoke surged from the locomotive and covered her from head to toe. She wiped at her face, tears and soot leaving streaks—Bubbles’ last image of her mother.



In time, Bubbles learned how to live without her mother. She also learned to live without Scotland. Though Skye itself did not change

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that dramatically over the years, the life she had known there did. The night her granny died, she heard a knocking at her window. She knew it was Granny, saying goodbye. When her granda went (he stumbled into a church, leaning on a curved shepherd's crook, sat down in a pew, leaned forward, and died), Bubbles dreamt *she* was painting *him* standing in the gateway to a vast garden. He was wearing the pith helmet and wedding veil, telling one of his many stories. Her granny and granda's croft was sold. The house Bubbles was born in was still there, but someone else owned it.

Her uncles and aunts died. The King of England died. Worst of all, her mother died. In Mexico, just three years after she'd moved there. A priest wrote Bubbles' father a letter, and they all cried the day it arrived, sitting around the kitchen table, tears spilling into Mexico itself. Bubbles was never the same after her mother's death. Something in her died then as well.

Her mother gone, her father preoccupied with his own bitterness and grief, she had to make the best of things. She needed to find a husband quickly who could give her a better life *and* respectability, not anticipating the suffering her husbands would put her through.

When she did marry at nineteen, she dutifully got pregnant, sewed, knitted, canned, cooked (her cooking did improve with practice and under the tutelage of her first husband's mother, and so did her sewing), cleaned, ironed, taught Sunday school—all the things a woman was supposed to do and more.

The men in her life—brothers, father, husbands, sons—gobbled up the scones and pies and bread she baked. They eagerly wore the shirts she made them out of patterns she thought up as she went along, as well as the socks she knit. They got well when she nursed them through influenzas and colds and other ailments. And occasionally, they'd slip her a dollar or two: "Here, buy yourself a treat."

But it wasn't enough. She always longed for more.

MEXICO CITY, 1996

After Feather leaves for the pyramids, Bubbles makes her move. The urn she saw at the museum containing the dead children gave her an idea. She wants one like it to carry her mother in, something pretty and shapely with big flowers painted all over it. She can't just carry the ashes around in a shoebox.

She tucks some pesos into her brassiere and carries only coins in the shoulder bag she straps across her body, clasping it close to her, protective of its contents.

Hair fluffed up and a slash of deep-red lipstick applied to her lips, she likes what she sees in the mirror. It's difficult believing she's ninety, except when she looks at her naked body, skin and bones playing tug of war with each other. Her legs are still good though. Nothing flabby about them. And they carry her where she needs to go. Better than some old people she's seen who use canes or walkers. She can't complain.

Outside the hotel, it takes a few minutes to get used to the noises and smells and crowds of people filling the streets. Feeling dizzy, she almost loses her balance, grabbing hold of a building to steady herself and get her bearings. She grips her bag and pats it, reassured it's still there.

Only one thing fills her mind—an urn. She's oblivious to the hands reaching out, trying to sell her things; to the beggars sitting on the

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sidewalk, some holding babies; to her own aches and pains. Her heart wants to go out to these people, and she almost loses her focus, thinking of the pesos in her purse. But then the urn image crowds out other thoughts, and she pursues her course, heading instinctively for a market near the hotel. They'd passed it in the taxi.

Some inner compass guides her through the tangle of people and stands, past the tantalizing smell of food that vendors are cooking right on the streets. They're selling things Bubbles has never seen before and can't even name. Feather's warning keeps her from sampling some of the food: "Never, never eat anything from a street vendor. You'll get sick as death." But the tantalizing odors make her recent breakfast of fruit and rolls fade.

Wavering, she almost gives in to the call of her senses. Then she veers away, back on course, the urn image driving all others away. She keeps walking, stepping over scrawny stray mutts and beggars. The market suddenly appears, and her heart beats faster. She passes sombreros of every size and color. A man plops one on her head, and the brim flaps around her ears. She doesn't like having her hair mussed up, so she knocks the hat away, fluffing her white curls again.

The leather purses hanging all over one stall almost stop her. Real leather. You can't find that any more in Canada. It's all fake—made to look like the real thing. She stops for a minute and picks up a bag or two, sniffing at them, loving the smell and the feel.

And then she sees it, the perfect urn. Its shape reminds her of a pregnant woman, narrow at the top and full beneath. No legs, of course. The lip reaches Bubbles' knees, the surface covered with white-and-gold flower petals intertwined with leaves on a deep-blue background.

While she circles the vessel, a caramel-skinned woman (caramels are her favorite candy, and just the sight of that skin makes her salivate), long hair pulled back into a bun, seems to appear from inside the urn. She stalks Bubbles, the two circling it together. Whichever way Bubbles turns, the woman follows. "One thousand pesos, señora."

Except for the skin color, the woman could be her mother—the same height and shape, the same hairstyle. Why is her mother offering her money? Bubbles blinks, glare of the midmorning sun glinting off her glasses. Confused, she thinks her mother's ashes were already in the urn and someone added water to them, resurrecting her. It makes sense that her mother's skin would be darker now after so many years in Mexico.

Bubbles feels buoyant again, as she did in Perda Varta, her own skin and bones no heavier than ash. A mariachi band strolls past. Playing guitars, all the men wear white sombreros, ornately embroidered short jackets, and long trousers. She recognizes the song they're singing, "Spanish Eyes." They stop and serenade her.

For the second time in her life, she's speechless, so many handsome men pouring out their hearts to her all at once. She finally understands why her mother went to Mexico and stayed. Bubbles would have done the same thing if she hadn't been too afraid of her father to go.

And then they're gone, drifting through the crowds, their music lingering. Gripping her purse, she feels suddenly exhausted, remembering Feather's words: "The high altitude's going to tire you, Mum. Don't try to do too much." She looks for a shady place to sit down.

Where's her mother gone?

A young boy, hair hanging in his eyes and reminding Bubbles of her own sons, shoves an armful of copper bracelets in her face. "Souvenirs, señora. Two hundred pesos."

The caramel-skinned woman creeps up behind Bubbles and whispers in her ear.

"Eight hundred pesos, señora, and I wrap it free."

Hungry and thirsty, Bubbles lurches toward a fruit stand, intent on the empty folding chair she sees, flopping onto it. "You can eat anything that has a skin on it," Feather has said.

Bubbles dips into her handbag, shading the contents from view, and pulls out the change purse, studying the coins inside. She grabs

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a handful and scatters them on the counter, pointing at a banana. She sees a coconut like the one she drank from in Perda Varta and gestures at it, too, making a slurping motion with her mouth. The caramel-skinned woman sidles up to Bubbles and leans over conspiratorially: “Five hundred pesos, señora, my best offer. You never see another like it.”

Bubbles sips on the coconut milk from a straw, staring into space, wondering how she’ll get back to the hotel. She looks around at the streets leading out of the market, unable to remember which one she took to get there. As if reading her mind, the caramel-skinned woman presses closer to Bubbles. “Four hundred pesos, señora, and I carry it to hotel for you.”



At the Sheraton, Feather has already returned. She’s standing in the lobby, talking to two policemen, pointing and gesturing frantically with her hands. “Mia madre, está mucho short and mucho wide.” They just shrug their shoulders.

Frustrated, Feather spins around just in time to see her mother hanging onto a woman’s arm, following a boy of about ten onto the elevator. He’s carrying a vase on his head.

Feather runs across the lobby, trying to catch the elevator before it ascends. The doors glide shut. Out of breath, she stumbles into the next elevator. When she reaches their floor, she finds her mum banging on their door. She doesn’t have a key.

“What’s going on? I thought you’d been kidnapped.”

“Oh, Feather, look what I found for Mother’s ashes.” The caramel-skinned woman thrusts the vase into Feather’s arms, almost knocking her over.

Feather—arms wrapped around the vase and face scrunched against its surface—manages to spit out, “Take this goddamn thing before I drop it.”

The boy dives for the vase, missing, wrapping his arms around Feather's legs. The woman yells at the boy, "Pablo, tú idiot!" He lets go of her and straightens up, banging his head on the bottom of the vase. Feather staggers over to the door, dragging the boy along, puts the key in the lock, and opens the door.

They all fall into the room.

Feather had found the post office earlier and picked up her grandmother's ashes while she was out. They were packed in a battered cardboard box, yards of twine binding it. The postmistress handed her an envelope that had come with the box. "Aquí, señora. Ésa es para usted también."

She had opened the envelope, the paper brown and cracked with age. All the words were in Spanish, and she could make out only a few.

"¿Habla inglés?" she now asks the woman with the vase.

"Sí, I speak a leetle."

"What does this letter say?"

"¿Me enseña él?" The woman holds the paper at arm's length and reads haltingly.

"My name Maria. Look after Senora Heather ashes till now (eighty years old). Expect some person any day looking for ashes. Now I dying. Box and letter explain everything. Senora Heather very good at me. So young my mother die. Me fifteen and Senora Heather die. Took care the lady in last. She tell to me much on you and sons. Talk at Skye many times. Kidneys very bad. Drank many gallons water at last. Swell like with child. Die and priest bless body. Senora Heather threw up water. Poured from Senora like downpour of heaven. Soak priest clothes. Bible. Everything. Priest faint. I splash water over and he wake. Ran from room frightened. Dog with tail between legs. Never saw priest again."

Her mum laughs and says, "Mother never did like priests."

MEXICO, 1924

The day Heather MacDonald stepped on the train for Mexico City, the earth shook and a great wind lifted the prairie soil, swirling it across the sky, turning day into night, leaving a layer of thick dust in each house. She had done the unspeakable, leaving her husband *and* children behind. The truth is, she'd left them much earlier, only no one had noticed. She left them before she even became pregnant. She left them the day she married their father Norman—a man forced on her by family, one she never would have chosen herself. Fen—the man she'd really wanted, an actor with no future, who had a haunting tenor voice and sang in the Gaelic choir—would not do. He'd be a drain on Heather's relatives, a liability, unable to support a family.

At the time, she had no choice. But now she did. So when Jimmy Campbell, her employer at the Mount Royal house where she was a live-in housekeeper, invited her to join him on a business trip to Mexico, she didn't think twice about an answer. Her father would pop a blood vessel when he found out. She'd heard him repeatedly say, "If anything bad happens, you can be certain the Campbells had something to do with it. That moron your sister took up with was a Campbell. And a Campbell cheated me out of my proper inheritance. He took property that was rightfully mine."

Campbell or not, Jimmy offered her an escape. And while she didn't like going off with her father's worst enemy, it couldn't be helped. At

fifty, her life almost over, her prospects were dim. Weighed down by Calgary's brutal winters, she was ready to flee. She'd lived by the sea all her life, and while Skye wasn't the tropics, it didn't have the temperature extremes of the prairies. It took all summer to thaw out from the sub-zero winters.

While preparing for the trip, she felt lighter than the wind—no responsibilities, no children pulling at her skirts. She was free of parents, of family ties. The lightness made her a little dizzy. She'd never been so free before. And Mexico sounded like paradise. A more temperate climate. A place where she could lose herself, shed her guilt for walking out on her husband and kids, start again. Hide.

She felt more vital than she had in years, and a wealthy man wanted her for his companion. She knew it was just a business trip for Jimmy. He'd return to his wife and family. But when she boarded the train heading south, she didn't know she would stay in Mexico. She only knew there was no future for her in Canada.



Before they left, Jimmy bought her a new “going away” outfit. Though she didn't have deep feelings for him, she felt like a bride. Still, she didn't want to marry Jimmy any more than she'd wanted to marry Norman—“a good, steady man,” as her uncles regularly reminded her. She'd had her fill of that kind of marriage, enough to last a lifetime.

Aye, steady Norman was. And dull, too. As dull as prairie dust. She was glad to see his back when he left for Canada. She thought then she'd seen the last of him, expecting his ship to sink or for him to be buried in one of those blizzards she heard about. But Norman survived all those hazards.

Still, she had seven good years without him. Her youngest child, Angus, was born ten months after Norman's departure. She insisted the baby had been overdue. It happened at times—some children just weren't ready to be born.

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But Heather knew who the father was. So did the rest of the family, though they never talked about it. At least not in front of Heather. However, they kept a watch on her. It didn't do much good. She evaded their scrutiny, carrying on with Fen as she pleased behind their backs.

Jimmy bought Heather a ring to wear on their journey. Just a plain band, no diamonds. But it was solid gold. Fourteen carat. He didn't want her traveling without a wedding ring. "It wouldn't look right."

His wife was used to him taking trips to Mexico. He owned a company there he had to inspect regularly. This time, he said he'd be gone three months or longer. Mrs. Campbell put up a row, but there was nothing she could do about it. She didn't like traveling herself, and Jimmy was the boss.

Heather had taken plenty of abuse from the Mrs. when she lived with the Campbell family. High and mighty, she was. Heather loved to imitate her: "How many times do I have to tell you, Mrs. MacDonald, the top sheet should be folded back over the blanket. And you must starch the sheets, too. I won't have limp sheets on my bed. I want them stiff and crisp."

So Heather gave the sheets to her stiff and crisp, just as she wanted. They were so stiff she couldn't pry the top sheet from the bottom. And that had ended her job with the Campbells. Mrs. Campbell wouldn't have "that" woman in her house any longer. No references, no other source of income, and only meager savings gave Heather few options.

Jimmy's offer was timely.



Departure day finally arrived, but the trip started poorly. A marked woman from the beginning, soot from the train's engine covered Heather from head to foot. She didn't know if she wept more for her ruined clothes, for the children she was leaving behind, or for the life she'd never had.

The train pulled out of the station, passing freight yards and tent cities, housing immigrants and sandstone structures. Grateful that Jimmy Campbell had rescued her from that godforsaken hole, she couldn't bear the thought of dying in Calgary without having some fun—seeing the world.

Now her thoughts were filled with Mexico—volcanoes and earthquakes. That's all she could remember about the country. She wasn't much for geography, but volcanoes had always interested her, dormant for a time and then one day erupting. They changed everything around them forever. Just like earthquakes. It reminded her of herself, breaking out of a cocoon at midlife. Since leaving Skye, she'd lived in a tunnel. But it was opening up now.

After she cleaned herself up in the lavatory, she felt better, ready to see and learn new things. Traveling relieved her from the dull, daily domestic routines that dragged her down and made her feel trapped.

A great mimic, Heather found the train to be a perfect laboratory. She loved meeting and watching people and had a way of getting inside others' skins and seeing the world through their eyes. In Portree, she kept family and friends entertained for hours with her imitations, her hearty laugh heard over all the rest.

She had long ago mastered Mrs. Campbell and gave both Jimmy and herself a laugh in the dining car when she mimicked his wife's behavior at the dinner table. Heather exaggerated her gestures and expressions, capturing the woman's voice perfectly.

Jimmy roared. "My God, Heather, stop! You're so like her, it's uncanny. I don't want to ruin my meal."

He could speak Spanish well, needing it for his business, but Heather knew none, so he tried to teach her. Her mimicking skills helped her to imitate his speech. Soon she was babbling away in Spanish, most of the time not knowing what she was saying, receiving strange looks from Mexican passengers.

She couldn't believe it. Here she was, Heather MacDonald (or Heather Campbell, as Jimmy introduced her), roaming the world.

FLING!

Jimmy said there was lots of money to be made in Mexico City. Silver. Real estate. Mining. People visiting from all over the world, getting rich. It gave her high hopes for herself.

But from the train, all Heather could see were armies of cactus. They looked more and more like scarecrows, scattered across the earth, long needles visible. She didn't like them a bit. "Jimmy, are you sure we're going in the right direction? Shouldn't we have been there by now?"

He just grunted and patted her arm. "Relax, we'll be in Mexico City soon enough. I think I'll take a walk."

He got up and left Heather in her muddle. She'd given up taking walks. It was too treacherous. She'd been thrown to the floor more than once by the train's violent swaying.

By now, the other travelers were mainly Mexican. With Jimmy spending much of his time in the club car, drinking and gambling with the men, Heather entertained herself. She took out her deck of cards. Soon women and men were clustered around, wanting to know their future. She used her scanty Spanish—and sounded convincing enough—to spin stories that they at least pretended to understand (they loved to hear their language spoken with a Scottish accent, something they hadn't heard before). It didn't matter ultimately if they understood or not. The cards had spoken, and that was what counted.

At night in their compartment, she refused to wear a nightgown. "I've had enough covering up," she said, flinging it onto the floor and cupping a breast in each hand, offering them to him. "You won't find better than this, Jimmy. Aye, they kept four wee ones happy."

Jimmy wore blue striped pajamas, his big hands dangling at his sides, unsure of what to do. He wasn't used to a woman who acted so brazenly.

Heather laughed and reached out to him.

"Come on, luv, you don't need all of those clothes to sleep in." And she untied the cord that held up his bottoms, releasing his stiffening cock. She rubbed it on her breasts and pulled him on top of her,

matching his thrusts with movements that stimulated her. Soon she was lost in a sea of sensation, unwilling to give it up.

After wearing out Jimmy with her sexual demands, she felt restless and couldn't sleep, afraid she'd be thrown out of bed every time the train went around a curve. So she lay awake, listening to the wheels make contact with the rails, shutting out thoughts of her children and what they would think about their mother going south with another man.

During the day, she dozed at times, sitting up, eyes half-closed, head flopping around like a fish on a hook, in and out of dreams. By then they were climbing constantly, the tracks stitching the land together.

She began to wish she were back in Portree, sewing at her father's shop, surrounded by family, making them all laugh with her imitations. Images of the Highlands flashed in front of her eyes. Lush green glens, meandering streams, and a misty veil of rain overlay the scenes from the train window. They became mixed up in her mind.

When Mexico City finally appeared, she thought she was dreaming. It rose out of a valley bigger than the whole of Scotland, going on forever, the skyline jagged, like a set of broken teeth, some missing. She grabbed Jimmy's arm. "Am I dreaming or seeing things? Look!" Mountains surrounded the valley, purple and green against the sky.

"Volcanoes," Jimmy said, pointing to two peaks higher than the other ones, the tops covered with snow—Popocatépetl shaped like a perfect cone, Iztaccíhuatl crouched like a woman begging.

As they drew closer, she could see domes of gold-and-blue tiling, spires, and belfries. She thought she'd died and gone to heaven—or stepped into a fairy tale. "Aye, it's Mexico City, not a wee place like Portree. Not a cowpatch like Calgary. A city."

A real city.

They booked into a hotel on the Zócalo and were immediately swept up by the many things to see and do. They rode the streetcars, crowded in with a mix of Mexican Indians, lighter-skinned Mexicans,

FLING!

Europeans, Americans, and Canadians. Passengers clung to the roof, bumper, and doorstep. The whole world seemed to be in Mexico City.

Day and night, the streets bustled with life. Entrepreneurs shuffled along, dodging motorcars and streetcars and bicycles, stacks of handmade chairs balanced on their backs. Darting through traffic, vendors pushed carts piled high with fruits and vegetables. Country women sat placidly on the sidewalk, colorful peasant skirts outspread, black hair braided with bright yarn, tending mysterious mixtures in clay pots over tiny braziers. Donkeys laden with overflowing baskets competed for space on the streets with motorcars and carriages.

Heather had no time to think about her past or her future. Mexico filled every part of her, waking and sleeping. It oozed out of her pores.

A city of palaces, at first its size overwhelmed her. The main square in Portree could fill a tiny corner of the Zócalo.

"It's just grand," she repeated over and over—sometimes to Jimmy, sometimes to herself. "Aye, just grand."



Over the years, Heather had heard her mother and other older women talk about the change of life, but she never thought of herself going through it. Nor had she thought the change literally meant a change in a woman's life. At fifty, she was just beginning to live, and she was so changed that she hardly recognized herself in the mirror.

Jimmy had given her money for shopping while he visited the plant, encouraging her to buy a new wardrobe. Her faded tweeds and tartans were out of place here. She wanted the most up-to-date clothes—and colorful ones, like the wealthy Mexican and European women wore.

Back in their room at the hotel, she modeled short-sleeved day dresses, tubular bodices dropping straight down to a dropped waistline, full skirt gathered at the waist, falling to mid-calf; a suit, its long jacket with fitted waist ending at her hips, slender skirt reaching her ankles; sleeveless evening dresses of filmy rayons and silks draped flatteringly

over her bodice, uneven lengths showing her knees, then dipping down to her ankles in back. Pale peach and purple pastels asserted themselves next to bright reds, greens, and blues.

The clothes increased her feeling of lightness, floating on her body, caressing it, making her more aware of her skin. They didn't drag her down the way wools and tweeds did.

She also wanted a hairstyle to match her new outfits. For the first time, she visited a beauty parlor and watched herself changed from a country mouse to a glamorous, sophisticated woman. The beautician cut Heather's long, wavy, auburn hair and shaped it into a becoming bob. She smoothed foundation makeup onto Heather's face and shaped her eyebrows, plucking and penciling in a fuller line. She applied green eye shadow to Heather's eyelids and mascara to her eyelashes. She left looking stylish and youthful.

She also bought cloche hats and ones with wide brims that flared out slightly. She wore pearls around her forehead or velvet ribbons with a colorful feather tucked into the side for an ethnic look. In the evening, she took hours getting ready, making up her face, trying one outfit and then another, entranced with her new self and marveling at the transformation.

She couldn't have imagined a life like this. Nor could she have imagined Mexico City. It was all beyond her wildest dreams. She felt she *had* stepped into a dream and would awaken any moment, still living with Norman, cleaning other people's houses to earn a few dollars. Mexico forced her to revise the limits she'd put on her imagination.

The days passed quickly, filled with shopping and exploring while Jimmy was visiting his plant. They dined late, visiting clubs and strolling along the Paseo de la Reforma—every day a fiesta, Heather the grand lady.

In the mornings, she sat at a café, holding a six-inch-long cigarette holder and smoking, sipping coffee, listening to the off-key music of curbside barrel organs and Mexican love songs sung by wandering

FLING!

mariachis. Nearby, artists were creating huge murals, the paint smell making her temporarily homesick for her father and his paintings.

She'd never seen anything like them, these bigger than life scenes of the Revolution and of the Indian peasants. Everything in Mexico was bigger than life, on the level of the gods. The women in the murals stood next to their men, shouting, carrying rifles, their faces contorted with anger. She'd never seen such strong, forceful women as in these images, reminding Heather of her mother Annie, who drove fear into the hearts of men and women alike when she rampaged. These women looked as fierce as the men, ready to fight for their beliefs and their country. Prepared to take chances.

Sometimes Heather watched construction workers rebuilding Insurgentes, one of the streets heavily damaged from the Revolution.

"We've come at a good time," Jimmy said. "The place was in shambles not that long ago with all the fighting and carrying on."

Heather would nod, for once speechless. It was almost too much for her, the grandeur of the architecture and the beauty of the women parading in the Zócalo. She had found a new home.

No. She had finally found her true home.

The city offered so much to see and do that she didn't want to sleep, managing on only a few hours a night, not wanting to miss a thing. By avoiding sleep, she also avoided her dreams' intrusions. Too often they brought scenes of her family—the children in Calgary and the large net of cousins and uncles and aunts (not to mention her parents) in Skye, people she would like to forget. It was too painful remembering them. She wanted to cut off contact completely with her past.

She fit in so well here that she almost convinced herself that her Scottish relatives didn't exist—that she was really Mrs. Jimmy Campbell, that her first language was Spanish, that she'd died and gone to heaven.

And then Jimmy announced over dinner, "It's time to leave. I need to be back before the snow starts. I have train tickets for Friday. We'll need to get packed up and say our goodbyes to everyone."

It was Monday. Black Monday. Heather dropped her fork and stopped chewing, her eyes filling with tears. Back? To Calgary? To the snow? The isolation of those bloody prairies? She used the napkin to blot the tears from her eyes, not wanting to smear her mascara, and swallowed her food determinedly, sitting ramrod straight in her chair.

The bottom was falling out of Heather's new world. She'd convinced herself their Mexican life would go on forever. The Grand Hotel had become home. She had her daily routines. People in the cafés and on the streets greeted her warmly. She was becoming fluent in Spanish. She couldn't just walk away from Mexico and what was growing inside her.

Images of the women in the murals flashed in front of her eyes. They filled her with resolve.

"I'm not going with you."

Now it was Jimmy's turn to stop chewing. His face had turned the color of rare beef, and his eyes popped out, making him look like Norman. Yes, she'd seen this same expression on Norman's face whenever she challenged him.

"You're plain daft, Heather. You can't stay here by yourself. My God, it's an unstable country. You could get buried in an earthquake or a volcano. There could be another revolution. You can't wander about, a woman alone. You need a man to protect you. It's out of the question."

She took a cigarette out of Jimmy's silver case and popped it into her mouth.

"Give me a light," she said.

Jimmy's face turned an even deeper red, and the cords stood out in his throat.

"I won't have you smoking in public. If you want to smoke in our rooms, that's fine. But I won't be embarrassed like this. What if one of my clients came in? What would he think?"

"I don't give a damn about your clients. I smoke cigarettes when I'm out by myself in the cafés, and no one treats me like a tramp. I won't have you telling me what to do."

FLING!

Heather reached into her purse, took out some matches, and lit up, blowing smoke into his face.



That Friday, she felt no grief when Jimmy's train pulled out. "I'll be back in a few months, girl. Here's a little money to tide you over and a return ticket, if you should change your mind."

She cashed in the ticket the next day. The money Jimmy gave her wouldn't go far with her expensive new tastes, and she needed to buy time to get set up on her own. She wasn't too worried. She had skills. Reading people's destinies. She'd always read them for nothing in the past, but now she would charge. Sewing. And if she had to, she could clean people's homes again and be a nanny. She wasn't too proud. She just couldn't give up the freedom she'd found south of the border.

Soon she discovered another source of income. Wealthy Mexican businessmen wanted to either learn English or brush up on their conversational skills. Heather made a tidy sum helping the men, meeting with them over lunch or dinner in order to work on their speaking style. Sometimes these meetings continued after hours, and soon she had quite a following.

She didn't view herself as a fallen woman. She had a large appetite, and it wasn't only for food. Teaching English took care of *all* her needs since the men paid for her meals *and* her company. They also delighted in her liveliness and antics. A Scottish woman was a novelty, and she made her English lessons fun, capitalizing on her mimicry to engage the men. She portrayed the various nouns she was teaching, becoming a chugging train or a creeping caterpillar, acting out different roles to demonstrate a phrase or a way of saying something.

Soon her earnings were growing, and so was her belly. It pressed against the fabric on her new clothes. Certain she couldn't be pregnant at her age, she at first blamed it on all the rich food she was eating. She vowed to lose weight, but nothing helped.

Then her stomach began cramping, and it wasn't her period. It had ended before she left Calgary. The pains became more insistent, making it difficult to concentrate on English lessons. She tried a pain medication she found in a pharmacy. It only made her feel worse and didn't touch the searing pains.

Eventually, she had to seek out a doctor. He was sympathetic, asking if she had any family nearby. She said no. He looked very serious: "Maybe you should return to your home. You have a tumor, Mrs. Campbell. It's inoperable."

She thought about returning to Calgary, but what would she be returning to? And Skye was out of the question. Anyway, she couldn't tolerate the discomfort of traveling for such a long time. She might not even last that long.

Out of money, she finally moved in with some sisters of mercy, who took pity on her. Maria, an orphan there, nursed Heather during her last days. But they say for years after her death her restless ghost walked the convent halls, the scent of heather trailing after it.

MEXICO, 1996

The veil of smog surrounding Mexico City lifts briefly to release Feather and Bubbles. Heading north on the road to San Miguel, they stop at a Pemex station near the city's outskirts to fill up the gas tank. Feather gets out and shows the attendant her map of Mexico, asking directions; Bubbles heads for the toilet. Mouth pursed, brows knitted together, she totters out of the restroom, holding on to her shoulder bag, one hand protectively cushioning it.

"Young man, that place is a disgrace. You should be ashamed. Don't go in there, Feather. There's just a hole in the floor. You'd think we were animals. Our outhouses on the farm were better than this." She climbs into the car, shaking her head in disgust.

The attendant shrugs his shoulders and returns to the map. "After four hours, señora, you see a leetle sign. Turn left and go west or you end up in States."

Feather gets back in the car and tries to take the white Styrofoam cup Bubbles has filled with water.

"Don't drink that stuff! You'll be sick as hell."

"Don't worry, it's not for me." She leans over the seat and pours water into the urn containing her mother's ashes. "Mother might be thirsty."

Feather rolls her eyes and starts the car. Bubbles cradles her purse like a baby. Feather glances at her.

“What’s in that bag? You’d think you robbed Fort Knox.”

She squirms, ignoring Feather’s remark, and turns toward the backseat again, patting the urn fondly, as if it were her mother’s body she’s touching.

“Mission accomplished,” Bubbles says, giving a deep sigh of relief, patting her purse as well.

“Partly accomplished. We have to get that thing back to the States in one piece and then to Skye.”

“My mission *is* accomplished. Just having Mother nearby again makes me feel better. It wasn’t easy to carry on after she left for Mexico. I was only sixteen, you know. I cried myself to sleep many nights. No one could replace her. Even after we heard about her death, I still expected her to return. I really needed her after my first two boys were stillborn.”

“That must have driven you mad.”

“It did. I never thought I’d give birth to a live baby. I couldn’t get over it when I finally had you. I was the only girl Mother had.”

“No kidding. I wouldn’t have known.”

“No wonder those boys didn’t want to come into the world. Their father was the problem. A drunk. Running after any skirt he saw. He died in my arms of a heart attack. If it wasn’t for his mother, I don’t know what I’d have done. A saint, that woman. I called her ‘Auntie.’ She could nurse anyone back to health and helped more women give birth than you can count.”

“How did she give birth to such a jerk then?”

Bubbles stares straight ahead. “That’s when I got interested in medicine. My dad let me have his medical book. I read every word of it. I was a big help to Auntie. We walked everywhere in the middle of winter. Scarves wrapped around our heads and faces. Slits for our eyes. What a pair we were. I was surefooted as a goat and helped her over the icy places. The townspeople waved at us as we trudged past, kicking up fresh snow.”

“Sounds like a real winter wonderland.”

FLING!

Bubbles frowns. "You've been spoiled by California. You forget how cold our winters get."

"No, I don't. The memory is frozen in my heart. Nothing will melt it."

"I don't know what I would've done without Auntie. She helped me through my first pregnancies and the babies' deaths." She caresses her round belly.

Feather glances at her. "Has your doctor checked your stomach lately? It looks pretty bloated. You've been complaining of pains."

"Just gas. I've never felt better. I had a treat before leaving the hotel. Ice cream, four scoops. The real thing, not that watered-down stuff you make me eat."

"If you catch these things—"

"Look, they have John Deere tractors here. Just like on the farm."

"So you and Granny were close?"

Bubbles nods. "Two peas in a pod. I was her favorite. Oh, she loved my brothers, don't get me wrong. But I was the one she always asked for."

"Why did she leave then?"

Bubbles glares at Feather. "She didn't mean to stay in Mexico. The man she went with dumped her. Left her stranded. She had only planned a holiday with him."

"Yeah, but she . . ."

They pass factories that sprout out of the desert like pop-up toys. Bubbles points at one of the buildings.

"Look, they make Singer here. My favorite sewing machine." Her feet start moving, rocking back and forth as if operating a treadle.

"Weren't you angry with her for abandoning you?"

"I told you, Jimmy dumped her. How could she get back to Canada?"

"Before that. She left all of you with Grandpa."

Bubbles glares at Feather and spits out, "She didn't leave us."

"What about you taking off with Manny?"

"He was a handsome brute."

Feather tightens her grip on the steering wheel. "He was a thief! He stole you from your kids."

Bubbles shrugs. "I didn't know what I was doing."

Feather's face flushes: "Neither did I! I was left with your two kids to look after—*and* your husband."

"Manny was no picnic—"

"This isn't a competition."

Frowning, Bubbles says, "Why bring it up now?"

"You've never said much about that time. I'd like to know what happened. I need some closure."

"That's easy. Don't think about it."

"Denial's your style, Mum. Not mine. We got those weird letters from you. A different place every time. 'Dear Kids, Yellowknife isn't all it's cracked up to be. Too many Eskimos and roughnecks. A real Wild West town. Manny wants to live in an igloo, and you know me. I'm game for anything. But I won't eat blubber. I draw the line there. If I survive a winter here, I'll never complain about a Calgary winter again. Ta ta. Your loving mother.' What were we supposed to think?"

"Manny wasn't one to settle down."

"What about you?"

"He needed me. He had a hard time holding on to jobs because of his drinking. We were always packing up and moving on."

"You could've left him."

"We had this old Plymouth he managed to keep going. We pulled a little trailer behind us. Real gypsies. I could always make a few dollars—cooking, sewing, cleaning, babysitting. I kept us going when Manny couldn't find work."

"Another loser."

Bubbles stiffens. "You should talk! You haven't done much better."

"Guess why?"

"It's not my fault you can't hold onto a man—"

"It's not my fault you hooked up with so many jerks! Give me a break, Mum."

FLING!

“Manny wasn’t a jerk. Just full of fun, like me. One night in Ottawa, he called me from jail. ‘Bubbles, you need to come get me.’ They’d picked him up at Eaton’s with some lipstick, and they wanted a two hundred dollar fine. I said, ‘Why’re you wearing lipstick? They’ll think you’re queer.’ He said, ‘I’m not wearing it. I stole it for you. You said you needed some.’”

“He stole lipstick?” Feather swerves to miss a rut in the road, jostling her mum and the urn.

“Be careful! Mother’s back there!”

“Yeah, right. So how long did Manny stay in jail?”

“Not long. I dug into my stash to get him out. I only had one hundred dollars, but the cops let him go because they trusted me. We left town fast that time. I hated leaving Ottawa. I liked to watch the changing of the guard on Parliament Hill. The Mounties looked sharp in their red tunics. They all had such fine heads of hair. Manny said it wasn’t hair, that they were wearing bear hats. What a laugh we had over that one. We had lots of laughs together.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Well, you wanted to hear about my trip East. It wasn’t a picnic. We went to Quebec next, a foreign country to me. Manny spoke French like a native, but I didn’t understand a word. I kept getting lost. I ended up in the darnedest places. The stockyards one day. A circus the next. I asked a carnie for directions to a restaurant on Joliet Street—they were looking for a cook. I pointed to my open mouth and made a lot of eating gestures. He opened his fly and shook his thing at me. Can you imagine?”

Feather slaps the wheel. “That’s hilarious!”

“Another day, I rode the entire bus route. The drivers kept giving me transfers and directions in French. I couldn’t understand them. I climbed on another bus and spent the day going around in circles. I *still* didn’t reach the hotel I was looking for. They were advertising for a maid.”

Feather yawns. “Bummer.”

"I finally got a taxi, but the cabbie didn't understand me, either. He dropped me at a home for the insane. I wandered around the grounds until I found a nun who spoke English. She drove me home. She reminded me of Mother, and I poured out my life story. I even confessed that Manny and I were living common law. She wanted to make an honest woman out of me and said I could stay at the insane asylum in exchange for kitchen work. I said I'd think about it."

Feather glances at her. "What made you finally leave him?"

"We were managing an apartment building. One day I found some of the rent money missing—most of the people paid in cash. I couldn't figure out why I was short. I dug deep into my bra that time to make up the difference. The next month, I hid the money in the oven. I forgot it was in there and nearly had baked bills instead of buns. I came up short again—fifty dollars. I panicked because I didn't have anything left in my personal stash."

"You both could've been thrown in jail!"

"I know. Just then Manny strolled in. He'd been out on the town and was wearing a new Hawaiian shirt. The bright colors nearly knocked me off my chair. He waved a bottle of red wine. 'I'm in the chips. Let's have a party, *ma chérie*. I'll take you out for dinner,' he said."

Feather scowls. "He blew the money?"

"Math wasn't my best subject, but I was pretty good at putting two and two together. I could forgive him for running around with other women. He claimed he was only after their money so he could show me a good time, nothing serious. I could bail him out of jail. I could clean up his messes when he threw up. But I couldn't stand a man stealing from me. I wouldn't even let Clark Gable do that. Anyway, since Manny had shaved off his mustache, he didn't look like Gable anymore."

"Thank God!"

"The next day—while he was gadding about—I grabbed my battered suitcase, set it on the bed, and unloaded the drawers and closet. Let him face the music for once. He could go to the dogs for all I cared."

FLING!

The car has been climbing a steep hill for several minutes. Feather now guides it in a long descent, tapping on the brake.

“Where’d you get the money to leave?”

“Called my brother Duncan. He wired enough for a Greyhound bus ride back to Calgary. I’d helped him out plenty when I was living with Floyd. Free room and board. He owed me something. The money came a few hours later, and I was on the next bus heading west.”

“I’m proud of you for leaving.”

Bubbles shifts in the seat, trying to get comfortable. “It wasn’t easy returning to those godforsaken prairies. I didn’t want to die there. Wind and snow howling around my headstone, the noise enough to raise the dead. No wonder Mother took off for Mexico. If I’d had the bucks, I would’ve headed south then, too. Calgary seemed dull after all the cities I’d lived in.”

“I never did understand why you went back to Floyd.”

“I missed the boys, and I was tired of supporting myself cleaning houses. I stopped by Floyd’s one day after school. Saw Abbot and Buddy. Baked apple pies, Floyd’s favorite. Wasn’t long before I was cooking whole meals—stews, pot roasts, stuffed chickens, pork chops. Floyd found them warm in the oven when he got home. I also vacuumed, scrubbed and polished the floors, waxed the furniture. The place shone.”

“How’d the boys feel about you being there?”

“Abbot and Buddy? Oh they were happy to have me back. They think the world of me.”

On a straight stretch of road, Feather speeds up. “So how long before you saw Floyd again?”

“He left me a note one day—maybe six months later. ‘Stay for dinner if you’d like.’ I stayed. I wore a dress I’d made on the farm that Floyd liked—remember? You helped me with it. I had on my best pair of spike heels—they showed off my good gams. Before long, he invited me back. I took over the master bedroom. He’d refused to sleep there after I left, and his asthma had gotten worse. He had trouble getting

oxygen. He slept on the chesterfield. Dozed off and on through the wee hours, watching TV.”

“You guys never had sex?”

“He only pressed his puck against me now and then.”

Feather’s eyes widen. “His puck?”

“I never told you? You don’t know the half of it. He didn’t undress at night. He slept in one of the two pairs of pants he wore at all times.”

Feather nods. “I remember him wearing all those clothes—double everything.”

“He got used to dressing like that on the farm. He had to be prepared at all times and never got over the habit. Many times his thick metal belt buckle cut into my belly.”

Feather frowns and looks quickly at her mum. “Ouch! But where’s the puck come in?”

“For years, he suffered from a hernia. He strapped a hockey puck to his groin to keep things in place. That bloody puck and belt buckle almost killed me. They practically gave *me* a hernia.”

“That’s abusive.”

“You don’t know the half of what I put up with. At least Manny didn’t sleep with his pants on, and he knew how to make a woman happy. In bed, anyway.”

Feather brakes for another descent. “I’m amazed you went back to Floyd.”

“It felt good not to worry about where my next meal would come from. But I can see why Mother took a powder. I would have, too, if the right man had come along.”

The car has started rocking and shaking. “Christ, it feels like an earthquake. Hold on, Mum. They can get some big ones down here.”

Bubbles grabs the door handle and her purse. All her traveler’s checks are stuffed inside a pocket she made in her brassiere, right over her heart. *A bandit will have to cut out my heart to get my money*, she thinks.

“This must be a bad one,” Feather says, slowing down.

FLING!

Bubbles sits there, frozen. The urn has cracked down the center. “Mother,” she whispers.

Feather glances at her. “Are you losing it? I’m Feather. *You’re* my mother.”

“I just added a little water to the ashes. I thought they’d be pretty dry after all those years.”

“What’re you talking about?”

Bubbles whispers again. “Mother’s with us.”

“Are you having one of your visions?”

“Look. She’s in the backseat.”

The rocking and shaking have stopped. Feather accelerates. “The earthquake must have shook you up. Don’t worry. We’ll be okay.” She glances at her watch. “We should reach the turnoff for San Miguel soon.”

“Stop, dear. We have company.”

“Bandits?”

“No. I told you. It’s Mother.”

Feather glances in the rearview mirror and almost loses control of the car. It swerves crazily for a few feet. “Holy cow. What’s going on?”

A woman is sitting in the backseat, poking at her skin, pinching it between thumb and forefinger, patting bobbed auburn hair that escapes her cloche hat. She’s wearing a dress right out of the ’20s—sleeveless and with a straight bodice—and taking deep breaths of the desert air through the open window. From a pocket, she removes a mirror and holds it up to her face. “Do you have some lipstick?” she says. “I look like death—a real fright.”

“I told you, it’s Mother,” Bubbles says, nudging Feather’s arm. “She always liked to doll up. She even cut her beautiful long hair. I used to brush it for her.” Opening her purse, Bubbles rummages around, presenting a shiny gold tube of lipstick to her mother. “I’ve only used it once. You can keep it.”

The woman examines it, trying to see her reflection in the shiny surface. Then she takes off the cap, carefully slathering poppy-red

lipstick on her lips, nodding approvingly at herself in the mirror. "Aye, that's better."

Shaking, Feather pulls the car over to the shoulder, grinding to a halt on the gravel. The woman could be her twin, except for her clothes and hairstyle, appearing to be near Feather's age of fifty-seven. Her grandmother would have been in her mid-fifties when she died.

The three women stare at each other. "Jesus," they all say in unison.

"Well, He did return from the dead," Bubbles says. "I had a feeling this might happen. My feelings are usually right."

"Only in Mexico," Feather says. "This can't be real!" She gropes in her handbag for a joint, something to steady her, and lights up, dragging deeply. She holds the smoke in her lungs as long as she can, unwilling to let it go. "We must be in a Márquez novel. *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. It's just too weird."

"What are you mumbling about? Speak up, dear. Let Mother hear, too. You don't want to be rude."

"Rude? I'm losing my fucking mind and you're worried about me being rude?"

"No need to use that language. Have some respect for me and your grandmother."

"My grandmother? We've got a stowaway. This woman hid herself in the backseat. She must have slipped into the car when we were loading it. Probably one of the maids from the hotel, wanting a ride to San Miguel."

Feather absentmindedly hands the weed to her mum and addresses the woman: "¿Su nombre?"

She looks blank.

And so does Bubbles. "Why'd you give me this thing? I don't smoke anymore."

"Have a puff," Feather says. "It'll calm your nerves."

"You know I don't like American cigarettes." She throws it out the window.

"Are you crazy? You want to start a forest fire?"

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Bubbles' eyes turn the color of steel. "You think dirt will catch fire? I don't want to smell that awful stuff."

Feather shakes her head in disgust and says to the woman, "What's your name?"

"Name?"

"It's Mother, dear. She's come back to life." Bubbles digs around in her bra and pulls out the only picture she has of her. "Look, it's her, all right, holding my oldest brother." She hands it to the woman in the backseat. "You're my mother. I'd know you anywhere. Here's your name, on the back of the picture—Heather."

The woman glances at the writing and looks away, fumbling in her pocket. "Does anyone have a cigarette?" she says. "I'm dying for a fag."

Bubbles puts the picture back in her bra. "We don't smoke. It's bad for your health."

The woman seems to have forgotten her request. She stares at a passing car, looking around as if awakened from a long sleep.

"This has to be some kind of prank," Feather says. "I came down here to rescue your mother's ashes, take some classes at the Instituto, make new art. Maybe connect with the goddess religion. This screws up everything!"

"Shh. You'll hurt Mother's feelings. She won't be a bother. We'll hang out together while you're taking classes."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Feather says. "The two of you on the loose."

"Mother and I have a lot of catching up to do. Don't worry about us."

"Jesus. My grandmother! Most of my friends have lost their mothers already, and here I am with a mother *and* a grandmother—"

"You should be grateful. At your age, I didn't have anyone. Now Mother—"

"How can you call her 'Mother'? She's almost half your age. She could be your daughter—my sister."

Bubbles looks hurt. “You know I don’t look a day over seventy. Everyone says so.”

“That isn’t the point. We’ve got a problem here. How’ll we get her into the States without a passport?”

“We’ll buy a bigger urn.”

In the excitement, Feather misses the turn to San Miguel and has to double back, adding a couple of hours to the trip. Soon a road sign appears around a bend, the silhouette of a full-bodied woman and beneath the words “curva peligrosa”—dangerous curve. “Hang on, everybody. Curves ahead.”

Bubbles says, “I’m tired of cactus—they look like wizened old men. I’m thirsty, too. You know, it’s amazing what can be done these days. Add a little water, and presto. Instant cakes. Instant puddings. Instant potatoes. Instant everything.” She leans over and whispers so only Feather can hear, “And now, instant Mother.” Bubbles laughs at her own joke. Feather just smiles, concentrating on the unfamiliar road with the hairpin turns.

Bubbles says, “She doesn’t seem very interested in us. She doesn’t talk at all, not like the mother I remember. She chattered all the time. Nonstop. Father used to say, ‘Jesus, woman, give me some peace and quiet.’ She called me dear all the time. ‘That’s fine, dear. Don’t worry, dear. I’ll be right there, dear.’ Imagine. I guess coming back from the dead would make anyone silent.”

CALGARY, 1950

The bungalow, located at the crest of the north hill before it dipped down to Riverside, might not be like the mansions in Mount Royal where Bubbles' mother had worked, but it would do. After moving from the farm, Bubbles felt like a new woman and had a fresh view on life.

If she walked to the end of their block, she could see Calgary at her feet, so different from looking out the kitchen window on the farm—an endless horizon with nothing much in between. Just crops—wheat, barley, rye. The men only talked about crops.

But no chickens. She had to find another income source.

Soon she was up to her elbows in other people's dirt, cleaning houses the way she had done with her mother. When on her hands and knees, sloshing a wet rag across a kitchen floor, she pretended the house was hers and she was waiting for her handsome, wealthy husband to come home. It helped pass the time.

All the men she worked for were doctors and lawyers. They said they liked her work, and *she* liked poking around in other people's lives, looking in closets and drawers, seeing how they lived. It was her favorite part of the job. That and the money she earned.

She used some of it to give Feather piano lessons. Bubbles had wanted to study music when she was a girl—she had a real flair for it,

everyone said. The least she could do was give her daughter a chance. The rest of the money she spent on clothes (she still loved to look nice and didn't have time anymore to sew), tucking away what was left over. She'd seen her granny hide money from her husband in an old sock. Mad money. Her own stash. A woman needed a something to fall back on, and Bubbles liked to see it grow. She could have been a farmer herself with her knack for growing things.

Soon she had a new source of income. She turned the bungalow into a rooming house. Her brothers and father lived with them at different times, and while Floyd didn't want to charge them anything—"They're family," he protested—Bubbles collected room and board promptly on the first of every month. She believed people should pay their way in life. She always gave Floyd a little something of what she collected from boarders: "Food money," she'd tell him. She never expected something for nothing, and she never got it, either.

Their two-bedroom bungalow somehow grew to hold all the strangers passing through, strays that Bubbles picked up on her travels around town, like the two French Canadians she took in, Romeo and Cecile. They were living common law and fornicated all the time, all over the house. He'd been in the service during the war and was a tough customer. One morning at about two a.m., Bubbles heard a noise in the kitchen and got up to see what was going on. Romeo was sharpening knives and muttering, "I'm going to kill that bitch."

Bubbles grabbed a butcher knife and waved it in his face. "You're not going to kill anyone in my house. If you want to kill her, go somewhere else." The next day, while she was serving them toast and fried eggs for breakfast, she said, "Oh, by the way, the whole family has lice. We can't seem to get rid of them." Romeo gulped down his toast and bolted from the table, following Cecile. She knocked over her coffee in her rush to get away. They packed their bags and ran out the back door before you could say "Jack be nimble."

Once, Bubbles returned from a shopping expedition leading a gypsy woman she'd found begging near The Bay. She'd held out a tin cup and

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jingled it at passersby. The woman, Theresa, said she didn't have a home, and Bubbles' heart went out to her, especially after looking into Theresa's cup. Bubbles had dropped a quarter into it and discovered the mug was filled with money.

She also saw some wet tea leaves clinging to its side and gave them a quick reading. The images in the leaves showed Bubbles giving Theresa a helping hand. *Poor thing*, Bubbles thought. *She could use a warm bed and some food.* One good turn deserved another, and she quickly calculated that if she collected a percentage of Theresa's take each day, she would make a tidy sum.

Theresa was not a popular roommate for the other family members. Feather wouldn't eat in the same room, saying, "She stinks worse than a barnyard." The boys imitated their sister, pinching their noses between thumb and middle finger and shouting, "Pew-ee." Bubbles called them all spoiled brats and shooed them out of the kitchen, giving Theresa the living room to sleep in.

The next morning, when Bubbles called Theresa for breakfast, no one answered. She sat, nursing her coffee, letting the poor woman sleep in. She must have been exhausted. An hour later, Bubbles called out again. Still there was no response. She finally turned the doorknob quietly and tiptoed into the living room. Everything was in chaos—sofa cushions thrown on the floor, drawers left open, pictures askew. Bubbles' knitting basket was turned upside down, the wool scattered all about, and the socks containing her savings were gone.

She couldn't understand it. Theresa had seemed like such a nice woman. She'd even read Bubbles' palm the previous night, predicting some major changes in her life.

Bubbles had suffered setbacks before, and she believed the way to cure an ailment was to get more of what ails you. A month later, she was in the ladies' bathroom at the Stampede, rearranging her mouth, frowning at her image in the mirror, when she noticed that the young woman standing next to her was crying. She was a frail little thing who

looked like she needed a good meal. Bubbles patted the woman's arm and said, "It'll be all right, dear. Don't worry."

Words came tumbling out of the woman's mouth. She and her husband had lost their apartment. The landlord had kept most of their things because they were behind on rent. Her husband had picked up a job during Stampede week as a carnie, and she was waiting for him to finish his shift. But they were out on the streets and didn't have a place to stay. What were they going to do?

Bubbles said, "Never mind, dear, you can come home with me till you get on your feet. We have an extra room."

And that's how she christened the new room she had added in their basement. Months earlier, she had supervised her brother Angus, giving him money out of the smaller stash she kept in her bra (the gypsy hadn't gotten to this one) to buy wood, nails, and plaster board.

"It takes money to make money," she always said. It didn't take Angus long to block in a room, putting a wood floor down over the concrete that they later covered with linoleum. It worked just fine, a good investment. She'd even set up beds in another part of the basement for the overflow, including her boys. What did it matter if they were directly on cement? Put a throw rug here and there, and no one would even notice.

Herbie and Sweetie moved in that night. What Bubbles hadn't counted on were all the cockroaches that accompanied them, infesting the whole house. It took her weeks to get rid of them.

Herbie and Sweetie's bed was right under Bubbles' and Floyd's bedroom. They were up until all hours with their moaning and carrying on, bed springs squeaking, putting ideas into Bubbles' head. Not that she needed much help. She'd been thinking of that dark-haired man a fortune-teller had said was in her future. She may not have met him yet, but he was already living in her imagination. It seemed just a matter of time before they discovered each other, as in the movies.

She soon got Herbie and Sweetie on their feet (she put Sweetie onto some housecleaning jobs and sent Herbie to find work as a security

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guard), and the money was coming in again. She had to knit more socks to fill. It made her heart pound faster just to think she had her own money to spend as she wanted. And she did want. Clothes. And knowledge.

A special kind of knowledge.

She looked up Helen again, the fortune-teller who'd put the bug in her ear originally.

Helen worked in a restaurant in Calgary's east end, the same place where Bubbles had dropped in for a bite when she was in town for the Farmer's Market. Helen waited on tables, reading tea leaves and cards on the side, using a booth at the back of the café.

Bubbles got fluttery feelings in her stomach whenever she visited Helen, putting all her faith into fortunetelling. She never felt like this when she went to church. The leaves and cards confirmed that unexplainable things happened in life. The church was way behind.

Helen stared at Bubbles' tea leaves for a long time, turning the cup this way and that.

"The image is really strong. I see the same dark-haired man again." And he just happened to be in the restaurant that day—Manny Le Blanc. Helen introduced her to Manny, and they all ended up back at Bubbles and Floyd's place for a party.

The next morning, Bubbles gave Herbie and Sweetie a week's notice. The following week, she had a new boarder.

Every Saturday night, Bubbles and Floyd had people over. They drank, square danced, and sang till dawn. Floyd dozed through it all on a chair in the kitchen. Bubbles' motto? Fun. Life was too short; you needed to have a little fun. In later years, when she was just seventy-five and visiting Feather in California, she found a white T-shirt that had **FUN** printed in bold pink letters across the front, the letters filled in with sequins. She even wore that shirt to bed.

Money didn't matter that much to her, as long as she could have a good time—singing and dancing and talking to people. And she wouldn't turn down a good romp in the hay, if someone offered it.

No question about it, Manny was Bubbles' dream man. Not exactly Clark Gable, but as close as you could get in Calgary. A widower, he also liked a good time, dancing up a storm. He could do the Charleston, as light on his feet as Bubbles. What a pair they made on the dance floor. She overlooked the fact that he was French Canadian. He never used that frog talk around her, and she never thought about where he was from. Le Blanc had a good Scottish ring to it, Manny the White sounding a little like Robbie the Bruce.

He had black hair, dark eyes, and a Clark Gable mustache he kept neatly trimmed. He also was a good dresser, wearing his bow ties and white shirts even when he was sitting around at home. A real joker, Manny liked gadgets and tricks. He always brought things home that he picked up at joke shops. Sometimes he paid for them; sometimes he didn't. He was like a magician the way he reached into various pockets and pulled out some new object—a figurine of a boy peeing that you could actually fill up with water; a deck of trick cards; a rubber dog turd that he plopped on the kitchen table, almost giving Bubbles a heart attack.

Her life was never the same after Manny came into it. More than she'd bargained for, he kept her off balance, and she never knew if she were coming or going. He laughed louder, drank harder, and played longer than any man she knew. And he loved women—all sizes, shapes, and ages—leading Bubbles on a merry chase.

But it was all worth it when she could creep downstairs and crawl into his bed, forgetting for a while that she was in Calgary, that Floyd was her husband, that Manny had other women on the side. Here in her own basement, *she* was number one, Manny *was* Clark Gable, and her will was not her own. Money no longer seemed so important, though she still collected room and board from him at the first of each month, pocketing most of it.

Business was business.

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The two of them fooled around for years, right under Floyd's nose. One big happy family. Floyd finally wised up, though, shedding his nice-guy image. "Get that French son of a bitch out of here or I'll kill him."

Bubbles had seen Floyd shoot gophers on the farm, and he still kept his .22 under the bed. She knew he meant business. But she couldn't live without Manny any more than she could live without food. He'd become essential to her diet.

Moving like a sleepwalker, or someone under hypnosis, she packed one large suitcase, taking only the essentials: her party dresses, lingerie, muskrat coat, bathrobe, toothbrush, peppermints, two *True Story* magazines, one *Silver Screen* with Clark Gable on the cover, pictures of the kids and her mother and father, curlers, nail polish, makeup, jewelry, a wishbone she'd been keeping for good luck, and her stash of money.

She didn't put her money in the suitcase. She stuffed it in a pocket she'd sewn into her bra. Mad money. Just in case.

Bubbles told fifteen-year-old Feather about her plans on her way out the door. Her parting words were, "Don't worry, dear, I'll send for you and the boys as soon as we're settled."

Feather just stood there, watching her mother drag the suitcase to the waiting taxi.

"You'll do what?" she said, but the words were lost in the clicking of Bubbles' high heels against the concrete.

SAN MIGUEL, 1996

Soon after they arrive in San Miguel and book into the Posada de Las Monjas, Heather starts talking, and she doesn't stop. A fountain of words pours out of her mouth from the time she wakes up until bedtime. Even in sleep, her mouth goes. She mutters and sings, keeping them awake, making up for all the time she was dead.

She wants to see and do *everything*. If they had still been in Mexico City, Feather and Bubbles would not have survived her curiosity or demands. Even San Miguel—a dusty little town with cobblestone streets, a salmon-pink church spire, and pale stucco buildings—keeps them on the run, satisfying Heather's need to explore.

She wakes before the roosters on neighboring roofs. The first morning, she accidentally turned on the shower, the only one she'd ever seen, splashing water all over the bathroom and herself, flooding the floor. Standing naked in a pool of water, her hair streaked with toothpaste, she was just about to plug in her granddaughter's hair dryer and electric shaver when Feather woke up from a dream of her grandmother stepping over a precipice. She leaped out of bed and rushed into the bathroom. "Stop! You'll electrocute yourself!"

Later, Feather wondered why she'd been so concerned since her grandmother was already dead. Surely, she couldn't die again.

After borrowing Feather's bathrobe and wrapping a towel around her head like a turban, she prowled the hotel room, opening closets

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and drawers. She asked about everything: the digital clock, its red numbers magically changing; electric rollers, toothbrush, and razor; mascara wands; blusher; a pocket calculator; Feather's PowerBook; ballpoint pens. And the television.

The first time she saw it, she tried to climb inside. She knocked on the screen and asked, "Where's the bloody door?" Feather tried to explain how the TV worked, but Heather couldn't get it through her head that the pictures are electronically controlled. Electronics itself is a mystery. So she sat in front of the set, chattering away at every new image and mimicking whatever she heard.

When a herd of wild horses stampeded toward her, she screamed, "Watch out! We're being invaded." Feather had to physically restrain her from jumping out the window, wrestling her own grandmother to the floor. "It's just a television show. The horses can't hurt you."

Heather spent the rest of the morning sitting behind the set, expecting to see the characters appear there, backstage.

Feather's PowerBook is even more puzzling, letters marching across the colored screen, forming words that she utters, her Scottish brogue still distinct.

"Perrr-fect," she says. "They're just perrr-fect," unable to get enough of them. Heather rubs the screen with a cloth, thinking it's like a blackboard and she can erase the letters and write more, but the words are still there. And so many symbols: arrows pointing in all different directions, boxes inside boxes, graphs and charts, a grinning cartoon caveman carrying a club that he points with. "Don't they have pencils anymore?" she asks.

At the mercadillo, she darts here and there among row upon row of clothes, food, hardware items, and crafts, popping into stalls and touching everything. A woman strolls past, a cage on one arm, a basket on another, both containing baby chicks, black-and-white balls of fluff with gray flecks. Heather stops her, gesturing at the chicks and talking gaily in Spanish.



Bubbles drops onto a bench, eyeing the chicks, remembering how it felt to wring the necks of full-grown hens or chop off their heads and later remove their innards. That was a long time ago—in another life. She would pretend she was a doctor, sharpening her knife, cutting into the chicken flesh, examining the gizzards and intestines. She could have been a doctor and imagined herself wearing whites, passing through the hospital, giving her queenly wave to patients.

Since arriving in San Miguel, wringing her mother's neck has crossed Bubbles' mind more than once. She acts like *she's* the Queen of Sheba. Bubbles wonders what happened to the mother she remembers who called her dear and confided all her woes. This woman is a stranger and shows no concern at all for her daughter. She's hardly spoken a sentence to Bubbles directly, as if she doesn't exist.

Shrugging off her negative thoughts, Bubbles loses herself in the surrounding sounds. Roosters' crowing and dogs' barking echoes all over town, amid the roar of motors and the beeping of horns. Vendors call. Children yell. Church bells ring, spires everywhere. The smells of grilled beef, onions, peppers, and maize mix together. It reminds her of the village where she grew up, most of the activity in the streets.

An old man, hunched over, passes by, wearing a huge straw hat and carrying a sack of corn on his back as big as himself, intent on the cobblestone street beneath his feet. Not her type. She feels sorry for him, though, just as she pities the beggars—mainly women holding their babies, some quite old, and crippled men. Hands outstretched. Others more aggressive and asking for money. They're everywhere.

While her mother and daughter shop, Bubbles studies the people, interested in how they dress and talk. Businessmen wear short-sleeved, embroidered white shirts. She never saw anything like this in Canada. The men there wouldn't be caught dead in them, but Bubbles likes the style. She especially likes the handsome Mexican men who wear the

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shirts. They bow and nod as they pass, recognizing a lady when they see one. They'd know how to treat her. Not like some of the men she's known.

A shoeshine man stops and asks her something in Spanish. She just nods and smiles. He pulls out his polish and begins applying it to her sandals.

"No!" she cries out. The only Spanish words she knows are "Bu-anes dees," and she says them right then, over and over. He just looks puzzled. She finally gets up and moves to another bench.

Two smiling Indian girls, clutching bouquets of pink blossoms, chatter away at Bubbles and offer her the flowers. Used to being admired, she takes them, recalling all the attention she got in Perdo Varta and remembering to say "grace-us." The girls stand there with their palms turned up, waiting, no longer smiling. She shakes their hands and moves to another bench, uncomfortable with the way they keep staring at her. She's used to male admirers, and the Mexican men especially are drawn to her, but this seems a little strange. Even her great-grandchildren don't act like that.

Sniffing at the flowers, she finally turns her back on the girls, watching the people some more. Tourists seem to come from everywhere—she hears German, French (those frogs are everywhere), and other languages she doesn't recognize. She tries out her Spanish on a couple passing by. They look Mexican.

"Bu-anes dees," Bubbles says. They look at her and then at each other, shrugging their shoulders. Not easily daunted, she tries again, smiling at two peasant women.: "Bu-anes dees." They glance at her, their faces closed, mistrusting. This time she shrugs *her* shoulders, her daughter's words running through her mind: "That's Meh-he-co."

Here's Bubbles, sitting at the crossroads of the world. She's never seen anything like all the movement in the streets. Tourists stand in line at restaurants or bars, climb off and on buses and taxies, and gawk—at her; at each other; at the church spires; at the red and pink geraniums filling clay flower pots everywhere she looks; at the cupolas and pastel

colored wash flapping on the roof tops; and at the mountains, veiled by a purplish haze, their soft contours silhouetted in the distance.

She notices her mother and daughter nearby, bartering with a vendor who's selling embroidered blouses. She likes being alone without her mother stealing all the attention. All the men go for her now. Bubbles is used to being the focus in a group, if only because she's older than everyone else. She loves to talk as much as her mother does. It's her way of trapping people, snaring them in her web of words. With her mother around, though, she can hardly get a word in.

Still, people like to look at her. They're amazed she's got all her marbles and enjoys life. Even Feather fusses over her when they're together, making sure she's comfortable, taking her arm and escorting her around. Now, with her mother there, it's as if Bubbles has another sibling, a much younger one. Feather seems to be the mother whose attention Bubbles and Heather both want. It's confusing.

She has decided to just ignore her mother since she doesn't seem very interested in her. No questions about what she's been doing all these years. No gazing at Bubbles lovingly and saying "my wee lassie." No amazement that her daughter has reached ninety years of age when Heather died in her mid-fifties. Her mother's resurrection hasn't gone at all the way Bubbles hoped. But then, she should have known better. Life never does the expected thing. It's always throwing curves.

She learned about curves from her grandson, Weed. He played in the Babe Ruth League and was an expert at pitching curve balls. He tried to teach his granny how to throw them, too, but she couldn't get the hang of it, barely able to toss the ball a few feet.

Childhood memories keep interrupting her people watching. So many things about this place remind her of Skye. The animals mingling with humans in the streets—cows and sheep and chickens. The buildings look homemade, not all perfect as in Canada and America. A little crude. They feel more human, more personal. And the Mexicans seem down-to-earth, happy with simple things. Not like so many Canadians. Bubbles can understand now why Feather likes

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to travel and see different people and places. It does make you notice more. She could have been a teacher herself, telling her students things.

She sees her granda through the crowds, standing at an easel, painting portraits. How did he get here? And then the throng of people swallows him up. Is that her granny hanging wash on the line on a roof? Then she's sure she sees her uncles and aunts chatting up some neighbors, buying fruits and vegetables at a stand. They all fit in here. And so does she. Maybe she'll never return to Canada. Maybe she'll stay with her mother and Feather in Mexico forever. Forget about dying.

For a few moments, she merges with the hot sun and everything surrounding her: the blue tile against white plaster; the arches and ovals; the wrought iron; the courtyards with ferns and ivy draped over balconies and trailing along walls; the patios with pink floor tile and fountains; the birds and butterflies soaring and diving; the patches of lime and gray-green on the distant mountain; the TV antennas wobbling on rooftops.



Back in their hotel room, Bubbles watches her mother poke through Feather's makeup kit. Her mother also carries on a running monologue with the television. Some characters on the TV are talking in Spanish, and Bubbles is amazed her mother speaks it as fluently as she does English. Bubbles doesn't understand a word and just lets the sounds fall on her like gentle rain. At least it isn't French. Her blood starts to boil just thinking of those frogs wanting to separate from the rest of Canada. If she were queen, she'd tell them a thing or two.

Feather said the place where they're staying was once a convent, so Bubbles feels reverent. She tiptoes, just in case any leftover nuns are hanging around watching, and she crosses herself each time she passes the crude wooden crucifix above the doorway. But she still can't get the movement right, making a kind of circle with her right hand in

the area of her heart and curtsying slightly. Though she does this, she wouldn't want people to think *she's* a Catholic. If her father thought his only daughter had changed her Presbyterian faith, he'd leave his grave. She knows *he's* underground, properly buried, not like her mother, whose body has been floating around all these years.

Bubbles watches her mother sample nail polishes, painting a different color on each finger and toenail, her hair wrapped in Bubbles' electric rollers, face hidden behind a green cleansing mask that makes her look like a ghoul. So far, their reunion hasn't turned out well for Bubbles. She thought they'd pick up where they left off, but her mother hasn't had a minute to spare for her daughter. If anything, it's Bubbles who is dead and invisible, at least to her mother.

A pain stabs her gut. She doubles over and gasps, grabbing a chair for support. It passes as swiftly as it hit. Sitting down, she stuffs her mouth with Roloids, glancing resentfully at her mother. She's so caught up in the TV screen that she hasn't even noticed her daughter's distress.

Feeling homesick, Bubbles misses her TV programs, especially *The Young and the Restless*. She also misses the man she met at bingo recently—Victor. Actually, she's had her eye on him for ages, and she doesn't want some other woman getting her claws into him while she's away. Originally from Budapest, he's lived in Canada a long time. He's as good as Canadian. Just a little accent left. A handsome brute. Six foot four. A good dresser. He towers over Bubbles. And he's younger. Just seventy-four. A great catch. There's nothing wrong with a younger man. Lots of the women are playing house with younger men, and half of the seniors are sleeping together. They talk about it all the time.

Before she left for Mexico, she went window-shopping with Victor downtown. He said he'd already spent his pension and couldn't afford to buy them lunch. His recent trip to Hungary had wiped him out. "I'm a traveling man," he told her.

Barely five feet tall, Bubbles had to stretch to hold on to his arm. The last time they went out, she wore her nice cheetah slacks and top and had a new perm. Everyone said they made a handsome couple. He's

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visited her several times at her place, walking her home after bingo, but they haven't slept together yet. She fantasizes about having sex with him. It's been a long time since she's felt this way or been intimate with a man. Victor has kissed her and always gives her a big hug, pressing against her ample breasts. But he acts like a real gentleman, though she's sure he has the hots for her.

Victor phoned her several times before she left, and they talked for hours. He said he's always wanted to visit Mexico. She thinks he was angling to go with her. He didn't come right out with it, but he was hinting around, saying she and Feather should have a man to protect them. Mexico wasn't safe for women alone. But she wasn't ready to travel with him. Maybe another time.

Bubbles gets up and prowls the room, waiting for her mother to get dressed so they can meet Feather for lunch. A container on the bureau says "Wrinkle Free." She removes the lid and sprays the contents onto her face, rubbing it into her skin. Studying herself in the mirror, she's certain she looks younger already.



After her painting class is over, Feather joins her mother and grandmother in a restaurant garden near the Instituto. She squeezes into a seat next to Heather, who is chattering away in Spanish, lost in her own world. Bubbles stares at Feather, blue eyes magnified behind her bifocals. "Notice something different about me?" she says.

Feather gazes at her. The sun makes her white hair gleam. "You've got new earrings. In fact, you're wearing *my* earrings. Jeez, Mum, you don't have pierced ears. How'd you get them to stay on?"

"Never mind that. Look at my skin." She turns her head from side to side, patting her face.

"You've got a sunburn?"

Her frown deepens, and she shakes her head.

“Okay, so what’s new about your skin? Looks the same as it always does.” Feather gestures impatiently for a waitress. “Senorita. Gracias. ¿Puedo ofrecerle algo de beber? Una cerveza.”

“Where’s the baby?” Bubbles asks and looks around.

“I wasn’t asking about a baby. I was ordering a beer. You want something?”

Heather smacks her lips, slathered with raspberry colored lipstick. “Aye, a beer would hit the spot.”

She looks like a cockatiel in the clothes she bought at the mercado that morning, using the money Feather had given her to shop. It’s better than her wearing all of Feather’s things. Besides, she’d already complained about Feather’s taste in clothes. Not stylish enough.

Heather likes the turban look, which she saw on TV, and has made one from an orange scarf, fastening it with a rhinestone brooch she found among Bubbles’ jewelry, real pheasant feathers tucked inside and flopping around whenever she moves her head. Her bobbed hair makes two big commas on her cheeks. The dress she bought has a yellow, form-fitting top and a full skirt with multicolored panels—orange, red, purple, green. Jangling each time she moves, a rainbow of bracelets—at least a dozen—marches up her arm, light glinting off them. Purple shell earrings dangle from her ears, and a matching necklace clinks on her neck.

Feather looks at Bubbles, who has the V of vexation between her eyebrows. It’s clear she’s jealous of her mother, a real glamour girl. Bubbles resembles a mudhen next to her. She grabs Feather’s arm and says, “Look at me. I don’t have any wrinkles. I used some of your wrinkle-free stuff.”

“What wrinkle-free? Oh, my God! That’s not for your face. Someone gave it to me for my clothes. You spray it on, and it keeps them from wrinkling when they’re folded.”

“Well, it works. I look years younger already. I could make a killing selling it in Canada. A regular fountain of youth.”

FLING!

“Yeah, and you’d end up in the coop for false advertising. You want your great-grandchildren to know you committed fraud?”

She glares at Feather. “It isn’t fraud if people are happy.”

“You’d make a terrific lawmaker.” Feather wonders at times how she ever grew up to be somewhat normal, given her mum’s zany ideas. She has an amazing ability to complicate things. It could be one source of Feather’s creativity, this tendency to subvert ordinary surfaces and transform them into something else.

The waitress sets down two frosty glasses and two bottles of Negro Modelo in front of Heather and Feather, a wedge of lime balanced on each bottle’s opening. Bubbles sulks. “You didn’t order me one?”

“You never drink beer. I thought you’d like a soda or a fruit drink.”

“I was practically weaned on ale. Granda gave it to me all the time.”

“Aye, there’s nothing like a good glass of malt.” Heather raises hers in a toast. “Your granda was a wise man, all right, even when he was in the cups.”

This is the first time she has made any reference to family, the first acknowledgment of a shared history with the other women. Feather wonders if she’s getting her bearings. It must be quite a shock to be dead one minute and alive the next.

Her grandmother pours more beer into her glass, squeezes lime juice into the amber colored liquid, says “Slan-ji Va,” guzzles the whole thing, and licks off the foam mustache before Feather can raise her hand to signal the waitress that Bubbles wants a beer, too.



Several cervezas later, the women finish their lunch and totter back to the hotel, arm in arm, singing “Over the Sea to Skye” off-key. Bubbles giggles and crosses herself, blurting out, “What would the nuns think if they saw us?”

Feather waves away a man who grabs his crotch and hisses as he passes them.

"I geeve you good time, señoras."

Heather stops and glares at him. "I'll give you the back of my hand, talking to three ladies like that. Where's the police?"

Feather laughs. "He *is* the police!"

She shrugs and takes Bubbles' arm again. "You're a bonnie lass, my girl. That's what your granda would say if he could see you."

Bubbles beams. She finally has her mother back.

Inside the hotel, the women wander around, unable to find their room.

"Too much sun. Always makes me lightheaded," Feather says.

Bubbles says, "I need a siesta," slurring siesta so it sounds like "shesta."

"I could stand another one, too," Heather says, turban askew, one of her earrings gone, feathers drooping.

"Another what?" Feather asks.

"Beer. We should have brought some with us in case we have company."

"Who're you expecting?" Feather says.

Heather winks. "You never know."

They've reached a dead end, an alcove with an elevated statue of a chocolate-skinned Virgin cradling a naked Jesus. The three women stand there, crossing themselves and giving blessings. The Virgin smiles benignly down at them, one hand reaching out. Bubbles digs into her purse and pulls out a handful of candies she's snatched from the restaurant, dropping them into the Virgin's palm.

After, they wind through the labyrinth of hallways and passageways, Feather holding the key the desk clerk has given them, comparing the number on it to the doors. Finally, they find their room and fling open the door, falling inside.

Thousands of moths flood the chamber, a blizzard of them, winging wildly through the open balcony door, blindly colliding with one another. They flutter against the women's skin and clothing. Bubbles strikes the air, trying to make a path through them. Heather does a restrained Highland fling over an imaginary sword. Several moths flap

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in her hair; one perches on the tip of her nose. Feather and Bubbles join her in a combination Highland fling and Mexican hat dance.

Overcome by the deluge, Feather grabs the phone, striking at the moths with a pillow and pulling a blanket over her head. In a muffled voice, she tries to explain to the concierge what's happening, but she's lost any trace of Spanish. All she can do is spit out, "We're invaded by moths! Send help."

Heather laughs and twirls. "There's an ancient saying, you know. The dead appear to us as moths and knock on our windows at night. They want inside—close to the light. Well, lassies, the souls of the dead are visiting tonight!" And she claps her hands in delight.

Feather wraps herself in a sheet. "Terrific. Why'd they pick our room?"

"We left the balcony door open and the lights on. They're attracted by the brightness."

Feather dives for the light switch on the wall and flips it off, leaving their room in darkness. The moths drift back outside, silhouetted against the streetlight and the smoky full moon. She slams the balcony door after them, several moths still fluttering around her head, before turning on the switch again.

Bubbles has passed out on one of the beds, mouth open, snoring musically, sounding a little like a bagpipe. She clutches her purse to her breast, and a chorus of chirps comes from that area. Feather bends over and presses her ear to her mother's chest, certain the sounds are coming from her body. Pushing aside the purse, she cries, "Mum needs a doctor. Her heart sounds weird."

The purse falls to the floor, and the clasp opens. Several chicks crawl out, wobbling drunkenly over the carpet, looking for food. Feather chases after them, but they dive under the bed.

"Will you look at this? Mum's been snitching again from the poor Mexicans."

But Heather is talking animatedly to an elderly man and woman. The man is wearing a dented pith helmet, a veil covering his face,

combat boots on his feet, a moth-eaten Boer War great coat dwarfing his short, stocky body. The woman—several inches taller than the man, her head crowned with long braids—wears a long dress and apron. Both of them seem slightly bewildered and out of place.

Heather glances at Feather and says, “Meet me mother and father, Annie and Malcolm—your great-grandparents.”

Feather collapses next to Bubbles, and the chicks peep out from under the bed, black eyes like grape seeds against their pale yellow feathers.



Feather is the only one who seems surprised to see her great-grandparents turn up in their room at the hotel. Bubbles assumes the dead come and go as they please, and Heather is one of them. As for Annie and Malcolm, they slip into the Mexican rhythms and customs as if they’ve always lived there. Malcolm has traded his pith helmet for a huge sombrero, his coat for a serape, his combat boots for huaraches. Annie has chosen a simple cotton peasant dress.

For Feather, it’s mind-boggling to be the youngest of four generations of women gathered together at once—almost as good as finding the goddess, though she hasn’t given up on that quest. She feels she’s among family, something she hasn’t experienced since she left The Circus, the commune she was part of years earlier. Except these people are her *real* relations. The same blood runs through their veins. The thought astounds her, and she watches them all in amazement.

Annie, who knows nothing about modern conveniences, gets up early each day—even earlier than Heather—to do the laundry. She fills a pillowcase with soiled clothes, throws it over her shoulder, and heads for El Chorro, the source of the town’s water supply. The local women wash their clothes there, and Annie joins them. After finding a good flat rock, she takes out a bar of soap and begins to scrub, too.

FLING!

By the time the others awaken, Annie has returned to Posada de Las Monjas, finding her way through the tangle of streets—winding around and around, mysteriously leading back to the town's center—and has hung the wet laundry all over the room. Water drips from panties and nighties, undershorts and shirts, socks and nylon stockings. She also has picked up some grain at the mercado and scattered it on the carpet for the chicks. “They’ll make us a good meal when they’re grown,” she says.

When Feather wakes up, Malcolm is sitting in his BVDs on a stool in front of the TV, wearing a sombrero and holding a half-empty Corona, his third for the day. He removes the hat and scratches his scalp, his hair—what’s left of it—tousled.

“Jesus Christ, Mother, I’m having a vision. I’m seeing the little people—or else I’ve got the screaming meemies. Maybe you were right after all, and the drink’s finally gotten to me.” He stares at the screen, shaking his head. “They’ve captured the little people and put them in a box. Look, Annie.” And he shakes his fist at the screen. “Well, they’ll not get away with it as long as Malcolm MacGregor’s around.”

Bubbles waddles into the room from the bathroom, swatting at a wet shirt sleeve dangling from the line in front of her. Chicks follow, as if she’s their mother. Music drifts up from the street, a band of mariachis passing by, and her feet—snug inside red slippers she’s knitted and having a mind of their own—take off with her, dancing around the room to the tunes she’s hearing.

Malcolm leaps from the stool, sombrero flapping like wings around his ears, and grabs the crucifix from the wall, holding it in front of him like a sword, advancing on the TV. “I’ll save you, maties,” he shouts, lunging at the back of the box, aiming the crucifix at an opening. Bubbles grabs the wet shirt and holds it in front of her, pretending it’s a man she’s dancing with, twirling and dipping, bobbing around the room, bumping into her granda. Feather tries to explain it isn’t little people who are trapped in the box.

“They’re actors,” she says. “The same image is being seen in thousands of homes. The little people are okay.”

“Aye, and cows have three ears.”

The circus-like atmosphere in the room reminds Feather of the other family that helped shape her.

ADRIFT IN THE 1950S

By the time Feather turned fifteen, she was ignorant in many ways, but she did know she needed to get out of Floyd's house.

Fast.

He had already initiated her into the world of work when she was thirteen. He asked the owners of the store where he bought all his groceries to hire her. She swept the floor and stacked the shelves with goods, stuffing packages of Export A into her underpants when she left. So she wasn't unprepared for her first full-time job in the stock room of the venerable Hudson's Bay Company.

Not long after she started working at The Bay, she moved into a three-room, furnished basement suite on the north hill, her first pad, relieved to be away from the pressures she was feeling at Floyd's. Now completely on her own, all she took with her were clothes and a few mementoes.

No one was going to pay the bills if she couldn't. She depended on the paycheck she took home every couple of weeks and her ability to hold down a job.

That was frightening. She hadn't had many people in her life she could depend on completely. How could she trust herself? She didn't know, but she didn't have much choice.

In need of a new look, she decided to lighten her hair. So she went to the local Rexall Drugstore and picked up some peroxide. She knew nothing, then, of its nuances.

Not ready for a completely new look, she decided to go about this transformation in increments, starting first with her crown in case she didn't like it. That night, she saturated the front section of her hair with peroxide and waited. Instead of ending up with a blonde streak, like a skunk, she woke up with green hair fringed with orange. A couple of generations later, she could have been part of the punk scene, and the hair color would have been perfect. But in 1955, it was just weird.

The next day, she went to work as usual, ignoring the puzzled looks of her coworkers. But the dream of becoming a real blonde, fueled by the glamour bug Bubbles had instilled in her, persisted. Eventually, she figured out how to do it and said goodbye to her deep-auburn color, becoming what she thought was a blonde bombshell. The blonde hair may have gotten her more appraising looks from some men, but it left her feeling adrift, unrooted in herself, groping for an identity.

Adrift in other ways as well, Feather threw a party one night in her small suite. She announced it at the local hangout, the Chinook Room at The Bay. Word spread like the measles, and youth from all over town descended on her place. They kept piling in, lugging cases of Labatt's beer, spilling into the yard.

Things quieted down when her landlord—a little guy from Hungary, who hadn't been in Canada long—marched into the living room. "I give you fifteen minutes to leave. Then I call police."

Red in the face, his eyes bulged out of his head. Someone handed him a beer; he ignored it. He finally pushed his way out of the place.

The sound of glass breaking rent Feather's fog. She noticed that the window in the upper part of the front door was now a shattered jigsaw puzzle, pieces dangling in the sill. Soon a big guy with a crew cut, a football player, hauled off and kicked a hole in the kitchen wall. Afterward, he stared blankly at the cavity. A girl giggled and jabbed at the opening with her spiked heel.

Feather could hear the high-pitched wailing of police sirens approaching. Someone grabbed her by the arm and yelled, "Come on, let's get outta here."

FLING!

She ran into the bedroom and snatched her pink clutch purse and Bubbles' hand-me-down muskrat jacket. It was tattered around the pockets and collar, the animal's skin showing through. Bubbles had said, "You'll need it more than me, honey. It rains a lot at the coast."



Two days later, Feather climbed aboard a train at the Canadian Pacific Railroad Station. It heaved and jerked, iron rails singing, throwing her into a seat. Clouds of black smoke trailed behind it.

She had spent the past couple of nights with a girlfriend, but she knew she had to get out of town when she read about the party in the *Calgary Herald's* police column. It said the police were looking for her.

She fingered the one-way ticket to the coast. She had \$9.75—enough to buy some food on the train and send a telegram to Bubbles in Vancouver, announcing her arrival.

What if she didn't get the telegram in time? Would Feather still have enough?

She looked out the window at her friend Rose, and her heart froze. It was frightening to leave behind the city where she had grown up and head off into the unknown. But she didn't have any choice. If she didn't leave, she would end up in jail.

The train soon left the station behind, slowly making its way to the city's boundaries, picking up speed. The prairies flashed past, daylight fading. When they drew closer to the mountains, she began to relax, staring at the land spreading out on both sides of the train, the snowy surface crisp and glaring white. The conductor lurched down the aisle, collecting tickets. Feather handed him hers. Then it dawned on her where she was going. Vancouver! She tried to imagine what it was like from the stories she'd heard. A *real* city. And she would see the ocean for the first time.

The train clattered around a bend, shattering her reverie. She pulled out Bubbles' last letter and reread it. A ratty piece of paper, folded

in many sections and fingered to death, the handwriting was barely readable. This contact with her mum made Feather homesick. She longed to see her again.

We found a one-bedroom suite with a curtain partition, it's partly furnished and not too far from the bus. I get lost every time I go out by myself, Manny had to get me sometimes. It's been too rainy and foggy to do much sightseeing (it snows here too but melts so fast it turns into ice, it's like walking on a skating rink). We did get to Chinatown, it's the biggest one you've ever seen. Call my attorney if you need to get hold of me.

Love

Your mother

She carefully folded the letter again and put it in her pocket. The train had just made its first stop at Field, B.C.

Field seemed a safe place to send a telegram from, far enough from Calgary that no one would be checking on her. She rushed inside the station, terrified the train would leave without her and afraid of being stranded there. Out of breath, she dictated a short message to the telegraph operator, giving him the attorney's address: ARRIVING TOMORROW AT TEN A.M. BY TRAIN.

Back on board, she watched a girl of about nine across the aisle, her head on her mother's lap, petticoat showing under her skirt, hair in pigtails. She remembered Bubbles putting her hair in pigtails, and that memory reminded Feather of the farm—of all of the things she'd given up in her life so far.

She had helped her mum raise chicks on the farm, keeping them in an incubator until they were big enough to transfer to the chicken house. She fed them each day, cleaning out the chicken house every week so they didn't get infections and keel over. She put up with the

FLING!

smell they gave off and their lice, knowing Bubbles needed the eggs they produced so she could sell them at Calgary's Farmer's Market. It did rankle Feather when her mum pocketed the cash and said with a laugh, "It's nice to have my own little nest egg."

Terrified each time she reached under the breast of a warm, pulsing hen to grab its treasures, Feather could have done with a nest egg of her own, something to show for her labor. The chickens pecked her hand, screeching and scolding until she backed away and gathered her courage to try again. After, she had to clean the eggs in the dank basement. And this wasn't her only chore. Besides cooking, she washed and dried dishes, milked cows, separated the cream from the milk, and churned butter. She helped her mum sweep, scrub, and polish floors. She also cleaned the barn and plucked feathers from the chickens after Bubbles wrung their necks or chopped off their heads.

In the fall, she and Bubbles would spend several days in the kitchen, sterilizing sealers in boiling water so they'd be ready for canning. The windows steamed up, and they sweated from the heat, the wood-burning stove blazing at a high pitch so the water stayed hot. They also cooked tomatoes, peaches, pears, apples, beans, peas, beets, carrots, pickles, and chicken. After, they filled the jars with the food, securing them with a rubber seal inside a metal lid. Later, they carried them downstairs to the cellar and lined them up on shelves, tired but proud of their work. Feather bloomed in this environment.



The landscape flashed past the train window. Unable to sleep, she wandered from car to car until she reached the dining area and bought a coffee. A conductor, wearing a black uniform with gold trim, sat down opposite her, giving Feather the once over. His eyes were mocking, taunting. "This your first time on a train?"

She tried to look "with it," staring at him boldly. "First time," she said.

"Would you like me to sweeten your coffee? I've got some rum here."

He unbuttoned his jacket, pulled out a small silver flask from an interior pocket, unscrewed the lid, and poured some liquor into her cup, hastily hiding the flask again.

She stirred the liquid with a spoon and gulped some down, the rum warming her insides, soothing her nerves.

"Come on, finish your coffee, and I'll give you a tour." He pulled out a package of Player's and offered her a cigarette. She took one, thinking *he's a player, all right*. He flicked his lighter, the flame flaring under her nose, then lit his own. "You ready for the tour?"

She nodded, wishing she had more of that rum, her body already feeling lighter and slightly alien. He led the way up to the lookout car. The interior lights were turned off so passengers could see the outside better, and a full moon lit up the land. He pointed to a seat near the back, away from the only other people there—a couple sitting at the front of the car.

"Hey, kid, you look kind of nervous. Running away from home?"

"No, I'm going to see my mother."

"You sure you don't need a place to stay? I've got plenty of room."

"That's okay. Someone's meeting me."

They seemed to be flying over the snow and through mountain passes. She was dazzled by what the moonlight revealed. Relaxed from the alcohol, at first she didn't notice his hand on her knee. The night was cracking open, the train a bullet hurtling through space.

His hand reached the scar on her right thigh and paused, feeling the indentation. A compound fracture of her femur when she was ten had led to four operations on that leg. The scar was covered now with a nylon stocking held up by a white garter belt. He whistled but didn't move his hand.

His fingers started moving again, touching the bare skin above her stocking. She flinched, not wanting to look at him for fear he'd become real to her. His caress tickled. Feeling a little tipsy, she almost giggled, trying to pretend nothing was happening.

FLING!

But she couldn't ignore his hand, fingers groping and probing.

Finally, she pulled away and stood up, holding the back of a seat to keep her balance.

"I'm tired. I need some sleep."

The conductor jumped up, too. "Come on, I'll get you a roomette. Real bed, sheets, the works."

"I don't have money to pay for one."

"No problem. Not many are being used this trip."

She followed, trying to match the easy way he walked through the cars, as if the train weren't moving. He took her into a tiny room that had a bed and its own miniature sink and toilet. "All the comforts of home," he said as he ushered her inside and closed the door. The night rushed past them.

She clutched her pink purse. It matched the pink sling-back heels she was wearing, the same ones she'd had on the night of the party. The conductor stood behind her. She could see their reflection in the window, and she looked petrified. He placed a hand on each of her breasts, cupping them.

Feather stared at those hands. They looked strange, clinging to her young breasts that were still finding their shape. His eyes were fixed on his hands, too, on what was under them, as if he had trapped something there.

She remembered reading about the Amazons, how they cut off a breast so they could shoot their arrows better and be more effective fighters. At times, she wanted to get rid of hers. They got her into too much trouble. Guys always wanted to touch them.

She avoided meeting the conductor's eyes in the window, not wanting to acknowledge he existed. Turning quickly, she caught him off guard. He fell onto the bed, and his conductor's cap toppled onto the floor, his toupee flying off with it. She shrieked.

The toupee resembled a guinea pig she'd once had as a pet. Lunging for the door, she yanked it open and ran into the passageway, losing her high heels. She picked them up, hurrying barefooted past passengers

dozing in their seats. Spittle gathered in the corners of their mouths, their heads limp and bouncing on burgundy seat covers.

At last, she was back in her car, the lights dim, the place smelling of stale cigarette smoke and stinking feet and bodies too close together. She reached her seat. Seeing the child still sleeping on her mother's lap calmed her.

The conductor faded into the landscape, just a reflection in a window or mirror, nothing tangible, nothing real—as fake as his false hair.

Feather curled up in her coat, head resting on the seat's cushioned arm. The train's rhythmic movement soon put her to sleep.



The next morning, the train glided into Vancouver's CPR station and stopped with a jolt. The movement upset her empty stomach. She didn't want to spend the little money she had left on food.

When she stepped off the train, she was sure everyone was looking at her, aware she was a runaway. Her spiked heels echoed on the station's marble floors, making her even more self-conscious. The sound stood out from the voices reverberating off the walls, family and friends greeting one another.

Studying everyone's face, she searched for Bubbles and Manny.

They weren't there.

She headed for the magazine stand inside the terminal and leafed through *Silver Screen*, shaking, her legs almost giving way. Tears kept welling up in her eyes. Holding the magazine in front of her face, she wiped away the drops with the back of her hand.

Where could she go with no money or clothes? Maybe Bubbles' attorney hadn't received her telegram. Maybe Feather had been too hasty in turning down the conductor. Or maybe her mother and Manny didn't want her. She was excess baggage for them—too much trouble.

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Then a familiar male voice said, "We didn't know what train station to go to, so we went to the CNR. We were waiting there for you."

Out of breath, Bubbles and Manny ran toward her, their faces flushed. She fell into Bubbles' arms and wept.

"Hey, doll, where's your suitcase?" Manny asked.

She hugged the paper bag that held her few possessions close to her body. "I lost everything."

Bubbles said, "You what? Everything?"

She nodded and stared at the cracked marble floor, wishing the cracks were wider so she could fall between them. "Yeah. Everything."

The rhythmic sound of windshield wipers soothed her, and she fell asleep in Manny's car. As they pulled up in front of a cream-colored stucco bungalow, the siding a faded hospital green, she awoke. A straggly row of bushes lined the footpath to the basement door. Manny led the way, and Feather got under Bubbles' umbrella with her. A whiff of her mother's Evening in Paris perfume made her dizzy.

After unlocking the back door, Manny bowed and said, "Nice thing about being a gypsy, you travel light. No luggage to haul around." He tweaked his black mustache.

They descended, cool, damp air enveloping them, fighting their way through wet nightgowns, panties, shirts, and shorts hanging from a line crisscrossing that part of the basement. A pair of Bubbles' nylon stockings draped over his hat, Manny pointed to a door next to the washing machine and patted Feather on the rear. "The bathroom's there. Shower, no tub." He winked. "Just call, and I'll wash your back."

This was a Manny she hadn't seen before. Now she knew what was meant by the expression "out of the frying pan and into the fire." She'd dodged Floyd and the conductor. Now she had to deal with Manny. Shivering, she pulled away.

He unlocked another door, the stockings trailing him, and they filed into a big room. Though midday, the place was nearly dark. Wearing his uniform of a white shirt, bow tie, gray slacks, and navy blazer, he flipped on the lights and spread his arms wide.

“Home sweet home!” he exclaimed and then wrapped himself around Feather, rubbing his beard against her face, scraping it. He smelled like a brewery.

Bubbles looked a little embarrassed. “Everything’s a lot more expensive on the coast. It’s all we can afford for now.”

Feather pulled away from Manny and took stock of her temporary home. It smelled of mildew. At one end, a bed, a chest of drawers, and a wardrobe were partitioned off by a drape, tied back with a sash. A sink, a hot plate, a tiny fridge, some cupboards, a table covered with rose colored plastic, four chairs, a sofa, a console television, and an easy chair took up the rest of the space.

That night, she fitted herself into the narrow width of the chesterfield. She kept sinking into the spaces between the overstuffed cushions, losing arms, legs, and feet, waking up frequently to rescue them. The couch threatened to swallow her.

Only a curtain separated Feather from Bubbles and Manny in the alcove. She knew what the sounds of raspy breathing and creaky bedsprings meant. Squirming, she felt as if she were in bed with them. No walls separated them. She could have been her mum, whispering things to Manny, letting him have his way with her.

The thought sickened Feather.

In the morning, they all had trouble looking at each other, floating around like ghosts in their pastel colored nightclothes, revealing as much as they concealed.

Feather needed to get her own place—fast.

THE CIRCUS, CIRCA 1960s

Feather met her first husband, Ed, at the Vancouver Zoo in front of the monkey cage. He gave her peanuts to feed the animals and offered her a ride home. She accepted and ended up marrying him when she turned sixteen. When the two of them found a justice of the peace and soberly took their vows, Feather was four months pregnant. For her, it was a day of weeping, not celebration. A shotgun marriage so her child wouldn't be illegitimate, as she was. She had hoped for more from life than kids and a husband, though she couldn't articulate then what that "more" might be. She just knew it had to exist somewhere.

Ed—three years older than Feather—already had a job as a plumber, his father's line of work. Like her, he was a high school dropout and had unplugged toilets and clogged drains for as long as he could remember. Unfortunately, the sewage smells became part of him and ultimately drove Feather away, though she probably wouldn't have hung around long anyway. He was just too dull, too plodding. His idea of a good time was spending Friday night at the beer parlor without her, getting drunk with his buddies.

She had other plans for her life, and they started with a capital "C"—CALIFORNIA. Since she first heard about that state in social studies, Feather had dreamed of going there. It seemed like the gold at the end of the rainbow, overflowing with fruits and vegetables, rugged coast

lines, vast deserts, lush forests, high mountains, massive marijuana crops, and, most importantly, a moderate climate. California equaled glamour and excitement. Freedom!

For years, Bubbles had fed Feather's fantasies with movie magazines and stories about Hollywood and the stars. California took on mythic proportions, larger than Olympus. Gods and goddesses romped there. Feather wanted to be a California girl, to shed her Canadian past—the inhibitions and timidity and other limitations. She wanted to be part of massive America, the Promised Land.

Finally, at twenty-two, she ditched Ed and made her break, taking their six-year-old son with her. After receiving green cards for both of them, they climbed aboard a train headed south, never looking back. She'd named her son Weed because she associated marijuana with the New World—a new way of seeing that she didn't want to lose. Grass loosened her inner restraints and made her realize there was more to seeing than just looking. It also made her conscious there was more to life than what she viewed with her normal vision.

For the first couple of years after mother and son arrived in California, they wandered around the Golden State in the green '54 Ford she found for a hundred dollars (she called it "The Green Hornet" after the radio program she listened to avidly as a child). When they stopped long enough, she temped in offices, worked as a cocktail waitress, went through roommates the way she did nylon stockings (they were always running), and tried to hold things together.

Many nights, she and Weed slept in the car or on the beach, the surf pounding nearby, snug in sleeping bags she found at a thrift shop. They stared at stars popping out of the night sky, and Feather made up stories about them, encouraging Weed to make up his own. The tales evaporated in daylight, just as the stars did, but they gave mother and son some mooring in this new land. Night after night, they wove together their creations, spinning a fabric of fiction they wrapped themselves in.

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He didn't complain about their nomadic life, but he often asked her where his dad was and when he would see him again. "I miss him, Mum. Don't you?"

Feather squirmed whenever Weed mentioned Ed. She didn't want to alienate her son from his father. But she also didn't want him influencing this boy who had lived in her womb and in a way continued to do so. "Your dad's in Canada, hon. You can write to him when we get settled."

In the morning, the two of them dipped into the ocean to wash up. Feather couldn't get enough of the ocean after growing up on the Canadian prairies.

They camped in parks, living at times on the fish she and Weed caught and the goodwill of strangers. She washed their clothes in rivers and streams, spreading them on the car to dry. She stopped shaving her legs and armpits. The ease of this life appealed to her, one day sliding into the next, slippery as an eel, night and day flowing together—boundaries blurring, distinctions hazy.

Her wanderings finally took her to Mendocino. She stopped at a roadside fruit stand to pick up apples and juice, asking if she could do some work in the garden in exchange for the food. That's where she met Plum Blossom, whose shape reminded Feather of a bunch of ripe plums sculpted together. Plum claimed she was related to the Miwoks.

Her long, dark hair braided and coiled on top of her head like a crown, she wore beaded moccasins identical to others that were on sale at the stand, a long, multicolored dirndl skirt, and a white peasant blouse with elasticized short sleeves and a scoop neck. Remembering her Indian playmates on the farm, Feather felt as if she'd returned home.

"You looking for a place to stay?" Plum asked.

"Yeah."

"Cool. We've plenty of space. Lots of kids here, too. What's your name?"

"Heather." (This was before she'd changed it to Feather).

"Wow."

WOW became an acronym for Feather's years on the commune: Wild, Organic, Wondrous.

Anywhere from fifteen to thirty adults and children stayed there at one time, reminding Feather a little of her mother's menagerie, an endless stream of waifs and vagabonds traipsing through the house, staying from a few days to a few years.

An unmarried couple in their fifties—the unofficial gurus—had started the commune. They called themselves Bonnie and Clyde, not because they robbed banks, but because they were basically lawless. They opposed government (or any other authority) interfering in their lives. They wanted their own kingdom, and they had created it atop a ridge with a view of the Anderson Valley below. All they lacked was a moat.

Former academics and socialists at heart, they had bought a rundown sheep ranch, minus the sheep, and opened the place up to others like themselves who were unhappy with the system. They called it "The Circus." Bonnie's gray hair spiraled into corkscrew curls that shot off her head like a modern Medusa. She'd taught sociology. Bearded, long-haired Clyde, a philosopher, had a bald spot on top of his head.

Feather felt immediately at home there, having lived in a circus all her life with Bubbles as her mother. Growing up in Canada, she already had socialistic impulses, and it was a relief to have a built-in family. Raising a kid alone was too hard. The Circus gave Weed, now eight, numerous parents, which may have been confusing at times, but usually the adults didn't act much like parents anyway. Rebelling from authority, they found it difficult to act like authorities themselves.

So he grew like a weed and had lots of freedom to do as he liked—to make his own choices. If he didn't want to go to school, that was cool. If he wanted to smoke a little dope, that was cool, too. If he wanted to stay up until all hours, no one made any fuss. There was one rule, however—there were actually several: no one owned the children.

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They belonged to everyone. Marriages were for uptight Republicans. Free love was in.

That was cool with Feather. She almost changed Weed's name back to his original one, Marty, when she realized the word "ed" was buried in her son's name. She didn't want Weed to be a dull clod like his dad. She wanted him to be a nonconformist. Unconventional. To go against the flow.

Feather bought the whole shebang. She bounced from bed to bed, almost literally. She swam nude in the Navarro River and joined the others on moonlit nights, dancing naked around a bonfire, chanting, calling forth the ancient pagan spirits and the goddess, fornicating in the shadows under the oak and manzanita trees. She helped build a sweat lodge and joined the others in purifying themselves there.

At The Circus, people were always talking about the spirits that lived in nature and surrounded them. Devas. One of the residents had visited Findhorn in Scotland and told Feather of its amazing gardens, the lush quantity of things they produced. The vegetables mysteriously grew to unimaginable sizes, string beans as large as squash, everything oversized—the nature spirits strong there, giving off good vibes.

Vibes meant a lot at the commune. Everything was measured in vibes—how things made you feel. Whether a person had good vibes or not. The vibes of an area. Bonnie and Clyde believed that the place they'd chosen in Mendocino had mystical qualities. The vibes made everyone more in touch with the spirit world. Certain energies intersected in that region, and anyone living there was affected.

Clyde loved to lecture, and one of his favorite topics was the Paradigm Shift. Everyone was entering a New Age: Aquarius. All the ideas that had formed Western thought were reaching a dead end and were in need of revision. Men and women had to rethink their roles. One god could no longer rule the world. That god was dead, though Clyde believed the Greek gods and goddesses still lived.

Clearly, he was Zeus and Bonnie was Hera.

Feather felt liberated. She had never heard of all these divinities. Not only did she have a new family, but she also had a whole new pantheon to hang out with. It was almost too much to comprehend, and she had trouble keeping everyone straight—in the commune and on Olympus. Shiva became a familiar deity. And, of course, Plum brought in Native ideas about Father Sky and Mother Earth.

Feather got so confused that she didn't know at times whether she was sleeping with Zeus the god or Clyde the man. She couldn't get the Greek and Roman names straight. But she entered into this new world wholeheartedly, lighting incense on the fireplace mantel, an altar dedicated to the fiery god Mars. She learned how to make the candles they burned night and day, offerings to the deities and spirits. She took turns cooking meals with the kitchen crew, using organic fruits and vegetables from their garden.

But most importantly, she worshipped the goddess. Once a week, she joined the others at midnight in a ceremony honoring her. Under a canopy of trees, they all gathered, carrying candles that Feather and the others had made, as well as fruits of the earth—lettuce, tomatoes, grapes, apples. Drums, cymbals, sticks, and rattles gave a steady background beat.

With Bonnie and Clyde leading them, they formed a circle. First, they faced east, and its power was invoked by the element of Fire, the rising sun. Two beats of the wood sticks, a ring of cymbals, and they all turned south, invoking the Earth, mother of all, the holy source of life. Two beats of the sticks, a tromp of drum, and they turned to the west, invoking Water, the power of inspiration and openness—letting go of old forms. A shake of the rattle and two clicks of the wood sticks and they turned north, invoking Air, breath of life.

Bonnie passed out a bowl of pine seeds. Each person took one, envisioning the seed as a focal point for spiritual growth, a place where the goddess touched them. Bonnie told them to swallow the seed so they could transform their lives, bearing good fruit and abundance

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in her name. Then Bonnie lit a joint and passed it around the circle, inviting the goddess to enter each person with the smoke.

They all began humming, the sound building peaks and valleys of sound, rising and falling, dropping off into complete silence. The kids joined the circle, the protective center of community, affirming the mother's gift of children. They all chanted and swayed together, eyes closed, while the kids grabbed the fruit and threw it at each other.

A ripe tomato splattered on Clyde's bald head, breaking the spell, its seeds spilling over his forehead and down his face. They had all smoked enough grass by now to see it as one big joke. The whole group rolled on the ground, laughing hysterically, flinging dirt at each other.



Plum taught Feather how to do bead work and weave baskets. Feather made leather moccasins and ornate evening bags covered with glittering beads, as well as preserves and other gift items (collaged greeting cards and tiny framed assemblages of twigs and wildflowers), selling them at the stand. And she discovered her touch for growing things, earning the title of official pot person. It was a thriving place.

All the restraints Feather grew up with fell away. She finally could be fully herself. She got so turned on—not just by dope and occasionally LSD—to art and learning new things. The rambling farmhouse had books from floor to ceiling, opening her to a world of ideas she never heard of before: channeling and Fritz Perls; Carl Jung and Theodore Rosak; Edith Hamilton and Simone de Beauvoir; Krishnamurti and Alan Watts. Inspired, she eventually started classes at Mendocino Community College.

Art became her passion. After earning an Associate of Arts degree, she transferred to Sonoma State, supporting herself and Weed by managing apartments, graduating at thirty-two with her MFA. Sage arrived on the scene when she was thirty-five, the year Weed headed out on his own. He returned to Canada and hooked up with his dad.

Feather married Sage a year later—in 1976. Soon after, she found a full-time job at the College of Marin, and the original members of The Circus scattered.

But Feather carried them inside her, their presence as strong as her original family.

SAN MIGUEL, 1996: LA CUEVA

Bubbles, Heather, Annie, and Malcolm follow Feather down to the street for an outing at La Cueva, a spa with mineral baths several miles outside of town. They stumble over dusty cobblestones, arriving breathless at the rental car. Bubbles takes up her command post next to Feather, motioning to people on the sidewalk with her right hand, again imitating the Queen Mother's wave. "Canada seems far away, she says, the prairies, the icy streets, the Stampede. I can't imagine returning there. I understand why Mother stayed in Mexico. These people feel like my own."

The other three climb into the backseat. Malcolm waves a Scottish flag out the window, a red lion on a gold background. Annie, who has taken over Bubbles' wool and needles, knits, oblivious to the garment taking shape, fingers expertly flicking the needles and guiding their progress. Heather wears a filmy mantilla over hair she's died black, inspired by the black-haired, dark-eyed women wearing traditional costumes at the Ballet Folklórico.

The car creeps through San Miguel, pausing behind donkeys laden with bulging burlap sacks, until it reaches the town's periphery.

"A woman at the Instituto said La Cueva's the real thing and is never crowded," Feather says. "We can get a good soak."

At the mention of water, Malcolm starts singing the "Skye Boat Song":

*Loud the winds howl,
Loud the waves roar,
Thunder clouds rend the air;
Baffled our foes
Stand on the shore,
Follow they will not dare.*

He raises one hand like a baton, and the others join in on the chorus, all off-key.

*Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward, the sailors cry.
Carry the lad that's born to be king
Over the sea to Skye.*

Wiping tears from his eyes with the flag, Malcolm raises one hand, as if in a toast:

“Here’s to Skye and Bonnie Prince Charlie. You know what he said, ladies, when he first arrived in Skye? He wanted to claim his right to be king of all Britain, and a Scottish king at that—a Stuart. The Highland chiefs told him to go home. They didn’t want any trouble. Charlie said, ‘I am come home.’ Can you beat that? ‘I am come home.’”

“Me, too,” Bubbles murmurs.

Feather glances at her. “What’d you say?”

“I feel at home here. I don’t want to leave!”

Feather hasn’t considered this complication. She can’t just dump her mother in Mexico, unless the others want to take care of her, and Feather can’t stay indefinitely herself. She has a house, a job, her art. Friends.

Malcolm stares out the window. “Aye, Charlie was our last hope, and we’ve paid for it ever since. The British punished the Highlanders terribly for helping Charlie. They tried to destroy our Gaelic foundations—wiped out Gaeldom. Aye, it was a sad day when

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Charlie lost his fight for the crown. But I won't let it get me down."
He blasts out:

*Just a wee deoch an' doris,
Just a wee deoch, that's all,
Just a wee deoch an' doris
Before we gang awa.
There's a wee wifie waiting . . .*

He sticks his head out the window, looking right and left. "Isn't there a pub around here? I'm dry as a landlocked fishing boat."

"I'll 'wee wifie' you," Annie says. "Never mind your wee drop and all your moaning about Charlie. You make him sound like a saint. There are plenty of stories about his drinking and carrying on. He was a cad with his wife and his Scottish mistress. You'd be better off looking at the scenery and forgetting this nonsense about Charlie."

"There are better views from the grave," Malcolm says, and he takes off his sombrero. Imitating the cacti he sees in the passing landscape, he hangs his head, raising his elbows shoulder height, fingers pointing at the floor of the car.

"Aye, and the grave's a far better place for the likes of you and Charlie."

"Give me a kiss, Mother. You know you love me."

"Get away with you! Your beard's prickly as a cactus."

Annie's fingers fly over the needles. Several different colors of wool are woven into the garment that threatens to take over the backseat. She knits so fast and so furiously she could outfit a village in a week. Her hands hover over the fabric like a priest's over the host.

Malcolm turns to Heather. "You see what I put up with? Your mother doesn't have a heart. And after all we've been through together. I wasn't able to part with her, even in death."

Heather—who's been carrying on her own running commentary about the passing countryside, pointing at peasants they pass in the

fields, excited about their colorful clothes and vivid flowers in the dusty landscape—gropes around in her purse for lipstick. Using the rearview mirror, she applies a new shade, rubbing together upper and lower lips, giving a big smack when she's finished. "Aye, Papa, you have a hard time of it, all right. Are we almost there, Feather? I'm thirsty, too."

Feather laughs, enjoying the banter from the backseat, buoyed by this newly found family. She's fallen for them all, including her mother, who seems less irritating to her now. Seen in the family context, Bubbles' behavior is eccentric—quirky—and therefore more tolerable. In fact, Bubbles appears quite normal next to *her* mother and grandparents.

She glances at Bubbles now as she gives a royal wave to a passing cactus that resembles a person. "You really like to imitate the queen, don't you?"

Bubbles cackles and blurts out, "Cat can look at the queen!"

Feather stops the car in front of a wrought-iron gate. A faded sign hangs from the top. She squints, trying to read it. "The first word is 'La.' I can't make out all the letters in the second word. It has to be the place. I followed the directions exactly. Eighteen kilometers."

"It looks like the moon," Bubbles says.

A chorus of "Ayes" comes from the backseat. The area—desolate, dry, and uncared for—shows no sign of life. They sit in the car, looking at one another. Feather is about to drive away when a wizened old man appears, wearing an enormous Stetson. About five feet tall, he opens the gate, beckoning for them to follow, making a walking motion with his fingers.

"Hey, Mum, there's a man for you. Just your age," Feather says, helping Bubbles out of the car.

She pushes away Feather's hand, grabbing the door handle and pulling herself out, strapping her shoulder bag safely across her chest. "That's not funny. He's twice as old as I am."

Feather opens the back door and they tumble out. She says, "People don't live that long."

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Bubbles takes one of Malcolm's arms. Heather, arranging her long skirts and petticoats behind her, grabs the other.

"Well, he's an old codger. Not my type," Bubbles says. "I don't want another dull farmer."

Feather and Annie lead the way, following the old man. Annie's knitting trails along behind her like a faithful pet. They pass an abandoned pool and several crumbled adobe buildings, minus walls and roofs. Clutter is everywhere—empty bottles, bits of adobe, scraps of clothing. Annie clucks, shaking her head. "It's a sorry sight."

Bubbles frowns, poking her foot at the dried-out grass. "What a place to take us to! I need to catch my breath."

They stop at another pool with a foot of water in it. Their guide pauses, waiting for them.

"I thought we were going to soak in a mineral pool. This is a footbath," Bubbles says, plopping down on a big rock with a flat top, eyeing a tarantula that's creeping around the pool's perimeter.

"There must be more pools," Feather says. "They couldn't stay in business otherwise."

After a rest, they continue along the main path, stepping over a snake shedding its skin. The old man's Stetson bobs in and out of view among the ruins. Then they pass through an arch that opens into a courtyard. Red geraniums trail along wrought-iron railings from clay pots, and a fountain stands at the center. The three Graces face outward, hands cupped in front of them, water bubbling onto the tiles. Large ferns and lush tropical vegetation tumble out of containers. On the other side of the courtyard, a door opens onto a pool, a slight breeze ruffling the water's surface.

Bubbles plops down at a table. "This is more like it," she says and looks around approvingly.

The old man dissolves into the grounds. A young Indian vendor, dressed in white, sits in front of a stand, drowsing in the sun, straw hat tilted over his face. A sign above him says "Refrescas, Cervezas, Tacitos, Mangos, Aquafrescas." He raises his hat brim and looks

around, dreamily lifting a hand in greeting—"Buenos dias, señor and señoras"—and drifts off again.

"Buenos dias," Malcom says. He ambles over to the stand and asks for a good bottle of Scottish ale. The vendor slowly gets up and stretches, smiling and shrugging his shoulders, responding in Spanish, pointing at the changing rooms, none of which have doors.

"No, no, lad, I don't swim a stroke. I want ale. A-L-E." Malcolm sticks out his tongue and pants like a thirsty dog, sombrero brim flopping around his shoulders. He points at the beer bottles in the cooler, chattering away about colonialism and the evils of English rule. The vendor smiles and nods.

Feather calls out, "Come on, everyone. Let's check out the pool."

After finally getting through to the vendor, Malcolm has planted himself at a table with a beer. "This is all the liquid I can tolerate just now. You ladies go ahead."

Bubbles heaves herself off the chair, pattering across the tiles, heading for the doorless changing rooms at the other end of the courtyard. The other women follow. Inside, Bubbles removes her shoulder bag, carefully setting it on a nearby bench, and places her dress and underclothes on top of it. The sagging skin that has parted company with her bones makes her appear clothed.

They all hastily put on bathing suits. Annie stands guard, arms crossed, holding a big stick she's picked up nearby. While Feather, Bubbles, and Heather step through the door leading to the pools, Annie stays behind, watching their clothes and valuables. "No one will get past me," she says, planting herself in a chair, resembling the Olmec statue *The Wrestler* that Feather and Bubbles saw at the Mexico City museum.

A lush tropical garden surrounds the pool, just like ones Bubbles has seen in the movies with Dorothy Lamour, Bing Crosby, and Bob Hope, running around wearing next to nothing. It's like being in a jungle.

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She descends one step at a time into the warm water, holding on to Feather's hand, remembering all the Esther Williams' movies she's seen. For a moment she *is* Esther Williams, twirling on the step, bowing slightly to the applauding audience, ready to dive in and do her underwater ballet. She loses her footing, feet sliding out from under her. Falling backwards into the water, she pulls Feather with her. Both women go under, arms and legs tangled.

Everything looks blurry submerged, not like in the movies, and Bubbles can't find the bottom. When she opens her mouth to yell, only froth comes out. She clenches Feather's arm, swallowing water, gagging on it. Everything goes black.

The next she recalls, she's sitting on a sunken seat in the middle of the pool. Feather is slapping her back. Heather is screaming, "My daughter's a goner!" Bubbles tries to speak, but only water spouts from her mouth.

"Jesus," Feather yells, "you scared the hell out of us! We thought you were done for."

Bubbles opens her eyes and attempts to speak again, but all that comes out is more water. Finally, she croaks, "You can't kill an old bird like me!" and cackles, blinking against the sun's late afternoon glare.

Her way of dealing with fear is to ignore it. So she leans back in the seat, still partly submerged, and retrieves her Esther Williams fantasy, now part of the centerpiece for the ballet. The swimmer-dancers whirl about her, ready for the grand finale. She raises one arm, as if motioning the show to go on.

Feather shakes her head and collapses next to Bubbles, holding her hand. "How can you act as if nothing happened? I almost panicked when you pulled me under with you. Thought we were both going to drown."

"Aye," Heather says. She has waded out to the seating area at the pool's center and strokes Bubbles' arm. "You gave us a good fright, my girl."

Bubbles loves all the attention. The soothing warmth of water and sun erases the scare they've had. She stays seated, not taking any

chances, kicking her legs in front of her. “Pretty good gams, eh?” she says to no one in particular, splashing them.

She squirms around, enjoying the feel of water seeping under her bathing suit and between her legs, wishing her friend Victor were there. She’d show him a thing or two.

She smiles up at Heather, who appears hazy. Remembering her bifocals are in the dressing room, Bubbles tries to make her come into focus. She actually prefers the fuzzy way things look without her glasses. She can fill in the gaps with her own images, like the snake she saw earlier that day on the path, its skin partially shed. Her skin, too, is trying to say adios to her bones. Maybe she’ll also get a new covering. Anything seems possible here. What a country! She wants to stay in Mexico forever with her next of kin, enjoying the pleasant limbo.

Feather interrupts her reverie. “Mum, look. There’s the tunnel that goes to the cave—la cueva.” Feather points at an opening almost hidden by ferns. “We shouldn’t miss seeing it while we’re here. You up for it? Or should Granny and I go in without you?”

“No show without Punch,” Bubbles says and laughs.

Feather and Heather each take one of Bubbles’ hands, and the three women wade through the chest-high water into the tunnel. It gradually becomes darker, opening up into a cave-like, circular enclosure, supported in the center by a post. Hot springs gush out of a crevice in the stone wall, and ribbons of light pass through a few narrow openings in the ceiling, creating a strobe light effect.

The water is even warmer in the cave and supports Bubbles. She feels lightheaded and free, a girl again, buoyant, the weight of her years dropping away. She hops around without much effort, the skirt on her white bathing suit floating on the pool’s surface, resembling a lily. She’s always liked water, and she does the dead man’s float, her bones turning to jelly, making her think of cherry Jell-O. She could use a nice dish of it right now, whipped cream on top.

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Later, Feather leads the way to the changing rooms. They find Annie dozing in her chair, holding on to the women's purses, even in sleep, a cloud of knitting at her feet. Before conking out, she rearranged their clothes, mixing them up. Bubbles leaves there wearing *her* mother's mantilla and Feather's caftan. Feather stares at Bubbles, startled. Except for the glasses, she resembles images she's seen in some of her goddess books.

"Wow, you look like an ancient priestess," she blurts out.

Bubbles puts her nose in the air, strapping her bulging shoulder bag across her chest again: "I'm not ancient."

Feather has on Heather's outfit, and Heather is wearing Bubbles' dress and Feather's floppy, white straw hat.

Once clothed, they all return to the courtyard. Malcolm is still spouting forth about Scotland, ranting to the heavens about the Highland clearances, complaining about his ancestors being displaced. "If we'd given Charlie the help he needed, we'd be a country today with our own monarch."

Heather drifts over to the stand and orders a round of cervezas in Spanish. The vendor delivers them, falling to his knees in front of Bubbles, whose mantilla flutters behind her. He removes his hat, bowing over and over. She giggles, inching her skirt up a little higher.

"Give me your blessings, Eíneeuq, Queen of Heaven. I am your slave," he says in Spanish. The vendor falls prostrate in front of Bubbles, shaking in awe.

She thinks he's asking for her hand in marriage and says, "I'll need to think it over."

Feather can't believe it. She's read about Eíneeuq, the rain goddess that the Aztecs worshipped. He thinks Bubbles is a goddess. Feather looks at her as if for the first time. She does look queenly. "Hey, what was in all that water you swallowed in the pool?"

Feather takes out her wallet to pay for the drinks, but the vendor refuses her money.

Heather interprets. “He says, ‘No, no. This is my privilege, señora. Who gets to serve Eineeuq every day?’”

Feather puts away her wallet and stares in wonder at her mum. The vendor’s perception jolts her into a new awareness: this woman who gave birth to her suddenly seems more complicated than Feather has thought. If Bubbles ends up being distinctive, even unusual, how might that change Feather’s take on herself? Everything that’s happened so far in Mexico has rattled her cage and altered her views on so many things, including her family.

She glances at the others, all of them sitting in this oasis, soothed by the sound of the fountain and the distant gurgling of the hot springs. The sun slips under the horizon, the outline of the full moon visible in the sky. They talk about Scotland and the old days. The vendor smiles and nods, sitting at Bubbles’ feet, not understanding a word. Feather sinks deeper into her chair, lulled into a hypnagogic state by the words floating around her, four generations knitted together again by these stories.



A warm breeze lifts the mantilla partly concealing Bubbles’ face. Her ninety years—a diamond that forms a core inside her—glow from within. Those years shine in the moonlight, smoothing out her baby-soft skin. Behind the veil, she appears ageless—or many ages simultaneously.

She has been rummaging through her memory bank, reliving different periods in her life, plopping down here and there. She looks around guiltily, remembering, as a girl, being upset one night with her granda.

He’d had too much to drink and was staggering around the kitchen, demanding his dinner, beating the top of his pith helmet with a large

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metal serving spoon. When he tried to sit down, Bubbles pulled the chair out from under him, sending him flying. Afterward, she hid in the pantry, fearing for her life.

"The bloody fairies are at it again," he'd said, sprawled out in front of the hearth. "They can't leave a man alone." She felt so bad about what she'd done that she helped him get up and served him his dinner. For days, he went around praising her to the heavens. "What a wonderful granddaughter she is, my bonnie lass." Bubbles can hardly believe she did such a thing.

She also recalls the wall of silence she ran into every time she tried to find out about the girl in the yellow dress her granda had painted and Fanny, her mother's sister. She's determined, now, to get to the bottom of it.

She blurts out, "What happened to my Aunt Fanny?"

"Fanny?" Malcolm scowls. "What a dark cloud she cast on the family, didn't she, Annie?"

Annie drops a stitch and picks it up, peering at them over her glasses. The garment she's knitting coils around her chair. "A dark cloud, indeed."

Malcolm takes a swig of ale and shakes his head, wiping foam off his mouth with his sleeve. "Aye, it's a sorry tale. Now, why did you bring it up, lass? There's no use digging up buried bones." He slouches in his chair, staring intently into his glass.

Heather laughs. "They say she killed him. Used arsenic. But they couldn't prove it."

"Who?" Feather asks, sitting up straight, now fully alert. She's been dozing in her chair.

"Me own daughter, that's who. Flesh of my flesh," Malcolm says.

"My great-aunt killed a man? Must've been in self-defense." She gropes in her purse for a joint and lights up, taking deep puffs, holding the smoke in her lungs before exhaling, dreamily passing it to Heather, who drags on it, too.

"These Mexicans make strong tobacco," Heather says.

Bubbles sniffs. "It smells like someone's shoes are on fire. I thought you quit that dirty habit."

"Have some, Mamacita. It'll make you happy. Not a care in the world."

"You and your crazy ideas!"

"Now, now, lasses. We don't want any rows."

"Rows, rows, rows your boat, gently up the dream," Feather sings and then starts laughing. "Who's got my weed? Here weed, here weed."

It's made the circle, and Annie is holding it between thumb and forefinger, studying it closely. "Me mother smoked a pipe, but I've never smelled anything like this before." She takes a puff and gives it back to Feather.

"What's gotten into you, Feather?" Bubbles asks. "You've had too much sun."

"Sun, fun, run. I'm a poet!"

The vendor stands up, and Feather fixates on his legs. Legs have always been her downfall. She goes for chair legs, coffee table legs, hamster legs—as long as they're shapely. Stirred by beautiful forms, she even finds her mother's legs well-proportioned. But Sage's blew her away, blinding her to his faults.

The first time she saw his legs, her heart did flip-flops. She was sitting outside at the commune's redwood table, shelling peas from their garden, listening to the birds twitter, taking a few puffs of grass—just enough to intensify everything. The blue of the sky seemed to be pulsing, the same clear, aching blue of prairie skies when she was a child. Everything had an extra dimension to it. Sage approached her, wearing shorts, crinkly, blonde fuzz covering his strong, muscular calves and thighs. Since she was seated and he was standing, his legs were the first things she noticed. So basic, so primitive, so part of nature—they were a real turn on.

It took almost twenty years to untangle herself from Sage, but it hadn't been the first time she'd fallen for legs. The limbs of an Indian pony her stepfather picked up from a tribe of Blackfoot had totally entranced her. At twelve, she became aware for the first time of the

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animal's slender ankles and calves that blossomed out into powerful thighs, muscles rippling under his gleaming chestnut hide.

Though Floyd had tried to break the horse (Feather had named him Sudden Heat), it never completely took. Sudden couldn't give up his old ways, bucking and rearing until he had thrown off any man who mounted.

But with Feather, the horse was different. Their rapport was complete. She also marveled at his penis, the way it unraveled like a jack-in-the-box, a fountain of urine shooting forth. It was one of her first exposures to a real penis—and the most erotic.

No man could measure up to Sudden. No man could give her the same kind of ride. The horse's backbone pressed against her clit, causing her to come again and again while galloping through the fields, wind hissing in her ears. It felt as if they were flying.

When it came time to leave the farm, letting go of Sudden was like losing a lover. She never did learn what happened to the horse or the other farm animals she was attached to.

Now she zeroes in on Bubbles. "Hey, Mamacita, what was the big rush to dump the farm?"

"What're you talking about?"

"The farm. One minute everything was groovy, and the next, we moved to Calgary, and my world was turned upside down."

Bubbles squirms in her chair. "We needed a change."

"Who needed a change? Not me. Not the boys."

"It was too much for us. All we did was work."

"Well, moving to Calgary didn't work for me. I didn't know what hit me. From feast to famine. New school. No friends. Nothing!"

"Why bring it up now?" Bubbles asks, squirming in her chair. "The farm's long gone."

"Yeah, but the bad memories aren't!"

Bubbles shakes her fist. "What about me? I had to move to another country, for Pete's sake. I lost everything—"

"You still had your mother," Heather says, sucking on the weed Feather has passed her. She gives it to Bubbles and pats her hand.

Bubbles scowls, lifts the veil, and takes a puff.

"A lot of good that did me. You didn't hang around long."

"Aye, what choice did I have? Living in that dump with your father knocked the life right out of me."

Feather watches her mother and grandmother spar, reminded of truth sessions at The Circus. They were modeled after Esalen encounter groups that Bonnie and Clyde had attended. It was the first time Feather became aware of the anger she felt from her mother's abandonment. That anger surfaces again, its edges tempered by the grass.

But it isn't enough just to feel it. One of her therapists told her anger is only one shade on the color wheel. While it seeps into the other colors, altering their total effect, alone it's split off, unintegrated, an orphan. It becomes tyrannical, dictating the emotional spectrum. Anger is only useful if it energizes the rest of the wheel, working in conjunction with all the other emotions. Feather feels she spent too long savoring her anger, using it as a weapon against Bubbles, sharpening its sting. It had been useful when she needed to separate psychologically from her mother, yet it could turn on her now if she clung to it.

Feather feels so deeply entangled in her family's lives and lies that it's difficult to know where one person starts and another ends. Like a snarl in Annie's knitting, she's waiting to be untangled and rewoven into the fabric—freed from the negative family stuff but not separated from kin. It's clearer to her now how one person's mess can be rooted in another generation. How can she blame Bubbles for behavior she wasn't completely responsible for? How can she blame herself? The truth is, her mother has never grown up. That's part of her charm. Maybe she never will. And she herself?

Better not to think about that.

In spite of these insights, Feather knows she idealizes her family, friends, and lovers. She doesn't know what to call it. Maya? Illusion? Icing on the cake? Something to keep her going.

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She prefers icing to what's underneath. Sweet. Intense. The cake is a disappointment after biting into the surface layer. She's always trying to get back to the icing's intensity, its memory overshadowing her enjoyment of the cake. That's one reason she likes grass. It both exposes and conceals.

She suddenly sits upright again, remembering that her great-aunt had killed someone. "Christ, arsenic is poison! Who did Fanny poison?"

Malcolm pulls a red flannel hankie from his rear pocket and blows, the tears flowing. "I didn't say *she* killed him," Malcolm says. "That's what the *authorities* said. They needed to pin the murder on someone, so they picked a poor, defenseless woman."

His eyes brim over, and he dabs at them with the garment Annie's knitting. She swats him with her handbag. "Keep your blooming hands to yourself. You're ruining my work."

"It looks like you're knitting a path from here to Scotland, and a winding one, at that. Don't be so bad-tempered, woman. Have a heart."

"You're just lucky *I* never put arsenic in *your* ale. I've thought of it more than once, don't think I haven't."

"Who did my aunt kill?" Bubbles asks.

Malcolm sips his beer and says, "They accused her of killing her lover, lass."

Feather feels as if she's entered an episode of *The Young and the Restless*. Murder and mayhem! Arsenic and old lace? She always suspected more skeletons were rattling around in the family closet. This one's a doozy.

"Oh, she was quite a woman, Fanny was," Malcolm says. "A real beauty. And proud. She could've had any man in Skye—in all of Scotland. They were all after her." He stops to take a drink, shaking his head. "Aye, but she fell for a Campbell. The scoundrel. It was his father who cheated me of my inheritance." He reaches for the weed and inhales greedily.

Heather asks the vendor for another *cerveza*. “Father forbade them to marry or to have contact,” she says, “so they had an ‘*affaire d’amour*.’ They wrote each other love letters that revealed everything.”

“Everything indeed,” Annie says, not looking up from her knitting. “During Fanny’s trial in Glasgow, the newspapers published some of them. Of course, they had to cut out some parts.”

“I don’t get it,” Feather says. “Why would she have killed him if he were her lover?”

“A more acceptable suitor started to court her—someone Father approved of.” Heather glances at Malcolm, who is staring glumly at the ground. “Her feelings started to cool for the Campbell lad, and he threatened to show Fanny’s letters to Father.”

“So she had a reason to kill him,” Feather says. “He was blackmailing her.”

“Aye,” Heather says. “She thought the family and the whole village would disown her. That’s exactly what her lawyer claimed. He portrayed Fanny as an innocent, seduced by a blackmailing blackguard. Anyway, no evidence came out that she’d seen the man on the days before his death.”

Annie snorts. “An innocent, indeed. All her letters talked about were sex. Sex, sex, sex.” She glares at Malcolm. “She must have gotten those ideas from you.”

“Now, now, Annie, she was her mother’s daughter. Filled with passion.”

“Away with you! You’re confusing me with someone else. The widow—”

“That’s all in the past, woman.”

“Then why drag poor Fanny’s name through the mud? She experienced enough shame.”

“Aye,” Malcolm says. “We all suffered. People I’d known all my life spit at me on the street. They called Fanny an alley cat. But they loved her in Glasgow. For the whole nine days of her trial, they queued outside for hours, calling her name and cheering. They were waiting to get into the public gallery to see me own daughter!”

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The weed has worn off, and Feather is absorbed by every word. “But you said she didn’t do it. Why was she charged, then?”

“Her lover died a few weeks after Fanny bought arsenic at a local chemist’s shop. She claimed she needed it for the calico fabric she was weaving. But someone put two and two together. They dug up the thief’s body and did a postmortem. He died of arsenic poisoning.”

“So Fanny did kill the guy,” Feather says.

“No one knows for sure,” Malcolm says. “The Campbells had plenty of enemies.” He coughs and averts his eyes, sipping on his ale. “Or maybe he killed himself. Fanny was taken to Glasgow for the trial, and it lasted nine days. If they found her guilty, she faced death by hanging. But her lawyer defended her brilliantly. I couldn’t have done it better myself. It only took the jury twenty-two minutes to reach a verdict of ‘Not Proven’ on the murder charge. The public gallery erupted into cheers, and so did the people crowded around outside.”

“Wow, she must have been elated,” Feather says.

“She didn’t show any emotion. She just sat there after the verdict was read, wearing a black veil over her face, somewhat concealed.”

“The family must have been relieved,” Feather says.

The vendor plunks his guitar, and she strums the arm of her wooden chair in time to its rhythms.

“Aye,” Malcolm says. “But she disgraced us all. No one wanted her back in Skye. The suitor refused to see her again—he felt betrayed. I had to arrange for Fanny to stay in Glasgow, and she found work as a governess.”

“But that wasn’t the worst,” Annie says, her needles clicking like castanets, picking up speed, poking in, out, over, and around the stitches, keeping a steady background rhythm. “She was pregnant, and no one knew who the father was. Oh, the shame of it! A daughter of ours pregnant and not married.”

Feather and Bubbles exchange looks, each concealing a smile. Both women had followed in Fanny’s footsteps.

“Aye,” Malcolm says, “she was like a stray cat. The suitor claimed he’d never laid a hand on her. The Campbell lad was dead. Who knows what other tomcat had his way with our daughter.”

Heather strokes her leg, a dreamy look in her eyes.

“So what happened to Fanny and her baby?” Feather asks.

Malcolm takes out his hanky again. “You tell her, Mother. It breaks me blooming heart to think of it.”

Annie concentrates on her knitting, the words rolling as easily off her tongue as stitches on her needles. “Fanny died in childbirth. We couldn’t let the poor wee tyke go into an orphanage, no matter who her father was. She still had MacGregor blood in her veins. So Malcolm and I took her in, the sweetest child you ever saw. She was too good for this world, wee Lilian. A little angel, she was. But God soon claimed her. She was only seven when He took her home with Him, her true father. Aye, she finally has a real home.”

“What killed her?” Feather asks.

“Consumption. Gone like that,” Malcolm says, snapping his fingers.

They all sit silently, listening to the strumming guitar, the moonlight casting a ghostly glow over everything, water from the springs gurgling nearby. Feather speaks first: “So no one knows for sure if Fanny was innocent or guilty of murder?”

Malcolm strokes his beard. “Aye, we’ll never know, will we? They’re all dead and gone, singled out by fate.”

EINEEUQ

At first, Bubbles thinks she's dreaming, but the voices are growing louder now. She can hear children laughing and shouting. Men and women are talking in a foreign language. She takes off her glasses and slips them inside her purse. In the distance, on the path she took just a few hours earlier, she sees a giant flower surrounded by light creeping toward her. It doesn't seem unusual. She really believes that anything can happen in Mexico. So far, she hasn't been proven wrong.

"Look, Mum," Feather says to her. "Indians."

Bubbles blinks. She still thinks they all look like one giant flower. The women's skirts—some red, some green—swirl as they walk. They wear gaily embroidered white blouses with short, puffed sleeves. Some carry intensely colored paper flowers, resembling a bouquet themselves. Others hold lighted flares.

Many of the men—red bandanas tied pirate fashion around their heads—wear short skirts and blouses made from bits of multicolored cloth, showing off their muscular brown arms and legs. Bubbles pulls her skirt up to her knees, revealing her own gams. They look just as good.

A few of the men are playing violins or guitars. Others move ceremoniously to the music, reminding Bubbles of dances she's seen

the Indians do at the Stampede. Each man is perfectly concentrated on what he's doing. They face each other at times, advancing and retreating, bowing to the women, drawing closer to the tiny group relaxing on the patio.

"They come to honor you, Eineeuq," the vendor says.

Bubbles pats her headdress and digs in her bulging purse for compact and lipstick, adding a little more color to her lips and cheeks and powdering her nose.

The people start chanting, "Eineeuq, Eineeuq." Women and children throw paper flowers at her. Dancers and musicians circle Bubbles and her family. Those who can't fit into the enclosure climb the fence, hoping to get a glimpse of their goddess.

When she hears good music, Bubbles' feet can't stop moving. Still sitting, she taps out the rhythm with her toes and pokes her mother, who has passed out from too much sun and beer. Heather awakens briefly and asks for another cerveza. Then she says, "We'll have a fiesta!" and falls asleep again, head rolling from side to side on her chest, mouth hanging open.

Annie puts down her knitting but holds a knitting needle in her right hand like a sword, in case she needs to protect them.

Malcolm also hears the music's call and jumps up, joining the men's dance, sombrero flopping around his shoulders, trousers rolled up to his knees. The music speeds up, and Malcolm collapses out of breath onto his chair.

Those Indians who aren't dancing clap their hands and constantly shout in Spanish, "Eineeuq, Eineeuq, give us food and water. Make our crops grow."

Standing, Bubbles smiles and nods, waving one hand, then the other, swaying her hips in time to the music, imitating the hula dancers she saw in Hawaii on her honeymoon with Ernie. She always did like an audience.

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Feather snaps out of her reverie and stares at her mother. “Jesus, they really think you’re a goddess. Or else I’m losing my marbles.”

“Don’t worry, dear, I’ll buy you more.”

“This isn’t funny. They’ve got you mixed up with the earth goddess Eineeuq. The Aztecs used to worship her. They think you can rescue them from poverty.”

“I’ve a little money saved. I don’t mind sharing it. I’ve no use for money where I’m going.”

Feather throws up her hands. “You don’t understand. These people are desperate. They aren’t after a little money. They want their lives changed. We need to get out of here.” She looks around wildly for an escape route, but the crowd has completely blocked the only way to the car.

Malcolm has discarded the sombrero, borrowed a bandana from one of the men, and tied it around his head. He resembles one of San Miguel’s expatriate artists. Heather has awakened fully now and watches the dancers. “Doesn’t anyone Charleston anymore?” she asks and jumps up, singing “Charleston, Charleston, in Carolina,” doing her own dance along with the Indians.

A young man steps out of the crowd and addresses Feather in Spanish, a pistol tucked into his waistband, dark and sinister against white trousers and shirt. She says, “No comprendo. No hablo español.”

It feels as if he’s pointing the gun right at her, though he doesn’t make any move to touch it. Certain all of the men have guns, she hisses at her family, “Let’s get out of here—pronto!” She starts gathering their belongings, motioning for them to help her, but they are too wrapped up in the music and people.

Bubbles has started dancing, too, a cross between a modified Highland fling and Irish jig. Hands above her head, she snaps her fingers in time to the music, her shoulder bag bouncing against her

body. Annie has relaxed and uses her knitting needles like drumsticks, clicking them on the chair arms. She accompanies the guitars and mandolins, her pile of knitting forgotten at her feet.

The young man with the gun persists, speaking in halting English. “Señora, we starving. Kids can’t go school. No books, no shoes. Everyone in family work, even children. No farming because no rain. No water to drink. Hours riding bikes from villages at jobs in San Miguel. If Eineueq no help, we kill rich people. They make us poor. Much blood flows.”

Much blood flows out of Feather’s face upon hearing the young man’s speech.

But Malcolm grabs one of Annie’s knitting needles. “Charge,” he shouts, plunging into the crowd, holding the needle in front of him like a sword, fencing with an imagined enemy, one arm held high behind him. “Free Scotland from the infidels—the English and the landowners. Let Scotland live again and be her own nation.” Malcolm pins the startled vendor to his stall, motioning for his troops to surround him.

Bubbles—unaware that the future of these people is in her hands—twirls with Heather, flapping her arms like a bird, the music inhabiting her bones. Annie’s knitting needles’ constant clicking against the chair helps Bubbles stitch together the Scottish dances of her childhood with the Indian ones she’s imitating.

Feather shouts, “That’s my mother! She’s an old woman. She could die any time. She’s no goddess. Comprendas? We’re just Canadians on vacation. No Americano. Americans have goddesses. Si? Usted comprendas? No goddesses in Canada. Just bears and beavers.”

“No, no, señora. Indians know what Eineueq look like. We see her many time in visions—round body, white hair.”

Feather looks at her mother. “She looks like a Hostess Twinkie to me.”

“No comprendo. She rain god’s wife, bring water. Look, springs in La Cueva stop till she come. Now they flow again. She make this whole land rich. You watch.”

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Maybe they know something Feather doesn't. She shrugs her shoulders, the feeling of fiesta stealing over her. After all, what's the worst that could happen to them? Malcolm, Annie, and Heather are already dead. The crowd can't kill them. They certainly aren't going to hurt or kill their goddess. That leaves Feather. As daughter of Eineeug, maybe she has some protection.

Not to worry. Go with the flow, as they say in California. Don't push the river. If they think Bubbles is a goddess, then she's a goddess.

It's turned very dark at La Cueva, and the people stand around, holding torches they've lit, faces transformed by the flickering light, the elderly appearing young, and the young looking old. Feather's fears have returned. She worries that they're going to sacrifice someone—her. Whenever she tries to gather their belongings and creep off with the others to the car, a couple of muscular men, guns tucked into their waistbands, stand in her way.

Some of the women are weaving palm fronds together, braiding them the way Bubbles used to braid Feather's hair. The fiesta atmosphere has grown, music and laughter filling the night, punctuated at times with gunshots, the men shooting off pistols joyfully, as if it were New Year's Eve.



Bubbles can't sit still. The music gives her itchy feet, and her mind goes a mile a minute. She has a few tricks up her sleeve—it's why she's lived so long. And she sure doesn't plan to pack it in just yet. She has plenty of living to do, and if she has her way, it will be in Mexico. These are her people.

Why bother worrying about passports for her mother and grandparents, or getting the three of them across two borders? They can all live nicely in Mexico where it never snows. And for a lot less money.

She always has liked getting a bargain.

Of course, she'll miss a white Christmas, her favorite holiday. She likes all the candy and the other loot people give her. And the stories of the Christ child being born in a manger always give her a lift. She could have given birth to Jesus herself. She's cleaned out enough barns to know what they're like, the scratchy golden straw soaked with animal pee. You'd think they could have found a better place to have a baby. What was God thinking, anyway?

If she were Jesus' mother, she wouldn't let him become God. It didn't pay. Look what they did to him. Nailing him to a cross like an old rag. If she were Mary, Bubbles wouldn't have stood for it.

If she wants snow at Christmas, she can buy some of that white flocking and spray a cactus with it—get into the spirit of things. Hang a few lights. Cacti remind her a little of midget fir trees, only the needles are sharper. She could get to like them.

There's no question—Bubbles feels younger in Mexico, especially at these pools. She's found her fountain of youth. Not an ache in her body since she's arrived. Just those gas pains, but they're going away, too. She wants to share this paradise with other old people and envisions shipping them from all over Canada to La Cueva. To the mineral waters. They could have a fiesta every night. Live it up instead of rotting in those old folks' homes.

The old people who join her in San Miguel will have to pay Bubbles something for saving their lives. After all, this is business. And she'll have to be careful about the word getting out. She doesn't want someone hogging in, stealing her idea.

She's unable to believe her luck. Not only does she have a new lease on life, but she'll also rake in the bucks. Bubbles wouldn't mind sharing her money with the poor Mexicans. Maybe she'll marry one so she can stay in the country for good. She's heard of people doing things like that. The young man who's been hanging around her like a puppy might make a good husband. Better than Ernie, that's for sure. She wants to die in a lover's arms, with someone who really loves her, and not alone.

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Still, from everything she's heard, sex doesn't seem very safe anymore. She's heard of phone sex on *The Young and the Restless*. It's supposed to be less dangerous than the real thing now that AIDS is such a problem. Feather says you can't be too careful. It might be the answer for Bubbles. Maybe she'll call Victor in Calgary and suggest it. She also brought some condoms with her that she found when she went through Ernie's drawers after he died. Just in case. Imagine him using condoms! Bubbles couldn't have kids anymore. Was he afraid of getting something from her? Or did he have someone on the side?

Half the seniors where she lives are doing it. She doesn't like being left out. Feather says some artist named Georgia O'Keeffe had a lover fifty years younger when she was up in years. Bubbles has as much going for her as that O'Keeffe woman. At least Bubbles' name is easier to spell.

Her head abuzz with plans, she doesn't notice when someone takes her hand and leads her to the seat the women have been making from palm fronds. She titters, seeming to glide over the ground in Feather's long dress, feet hidden from view, holding onto the young man's hand and waving with the other, nodding her head from side to side.

"Eineeug, your throne." Hands reach out from the dark and help her to sit down. "If you stay with us, Eineeug, our land, it will grow things again. We won't be poor anymore. Water will flow. You save us!"

Bubbles would never refuse someone in need, and though she doesn't understand what they expect of her, she willingly sits on the seat they've produced. The men lift her into the air, long poles attached to the chair resting on their shoulders.



Feather flings herself in front of the crowd that's following her mother and shouting, "Eineeug lives!" She waves her arms to get Bubbles' attention, yelling at the men, "Alto! Stop!" But Bubbles can't hear

Feather over the crowd. Feather cries, “You can’t take her! She needs to get to bed!”

Frantic, she searches the crowd for Malcolm. He’s marching in front of the long column of people, carrying a torch, still gripping one of Annie’s knitting needles in front of him like a sword. He thinks he’s leading an assault on the landowners, confusing Mexico with the Scottish Highlands. “Down with the infidels. Up with the people. By God, we’ll restore the proper order to this land at last, or my name isn’t Malcolm MacGregor.”

Someone has helped Annie climb onto a donkey, and it sways from side to side, following behind Malcolm. Annie knits madly away, the wool draped over herself and the animal. A family of tarantulas, awakened by all the movement, peers out of their nest in the garment Annie is knitting, clinging precariously to the stitches.

Heather grabs a torch and falls into step with her mother and father, joining the shouts. “Eineeug, Eineeug!”

Watching from the sidelines, Feather doesn’t know whether to feel relief or horror that Bubbles and the others have been spirited away. Not that she wishes any of them harm. But having so much family suddenly thrust on her has pluses and minuses. She’s obligated to hover over them, like a mother bird, not her favorite role. But it does make her appreciate that maybe it wasn’t Bubbles’ role either.

Weed withdrew from her for several years, blaming her for taking him from his father. When he left high school, he headed back to Canada and hooked up with Ed. Since then, Weed has become everything Feather hoped she could protect him from. He’s dull, conventional. Refuses to go against the flow. She couldn’t protect him from himself—or at least the self that resembles his dad. Surely he’s not like her. Feather, dull? Conformist? Or has he just donned that identity because it’s easier than digging in and finding his own? His dad’s new wife introduced him to the girl he married, a hairdresser. No kids yet. The only thing he’s retained from his life with Feather is his name.

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She stumbles over the dark path to her car, not wanting to think of Weed now, trying to focus on one thought: rescue Mamacita. But first she stops and lights up, sucking deeply, trying to calm herself. At least they haven't tried to sacrifice Bubbles—yet. And she seems safe enough, though she shouldn't be overdoing it. At ninety, she could go at any time. Still, Feather's been expecting her death for years—at times even longing for it.

Though Bubbles still lives on her own, fifteen hundred miles away from Feather, she counts on her daughter for many things that her sons can't or won't do for her. Feather and Bubbles talk on the phone almost daily. Bubbles needs a woman to lean on emotionally, so Feather feels constantly at her beck and call. Her mother also behaves like a vampire, drawing on Feather's relative youth and independence to keep her going.

The weed starts working its magic, giving her a floaty feeling, as if she's gliding through the air. She spreads her arms and flaps her hands, feet skimming the ground. Giggling, she opens the car door and drifts onto the seat, locking up. Feeling a little paranoid, she wonders if someone might be watching her. Maybe the old man that guided them to the pools earlier. Or someone from a UFO. She's heard of sightings in Mexico.

But she shakes off that feeling and draws again on the weed, settling down, completely relaxed now, the darkness no longer a threat but a comforting womb surrounding her. She dreamily rolls down the windows, letting the night air rush over her. Getting back into the spirit of Mexico. *Mañana*. Everything *mañana*.

Her mother and the others will have to wait.

Feather drifts off, thinking about UFOs and her fantasy of being beamed up into one, visiting new worlds, becoming the lover of someone from outer space. Or *Star Wars*. As long as he doesn't look like Yoda.

It couldn't be any worse than her relationship with Sage, a real space cadet. And Bubbles isn't exactly of this earth. What of herself?

She shakes off that thought, realizing she needs to take more risks. Her life seems so mundane compared to her grandmother's. Teaching at a community college. The regular round of students every semester wanting to learn the basics. She feels like a sow at times, these young artists sucking out all of her creativity.

Art—and grass—allows her to soar into unexplored places. It blows Feather's mind to think her grandmother was nearly Feather's age when she took off for Mexico. In 1923, such a journey would've been like traveling to the moon. When she heard the call to adventure, Heather didn't let anything get in her way. Well, if Heather could do it, so could she. She'll take off the fall semester. Have the house sitter she hired stay on a few more months. Rent a place for them all in San Miguel and focus on her own work.

It isn't that Feather never takes risks. She took a major risk just by letting Bubbles join her in Mexico. What if she got sick from the food or came down with something—malaria or another exotic bug? What if she had a heart attack? It's difficult enough communicating with doctors when they speak the same language. What if Bubbles got one who only spoke Spanish? Is that why she'd allowed Bubbles to come along on this trip?

Feather never knows what will happen when her mum is around. She's so unpredictable that taking Bubbles anywhere poses a risk because of the crazy situations she gets into. But that's part of her charm. She's curious and open to new people and places. Their house may have been a menagerie, but it was never dull. No wonder Feather immediately took to The Circus. All those quirky people made her feel at home.

Drowsy from the drug, Feather falls asleep and dreams that the real Eineeuq visits her—and she does resemble Bubbles. Eineeuq has her mother's pear shape and a halo of white hair. Feather asks the goddess to prove her powers and make it rain.

Several hours later, she wakes up, drenched, unable to remember the dream or much that happened the previous evening. Rain pounds on the roof and fills the vehicle, threatening to never stop.

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Shivering, she rolls up the window and turns on the engine, wipers, and the heater. She searches the backseat for Bubbles and the others. All she finds is Malcolm's Scottish flag, Heather's compact, and a few scraps of yarn. Then she remembers. The villagers think Bubbles is Eineuq. They've kidnapped her. They might really believe she's the goddess and do some crazy thing when they find out she isn't. They're probably holding the whole damn family for ransom.

Feather feels a stab of remorse for not following them immediately. Who knows where they are now. The reefer distorted her judgment. She floors the gas pedal, but the wheels only spin. Gripping the steering wheel, she tries to force the car to obey her will, but she's stuck in mud.

"Shit," she says, wishing she had more marijuana right now. None appears, so she climbs out of the car, peels off her wet clothes (already drenched, what harm would a little rain do her?), and spreads them on the ground next to the front wheels for traction.

Inside the car again, she floors the gas pedal. The Honda Civic lurches forward. She brakes, shifts to neutral, gets out, and puts on the soiled garments. Mud streaks her face, arms, and the clothes she's wearing. If she walked naked into the hotel, that former sanctuary for the nuns, the cops would arrest her for indecent exposure. Now they'll just think she's celebrating Día de los Muertos early.

The pelting rain makes driving difficult, and she has trouble seeing the road. The slow pace suits her; she fears what she'll find when she reaches San Miguel. But she's prepared to fight. She learned kung fu for self-protection and can kick with the best of them. Bubbles had also wanted to learn when she saw Feather practicing.

"I have to protect myself, too, you know," she'd said. "Calgary isn't safe anymore. Some punks have been breaking into the old folks' homes and stealing anything they can get their hands on."

Feather had talked Bubbles into getting a police whistle and some pepper spray instead, though Feather worried that she would spray herself. Maybe Bubbles should have learned kung fu, too.

In San Miguel, Feather finds the townspeople and Indians from surrounding villages in the streets dancing, clothes soaked and

clinging to their bodies. Some balance buckets on their heads, catching the rain, celebrating the end of the drought. The streets are so packed, she has to leave the car and walk the rest of the way, her feet slipping on the wet cobblestones.

Joining the crowds, she looks for her family, expecting to see them bobbing up and down outside la Parroquia—dancing, wearing giant sombreros and colorful serapes to deflect the rain. The joyous mood permeating the town inspires her to create, to get back to her sculpture. The excursion to La Cueva has given her an idea for a series of sculptures, and she's eager to get started.

But first she has to make sure Bubbles and the others have returned safely. They must be waiting for her at the hotel, worrying about her whereabouts. Then she needs some breakfast. She's famished and can already taste huevos rancheros and hot Mexican chocolate.

The crowds are even thicker on Insurgentes. She dodges a man wearing a death mask—a skull made of rubber pulled over his head—and bounces off someone who's dressed like a donkey, laughing and braying and clapping his hooves together, wrapping them around her. "Give me kiss, señora," he says, offering thick rubber lips, his pink tongue flapping like a rooster's.

Feather slips out of his grasp, remembering the chicks they've been keeping in their room, afraid she'll find them belly up from no food or water.

Worse, what if her mother and the others are out in this rain? The street scene is bedlam, dust turned to mud, the people all acting as if they've just inhaled a field of marijuana. She pictures Bubbles slipping on the cobblestones, sprawled on the ground somewhere, her hip or leg broken, crowds of people stomping all over her. The possibility slashes her heart.

After fighting her way into the Posada, she asks the desk clerk for a key and stumbles up the stairs to their room, afraid of what she'll find. The shouting and laughter follow her through the hallways, leaking out of the rooms, too. The whole town is one big fiesta. She turns the

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key in the lock of their door. A few faint cheeps greet her. Otherwise, she meets silence, accentuated by the sounds of celebration all around. Taking a deep breath, she pushes open the door. The weight of it pulls her inside and throws her off balance. She lands on the floor—it's covered with chicken crap. The chicks scurry toward her, pecking at her legs, screeching, mouths open.

They remind her of Sage. His mouth was open all the time. Give me food. Give me money. Listen to my poems.

They also remind Feather of Bubbles.

The suitcases sit untouched. The Indians have kidnapped all of them, confirming her worst fears. Now she has to delay working on her sculptures while she searches for her family.

She drags herself to her feet, flings some grain from Annie's sack at the chicks, and steps into the shower, clothes and all. One piece at a time, she strips off the sopping, mud-stained things she's been wearing. They lie on the shower floor, and she dances on them, a combination twist and mashed potato, stomping out the dirt the way she used to crush grapes at the commune. She resembles one of the peasant women she's seen at El Chorro. Running the hot water as long as she wants, she ignores the "conserve water" signs. What the hell. The drought's over. Eineeuq came through.

Could Bubbles have had anything to do with it?

Maybe the Indians are right and she really is Eineeuq in disguise. Maybe Feather has been blind all these years.

After drying herself, she wraps a towel turban fashion around her wet hair, wrings out the clothes she's washed, and hangs them over the shower door. Then she strolls into the other room. Heather had left the set on when they went to La Cueva because she thought the TV would entertain the chickens till they returned. Feather switches channels to the English speaking one, hoping to get the latest news.

A pompous male announcer says, "The National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City reports missing a seven-inch high, rare clay family group sculpture. It's from the eighth to tenth century A.D. Police

are searching for an elderly Anglo woman. A museum guard saw her handling this piece. She's about five feet, plump, with fair complexion, thinning white hair, and blue eyes. A younger woman, her daughter, accompanied her and may be an accomplice. The younger woman has long, reddish-brown hair with some gray streaks in it. She wears it tied back with a scarf. If you have any information about these suspects, please contact the police. The museum is offering a reward of fifty thousand American dollars."

Feather's ears burn, and her heart sounds like a jackhammer. How many elderly American women are there in Mexico of that description traveling with their daughter? Is this the reason Bubbles has seemed so protective of her shoulder bag, clutching it to her body as if it contained the crown jewels? Her own mother? A kleptomaniac?

Feather knew Bubbles' father had been one. It started late in life. He pilfered boxer shorts, undershirts, ties. Bubbles thought it had given him a lift. Something different. Just a quirk.

Like father, like daughter? Bubbles has always picked up little things that don't count for much—candy, a few roses off a neighbor's bush, lemons or oranges from trees when she visits Feather in California. And, of course, she brought these chicks home in her shoulder bag.

That shoulder bag? What else is she carrying in it?

But the statue from the museum is major theft. They could both go to jail. For life! Feather's heard nothing but bad things about Mexican jails. It's not what she had in mind when she came to Mexico seeking inspiration and adventure.

Maybe the Indians already knew about the reward and kidnapped Bubbles so they could collect it.

Feather digs around in her suitcase for some grass, dropping more of it on the floor than in the wrapper, shakily rolling a cigarette. The chicks scurry over and peck at the droppings while Feather lights up, calming her nerves.

Naked, she drops onto one of the beds, laughing hysterically, drifting off. The chicks crawl on top of her, making a nest in her pubic hair and falling asleep there.

FIESTA

Bubbles, Heather, Annie, and Malcolm enter the Indian village like returning heroes. Villagers who stayed behind preparing a fiesta in Eineeuq's honor greet the four of them. Several men carry Bubbles on a litter. She's never had so many young men at her feet before. She's lapping up the attention, enjoying the measured rocking motion created by their rhythmic walking, the pace interrupted periodically when someone steps in a rut or hole and she gets jostled. It's an entry fit for a queen, and she waves, feeling like royalty.

They pass a row of paper men made from wires and dressed in white pants, jackets, and hats. Firecrackers hang from them, sputtering and hissing. *Hot stuff*, Bubbles thinks. She winks at one of the mock men, mistaking them in the dark for real ones and the fireworks for sequins. All those lights remind her of Liberace and his glamorous outfits. That Liberace had a way with women, all right. She thought he was the cat's meow and can't believe she's outlived him.

She turns to see if her family is still with her. Malcolm removes the sombrero from his head and bows to Bubbles. Annie, still riding the donkey, lurches from side to side in sync with the animal's rhythm. She hasn't missed a stitch in the time it's taken them to arrive at the village and hardly notices the activity around her. An animated Heather is talking to two young men, one on each arm. She waves at Bubbles and shouts something.

Bubbles nods and smiles at her mother, unable to hear her words through the din. Shots ring out periodically and mix with the fireworks' popping and cracking. Smoke from both lingers, leaving its traces in the air. At the village center, the men stop and gently lower their cargo, helping Bubbles to stand up. She clutches her shoulder bag close to her body and pats it reassuringly.

The head man of the village—not much taller than Bubbles, his bushy white mustache shaped like a handlebar—greets the honored guests, removing his hat and making a sweeping bow in front of them. In Spanish, he says, “You honor us, Eineeuq, with your presence.” Bubbles just smiles and nods regally, proudly sticking out her chest and following him to a seat decorated with flowers and vibrantly colored ribbons. The headman offers his hand and helps her to sit down.

A gust of wind cuts through the crowd, causing skirts to swirl and lifting hats off heads. Bubbles grabs her mantilla before it can float away. They're about to officially start the fiesta when lightning rips the sky, followed by earthshaking thunder. Rain starts to fall, and the villagers let out a loud cheer. Before seeking cover, they extend their hands to the heavens, dancing around Bubbles, praising her in unison.

One of the village elders holds a mat over her head, leading Bubbles and her entourage to the best hut they have, ushering her inside, Heather and the others following. It reminds Bubbles of her granny and granda's croft in Skye, the years and miles vanishing. A fire smolders in the grate, keeping a pot of water hot. She looks around, peeking into cupboards, peering into baskets hanging from the ceiling that hold the inhabitants' worldly goods. “Quaint,” she says.

“Aye, lass,” Malcolm says. “It's a wee bit of heaven—a touch of Skye.” He takes off his sombrero and embraces Annie. “Our honeymoon cottage, Mother. Doesn't it bring back memories?”

Annie laughs. “Away with you now. Don't get ideas.”

Heather pops on a settee. “I feel like a wee girl again.”

“You'll always be my wee girl, lass,” Malcolm says, patting her hand.

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Bubbles gazes at the masks and hand-painted plates hanging on one wall. They're made from clay and painted brilliant red, blue, green, and yellow. "Feather, look at these, will you?"

"She's not here, lovey," Heather says.

"Not here? What's happened to her?"

Malcolm shrugs.

Bubbles feels a stabbing sensation in her heart. Her lifeline is missing. She's taken Feather for granted, assuming she'd always be there to care for her in spite of the distance and differences between them. What were those gunshots she heard when they entered the village? Could a bullet have found Feather? She might be sprawled on the ground somewhere, the rain merging with the blood flowing from her wounds.

Bubbles glances around the room as if waking from a long sleep. These people are all dead. What's she doing here with them? The hut is lit only by a lantern whose flame wavers. The massive shadows threaten to swallow her granda, granny, and mother. If the light goes out, Bubbles fears she'll be alone in the dark with only her worries, and tonight they're hammering at her. Since her mother left for Mexico so many years ago, Bubbles has hated the dark. She believes nothing good can come out of such gloom. It feels too much like a black hole that's waiting to gobble her up.

Her remedy for the heebie-jeebies is to sing, so she bursts into song. "By yon Bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes, where the sun shines bright on Loch Lomond."

Malcolm joins in: "Where me and my true love were ever wont to gae, on the bonnie, bonnie banks o' Loch Lomond."

Annie and Heather take up the refrain:

O ye'll tak' the high road and I'll tak' the low road,
An' I'll be in Scotland afore ye;
But me and my true love will never meet again
On the bonnie, bonnie banks o' Loch Lomond.

"Aye, that's the truth, my luv," Malcolm says to Annie. "We'll never meet again in the homeland."

"Don't be too sure of that," Heather says, flitting around the room, shaking her skirt in an imitation Irish jig. "Who knows where we'll end up?"

Singing has settled Bubbles down again, and she continues warbling all the old Scottish tunes she can think of. The music buffers her concerns about Feather, the dark, and any other fears nibbling at her. She draws an imaginary curtain around herself, protected from her thoughts.

Heather asks, "Where do you suppose Feather got to?"

Bubbles shrugs this time. "That girl. Always doing her own thing."



That night, they all sleep like the dead, lulled by the falling rain. The next day, after the sun comes out, everyone gathers in the plaza. Bubbles sits at the center, in the place of honor, surrounded by the elders. She doesn't like being with all the old people and moves her seat closer to the musicians. They're younger—more her style. Playing homemade harps, guitars, and drums, they gather around her, smiling and swaying to the rhythms. She nods her head in time to the music, her feet warming up for some dancing.

Villagers file past, lighting tiny candles and setting them in front of her, bowing their heads, smiling shyly. Children hide behind their mothers' skirts and peer out at the goddess. A goodlooker still, she doesn't blame them for staring at her, and she gives them her best queenly wave. The smell of burning incense goes to her head, making her giddy, reminding her of that stuff Feather smokes.

Where has that girl gotten to? Bubbles shivers, the icy edge of fear prodding her again. Not even the hot sun can chase it away. She draws closer to the musicians and sings along with them, though she doesn't know the words. Music's magic works. What's there to worry about?

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Feather's old enough to take care of herself. She's always going off on her own to sweat lodges or yoga things. Bubbles can't keep track of her—she never could. She'll turn up. Anyway, there's too much going on right in front of her eyes to think about her daughter. Dancers wearing traditional costumes twirl past.

All afternoon, the villagers lose themselves in the fiesta. It drapes them like a giant garment, a protection from worries, relieving them from their daily routine—hunger and want always gnawing away. Though it rains off and on, signaling Eineuq's great powers, the party continues into the night, and they pass around jars of pulque that Bubbles sips, too, reminding herself it's good for her heart, the more the better. It also creates a nice buffer against her vague fears.

The villagers dance, sing, talk, and laugh, small groups of them mixing and merging. Bubbles sits in the midst of all this, a yellow rain slicker with black buttons making her look like a giant queen bee. Three men hold umbrellas over her head. She taps her feet in time to the music, waving a flag of Mexico someone has given her, looking fresh and rested. She could charm the wigs off members from the British House of Parliament.

Trays of food pass from hand to hand. Free from Feather's watchfulness, she helps herself, hot peppers lighting up her interior till she's sure she glows like one of the fireworks. At least she thinks it's the peppers that pierce her gut. She tries everything that's been forbidden her so far on this trip—gobbling tasty tortillas wrapped around unrecognizable chunks of meat, dripping with grease and sauce. She's having the time of her life, downing Roloids as fast as she eats.

One of the dancers waves a red banner in time with the music. Refusing to be outdone, Bubbles reaches inside her purse and pulls out the hand-painted scarf that she wrapped the stolen sculpture in. Waving the scarf, she forgets her treasure. It drops to the ground, rolling under her chair.

Buoyed by the music, food, and good spirits, they all sleep when they grow tired, but no one pays attention to whether it's day or night.

They doze like animals, in spurts, relieved from the anxiety of whether it will rain or not. Now they know they'll have crops and that they'll prosper. There's nothing to worry about with the goddess among them, watching over the village.

Bubbles also feels rejuvenated from the merriment. She's always liked a good party, especially if she's the center of attention. And this has been the best she's attended since leaving Skye. Canadians don't know how to throw parties.

SHAMAN

Feather wakes to the chicks' screeching. Hungry again, they scratch around on the floor, spreading their wings, fighting over the few bits of grain and grass left there.

The clock says 1:12 p.m., and she hasn't eaten anything yet. She jumps off the bed and rummages in the bag of grain, popping some into her mouth, dribbling the rest onto the floor. The chicks cluster around her feet, pecking at her toes, at the seeds.

What should she do? She can't contact the cops. They're after her *and* Bubbles. Both of them are on the lam. She'll have to wear a disguise and hope the police don't find her mother before Feather does. But she hasn't a clue where to start looking.

Diving into the closet, she tosses out skirts, tops, ponchos, a kilt, purses, shoes, a pith helmet, wool—searching for something to wear that will conceal her identity. Settling on an outfit Heather had picked up at the mercado, Feather puts on a peasant skirt and top. Then she braids her hair and wraps it around the crown of her head, yellow seashell earrings dangling from her ear lobes and a matching necklace hanging around her neck.

The final touch—a mantilla. She places it on her head, veil covering her face, and glides out the entry, the chicks wobbling after her. She chases them back into the room, slamming the door before they can escape again.

Averting her head as she passes the desk clerk, she tries to look unobtrusive. Outside, she stands under an awning and waves at a taxi, afraid the cops will be watching for her car. Maybe they've picked it up by now. A taxi driver comes screeching to a halt in front of her, and she slips inside, her mantilla tilting.

The cabby greets her. A gold tooth flashes when he smiles. "¿Cómo está, señora?"

"Bien, gracias. ¿Y usted, señor?"

"Bueno."

"¿Habla inglés?"

"A leetle."

"Bueno. I need a shaman. A medicine man. Good medicine." She looks around furtively from behind the veil to see if anyone's following her.

The cabby thinks for a minute, scratching his head. "A shaman? A brujo?"

"Si. Un hombre who knows everything."

"Si, señora. Comprendo. I weel take you, pronto."

"¿Cuánto costará?"

"Three hundred fifty pesos. Okay?"

"Si."

The driver roars his engine, sending up a cloud of black smoke, and creeps over the cobblestones to the town limits.

"Where is this wise man, señor?"

"Not far. A couple hours."

"How do you know he'll be there?"

"No problema, señora. He is there."

Feather stares out the window at the mountains in the distance. They remind her of the dream she had recently. Who was the cabellero who rescued her? A shaman? What does she expect to learn from this wise man? She's looking for someone with a crystal ball who can help her find Bubbles and the others.

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Her stomach gurgles and growls. She'd give anything for a Big Mac with everything on it, a double order of fries on the side. Whenever she's in crisis, she regresses, returning to the things that sustained her on the farm. Beef was one of those things—and lots of it. They raised and slaughtered their own cattle. Cows were the center of their lives, providing milk, cheese, butter, and meat.

One of her therapists told her she had a cow complex—that it was connected to her mother. Is that why she became a vegetarian? If a cow equals Bubbles, Feather's desire for beef is cannibalistic. Her stomach growls again, almost like a wail.

The driver looks at her through the rearview mirror. "You say something, señora?" Feather shakes her head, wondering if he recognizes her. He seems to be studying her. Buddy or Abbot could have given the Mexican authorities a picture of Feather and Bubbles. Maybe the local TV stations have shown it. What if the driver plans to turn her in?

But they're in the countryside now, heading toward the hills. If he were going to turn her in, he would have done it in San Miguel. The rain has stopped, and the sun's rays cause steam to rise from the wet ground. Everything appears washed and hung out to dry. The multiple, spiny leaves of the maguey plant glisten like a cluster of slick snakes.

She's read that the Otomi Indians drink the maguey's sap; it gives nourishment, medicine, and pulque—a water substitute that gives them a little buzz. Firm leaves provide building material and fuel. The center of their life. Wild plant gatherers, Otomis have preserved their pre-Hispanic origins.

Always looking for new materials, she wonders if she could make sculptures from the maguey. A Medusa series, perhaps, exploiting the natural serpentine qualities of the plant.

Medusa makes her think of Bubbles. Feather might have known that traveling with her mum would mean lots of detours and curvas peligrosas—dangerous curves. Feather's whole life has been like that, one curve after another. Expect the unexpected, especially around

Bubbles, who still hungers for adventure and change. Routine turns her to stone.

The taxi driver has left the main route, and the car is creeping over a rutted dirt road. A cactus waves its misshapen arms, resembling a thalidomide baby. Maybe Feather is feeling the weed's aftereffects. The landscape appears brighter and greener—vibrantly alive.

A raven lands on a nearby cactus, singing love songs—in Spanish, of course—and the surrounding cacti join in the chorus. Doesn't Castaneda have a raven in one of his books that also is the *nagual*—the shaman figure—in disguise? Could the shaman be looking for *her*? A singing shaman?

Maybe she was too hasty in asking for an audience with a shaman. They're into pretty weird things—mushrooms and peyote and who knows what else. What's she getting into? No turning back. She's always wanted to meet a real Indian shaman, not some watered down American substitute. This is her chance. She can kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.

The rain has washed away all the depressing gray dust, and she can see more rain clouds on the horizon, waiting in the wings for their turn to perform. "Looks like rain again tonight."

"Oh, yes, *señora*. The rain, she has return. The rain goddess back for good."

"Rain goddess?" Feather snaps to attention. Maybe she doesn't need a shaman after all.

"Yes, *señora*. *Eineeuq* bring rain."

She fingers her skirt, feigning disinterest. "You know this *Eineeuq*?"

"Si, *señora*, everyone knows *Eineeuq*. We pray to her every day."

Her flesh quivers. "Seen her lately?"

"*Eineeuq*? Si. Her statue, it sit on altar in my village."

She gulps, trying to picture images of her mother cluttering altars all over Mexico. How in hell did Bubbles come to resemble this rain goddess? If they really think she's their beloved *Eineeuq* come to save them, they'll never let her go.

FLING!

No wonder Feather was crying out “Mother” in the dream. She’s already anticipating her loss. Of course, she never really had her mother. Bubbles has always been absent in some important way. Out to lunch. But she *is* a mother, not some impersonal goddess.

Passing through another tiny Indian paraje, Feather doesn’t see any TV antennas. Thank God! They won’t know of the price on her head. Barefooted children play outside the huts, a slur of color, kicking balls and laughing. They call out to the cab driver, “Buenas dios, Ramón,” but their faces close over and they stop laughing when they see Feather. In spite of her mantilla and dress, they clearly know she’s a gringa, a possible threat. Gringas come from the edges of the world that are filled with dangerous animals and people—witches. And gringa witches are especially feared. They can take your soul.

Ramón laughs and waves, pulling up in front of a tiny chapel. He stops the car sharply, throwing Feather against the front seat and knocking off her mantilla.

Inside the dim church, glittering candles flicker on the floor where several Indians sit cross-legged, chanting, creating an eerie drone. The smell of burning incense fills the air. A wiry, dark-skinned man, who appears to be Feather’s age, stands in their midst. He wears a white muslin kilt and loose shirt. A scarlet headband circles his head, his dark hair drawn into a ponytail. In a trance, he runs eggs over a woman’s arms and braids. Feather’s electrified. The man of her dreams.

Ramón motions for her to sit down on the floor and joins her. He leans over and makes a sucking motion with his mouth. “Don Miguel, he sucks woman’s demons. They make her sick.”

Feather nods. He can suck out her demons any time he wants. She watches him spray the woman with some liquid he has in his mouth and give her something to drink. Feather whispers, “What’s he doing now?”

“He has posh in mouth. He blow good spirit into woman’s body, get rid of demons making her sick.” While Ramón is talking, Don Miguel passes a live chicken over the candles and sips something from a cup

that he shares with the woman. The smell of burning feathers fills the room. Feather covers her nose, reminded of plucking dead chickens on the farm and singeing off the stubborn feathers.

“What are they drinking?”

“Posh and Coke. The woman, she burp out problem and posh make her happy again.” Feather nods. It all makes sense. She wonders why she’s spent so much money on therapy over the years when she could have swallowed a spiked Coke. Burped out her problems.

Maybe she should invent some demons for Don Miguel to get rid of. She’s sure she still has a few floating around, one of them being her mother. Feather hasn’t felt this kind of attraction for a man before. Her whole body buzzes, all her nerves on alert. Her antennae are focused in one direction only—Don Miguel. Don Miguel.

She feels like bursting out in song herself, and the words to “Twilight Time” come to her lips. She doesn’t sing it, though, not wanting to interrupt the scene unfolding in front of her. Her eyes glued to Don Miguel’s body, they make their way down to his legs. The brown, muscular calves and slender ankles remind her of Sudden Heat’s legs. All of the fervor she felt then surfaces again, and she’s a girl, hot for this man. It must be the final surge of passion before her hormones take a permanent vacation.

Feather tries to shake off the sensations she’s experiencing. It’s crazy getting aroused over a two-bit shaman. Seeking distractions, she looks around the tiny chapel, searching for native art, ideas for her sculptures. Her mother’s image stares back at her from an altar at the opposite end of the room, a statue about a foot tall. Candles illuminate the figurine. The light dancing on its surface makes it seem almost alive. Of course, it isn’t Bubbles. It’s Eineeuq. But Feather can see why the Indians have mistaken the two. The similarity is eerie.

Feather stares at the statue, startled by the likeness and disturbed to see her mother immobilized. Usually in motion, she’s always doing something—knitting, puttering around her place, cooking, shopping.

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Feather swears it's why she's lived so long. To see Bubbles inert gives Feather the creeps. It's too much like—

She won't say it.

Don Miguel, no longer in a trance, nods at the people who are now filing out.

Ramón says, "Come meet Don Miguel. He help you."

She feels like a lovesick teenager, tongue-tied and shy. She can feel herself losing control again, succumbing to those deep-brown eyes looking at her curiously. Is he pegging her as a gringa? Can he read her mind?

"You talk to him for me," Feather says.

"Si, señora." Ramón flashes his gold-toothed smile. "No problema, señora. You tell me. I tell him."

"My mother, a very old woman, has been kidnapped. I need to find her. She could be ill. I will pay him if he can tell me where she is."

Ramón asks, "She in Mexico?"

"Si. Some Indians took her from La Cueva because she looks like Eineeug."

"Ah, La Cueva. Una momenta, señora."

Ramón takes Don Miguel aside and the two men talk animatedly for several minutes, pointing at Feather, at the statue of Eineeug. Gesturing wildly with their hands, they make sculptural shapes in the air, mesmerizing Feather. Her head begins to nod, and soon her lusty snores fill the chapel.

When she wakes, it's dark outside, the candles giving off the only light. She looks around lazily, not immediately fathoming where she is. A mouse scurries over the mountain of her body, and she shrieks. Jumping up, she searches for something to stand on. The altar is all there is, a narrow, oblong wooden table covered with a fringed, hand-woven scarf, several candles, and Eineeug's statue.

Feather climbs up on it, teetering until she finds her balance, the statue between her legs. She doesn't mind snakes or lizards. Spiders

and June bugs she can tolerate. She even likes skunks. But mice? They drive her crazy.

She's had a real mouse phobia since millions of them overran Southern Alberta when she was little—mice scurrying over sidewalks, crawling up fences and walls, invading houses and barns, slipping between bed covers. They were everywhere. She couldn't avoid stepping on them, dead mice rotting in gutters and other crevices. She had mice nightmares for years after.

Just thinking about them makes her shake from fear, their quivering bodies darting everywhere, nasty little pointy teeth bared when they felt threatened. Thank God research scientists are killing off a few, though Feather doesn't know how they can tolerate handling mice every day—those long, skinny tails trailing behind.

It occurs to her that Don Miguel may have transformed himself into a mouse in order to help her. She's heard of shamans taking other forms. Would he still attract her as a mouse? Scrabbling around. Darting about and slipping into the tiniest spaces. Well, she doesn't want this mouse to get into her spaces, even if he is Don Miguel.

Her hunger temporarily overpowers her fears. It even temporarily swallows her feelings for Don Miguel. She can smell food cooking, and her stomach responds with a deep growl. Forget the mice. Forget her mother. She still hasn't eaten today. She must find food or she'll keel over.

In the dim light, she inspects the floor before jumping off the altar, knocking over the statue of Eineuq on her way down. It shatters into hundreds of pieces, a disembodied eye staring up at her accusingly from the floor. There it is again—her guilt. She never can do enough to ease it.

Grabbing a handmade broom that's leaning against the wall, she frantically sweeps the shards of clay into a dark corner, burying the eye. Hopefully, no one will notice the statue has disappeared until morning, and she'll be long gone by then. She'll buy them a new one.

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Maybe she'll make them one. Or she could send them her mother. But first, she has to find her.

Feather looks around for her shoulder bag. It's missing, and so are her passport, driver's license, money. Her life! How will she ever get out of Mexico without a passport? Of course, without ID, she can't be identified as Bubbles' daughter should she get caught. But Feather can't desert her mother. Two wrongs don't make a right.

What would happen if she turned in Bubbles and collected the reward? Surely, the Mexican authorities wouldn't put an old woman in jail once they got the sculpture back. That's all they're interested in. Feather could tell them her mother gets confused at times, and that's the truth. At ninety, who wouldn't get confused? All those years to keep track of. Feather has trouble just sorting out her own clothes.

If she collected the reward money, she could give it to the poor Mexicans and have enough left over to take Bubbles back to Scotland one more time, accompanied by Don Miguel, of course.

The idea gives her wings, and she almost flies out the door, too light from not eating, no shoulder bag to give her some ballast. On the street, she sniffs, salivating at the smell of tortillas cooking, stumbling through the dark streets. The warnings of avoiding food not cooked in a reputable café evaporate, like her purse. She'd shovel anything into her mouth right now.

She follows the scent of food. Something swoops down at her out of the sky. She thinks it's a bat and covers her head with her hands, wishing she were still wearing the mantilla. At least it gave her a little protection.

When she was young, bats came out at night in the summer and made Feather and her friends shriek. They feared the bats would get tangled in their long hair. If mice make her break out in a sweat, bats turn her batty. They have the most horrifying faces of all—pointy ears and fangs and dark hollows for eyes. Little vampires. God must have been bored the day he made them. Or he ran out of ideas.

Cawing and screeching sounds break into her thoughts. Bats squeak. Ravens caw. Ravens she can tolerate. Just another feathered creature. But this one wants something from her. It dives again, directly at her head, sweeping past, grasping her necklace in its beak, pulling it over her head and flying away. Is it the raven she saw earlier that day?

It begins to sing “On the Road to Mandalay,” and Feather fears she’s hallucinating. It must be lack of food. Or maybe Buddy’s condition is erupting in *her* now under this stressful situation. She’s heard of mental illness remaining dormant for years before appearing. After all, he is a half brother. She could have some of the same genes.

Now she really does have a *problema* for Don Miguel to cure, but he has disappeared, too. The trauma she went through as a girl when her mother left with Manny must be surfacing again, stirring up all the long-buried feelings.

It’s too confusing. How in hell did she get into this mess—abandoned somewhere in Mexico, stripped of her identity, shadowed by a singing raven, attacked by mice, hiding out from the cops, smitten with a man she doesn’t know who has become an animal. What next?

The raven returns. Feather’s necklace hangs from its neck. It attacks her again, yanking the watch from her wrist and leaving a welt with its beak. As it flies away, it sings,

My bonnie lies over the ocean.

My bonnie lies over the sea.

My bonnie lies over the ocean.

Oh, bring back my bonnie to me.

That’s one of Bubbles’ favorite songs. Has her mother been turned into a raven? The whole bloody family? Is Feather next?

What does a raven want with her jewelry?

Is the Mexican Mafia recruiting birds now? Is this how Ramón got his gold teeth?

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Her stomach twists and churns like a washing machine, hunger driving out everything else. She'll deal with the hallucinations later. She'd eat a slug right now if she could find one. She heads toward the cooking smells, passing families sitting in front of their huts, chattering with neighbors. They grow silent at her approach, tensing visibly, as if she's an enemy.

She says "buenos tardes," frantically trying to recall the few Spanish words she knows. "¿La comida?" Food? They just shake their heads "no." No comprende. They draw away, retreating into their huts, acting like she's a leper. She points to her mouth and stomach, rubbing it, but she realizes she has no money to pay them. They're poor people. Very poor. They probably have hardly enough food for themselves.

Well, she's been meaning to go on a fast again. This is as good a time as any.

She's thirsty, too. A cerveza would taste good right now. Maybe some of that posh. Could any be left in the chapel?

Thunder shakes the ground, and a few drops of rain splatter her face. She looks up at the skies and opens her mouth. Rainwater should be safe to drink.

Where did Ramón go with his taxi and her handbag? She has travelers' checks at the hotel. If she could get back, she'd be okay. An old, bent man passes her, pulling a donkey. She stops him and asks, "¿Donde esta Ramón? ¿El taxi?"

He shakes his head. "No taxi, señora. El burro," and he points at the animal.

She points at herself and then at the burro and says, "San Miguel. You take me?"

"¿Cuánto es, señora?"

"Two hundred pesos."

"Si, señora. Mañana."

"Mañana?" Mañana could mean a day, a week, a month. But she hasn't much choice. "Mañana."

He isn't exactly the caballero from her dream, and the burro isn't the swift, powerful horse she rode. But dreams always exaggerate. Or was it referring to Don Miguel. Has she just not gotten to that part yet?

No Hiltons in sight. She'll have to spend the night in the chapel. She just hopes the mice have booked in elsewhere.

Lightning zips across the sky, and rain pours from the heavens. Eineeueq is working overtime. Maybe the goddess is angry that Feather has broken the statue and is showing her wrath this way. She runs back to the chapel and ducks inside, shivering. The candles have burnt out. The place is dank, dark, and smells of mice. At least she doesn't have to look at the statue's fragments, the memory of that sightless eye pursuing her.

She gropes in the dark for the altar and feels around for the cup she saw earlier filled with posh. Raising it to her lips, she drains the remaining liquid, just as she drained glasses left lying around the house the morning after her mother's parties. She had liked the buzz she got.

Though it's mixed with Coke, the posh burns worse than the hottest jalapeño pepper she has ever eaten. The top of her head feels as if it will blow off or she'll explode, her stomach a vat of fire.

No wonder ordinary people turn into ravens or mice. This drink could do it. She worries that she'll wake up and find herself changed into an insect, like something out of Kafka. She crawls onto the altar, feeling a little bug-like, curling up on her side, hoping the drink will knock her out. The rain rattles on the roof, and a few drops find their way inside, splattering her bare legs.

Images of juicy T-bones, broiled medium rare, floating in garlic butter, served with firm, succulent garden-grown tomatoes, crunchy French bread, and fluffy whipped potatoes bombard her. She tries to conjure up a frittata or ratatouille instead, but these vegetarian images don't stand a chance. It's meat she wants, a solid farm meal.

Before falling asleep, she burps and smiles, lighter now. Freer.

EINEEUQ'S RETURN

Neither Bubbles, Heather, Annie, nor Malcolm know what day it is when they finally return to San Miguel. Nor do they care. They don't know if they've been gone a day, a week, a year. Mexican time rules. Bubbles could have continued indefinitely, wrapped in the cocoon of the fiesta, surrounded by a life she knew as a girl. She feels like the young woman who first made the crossing from Scotland to the New World, excited by the possibilities ahead of her and keen for adventures.

She understands now why Feather was so eager to leave Canada and move to the States. She had to find her own new world. But where *is* that girl of hers? On the farm, she wandered in the fields, vanishing for hours. She would arrive home, clothes torn from getting caught in the brambles while picking berries, her knees and elbows skinned and streaked with dirt. She would find injured rabbits and other animals to bring home and nurse back to health. This time, though, she's been gone much longer.

When Bubbles and her family first returned, they went out searching for Feather, expecting her to turn up at the mercado. Bubbles wandered through the stalls, calling Feather's name, her voice tremulous. But when she looked at the smiling brown faces, her confidence returned. Nothing bad could happen to her daughter in Mexico. Wasn't it like one big village? Everyone has treated Bubbles as if she's a queen. So she trusts that Feather will turn up in good time, unharmed.



Each morning, two young men call for Bubbles and drive her wherever she wants to go. Their job is to keep the goddess happy and the rain flowing. If she's doing well, they'll all thrive. She loves to hang out at La Cueva, frolicking in the water, bouncing across the bottom on tiptoes, loving the feel of buoyancy. She's convinced she's found the fountain of youth.

Her brow furrowed, her mind calculating, she realizes it would be too costly to ship all the old people from Canada to La Cueva to use the waters—more than she could make off the deal. She'll need to hire workers to bottle the water and distribute it in North America. It'll sell like hot cakes.

The young men attend to her, whipping up smoothies from pineapple juice, bananas, papayas, and mangoes, feeding them to her in tall glasses with thick straws. They stroll back and forth in white trousers and jackets, bright-red scarves knotted at their throats, playing haunting melodies on their battered guitars.

When she isn't kicking her feet in the water and doing the dead man's float, she's lounging poolside among the palms, hibiscus, and parrots, soaking up sun, sipping drinks, and singing along with the music. If she doesn't know the words, she makes them up. When she tires of singing, she chatters away about her plans and anything else that comes to mind, the parrots repeating what she says. She thinks it's the men talking to her.

Life has never been so good. The only thing she needs in order to die happy—though she seriously doubts now that she'll ever die, not since she's found this Eden—is a man's love. She wants to show everyone she's not too old to get a man. She still has some charms.

Maybe she should send for Victor. Maybe she *will* send for him when the water deal goes through. Maybe she won't. He seems pretty dull compared to Mexican men. Maybe she should leave well enough

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alone and be satisfied with what she has. Feather's right. Her luck with men hasn't been great.

But she feels more herself in Mexico than she has anywhere, and she's never been treated so royally. It's hard to imagine living in Calgary again and returning to her old routines, not after her experiences here, though she does miss *The Young and the Restless*. She tried to find it on Mexican TV but only got lines zigzagging across the screen.

She also misses scratchies. At home, whenever she gets an itch to gamble, she takes a taxi downtown, too impatient to poke along on a bus. At the Legion, where they all know her, she puts out a hundred dollars and buys a big block of the cards. The other old people play it safe, buying only a few at a time. But they never make more than a few dollars. She stands there counting the cards, making sure no one's cheating her. Then she tucks them in her bra and rushes home, not looking right or left, oblivious to anyone or anything. Faces, trees, flowers all become a blur. All she can think of are the scratchies.

Once inside her cottage, she hangs up her coat. Needing a pick me up, she pours a little glass of wine. A doctor on TV has said, "Drink lots of wine, and have sex twice a week, and you'll live longer." She's still working on the sex part and wonders if phone sex counts. She puts the cards on the kitchen table and sits down, ready to work.

Methodically, and with full concentration, she goes through each card. Using her lucky penny to scratch with—the first cent she ever made in Canada that she always puts in her right shoe—she unveils the symbols beneath: cherries, one-armed bandits, cowboy hats, crowns. She gets crowns all the time. She forms different piles for the various combinations, always making her money back and more. Sometimes much more. On a good day, she can make maybe five hundred dollars. Her best day was eighteen hundred.

She has the touch all right, and it isn't just luck.

FEATHER'S RESURRECTION

Sunlight probes the slits in the chapel's walls, waking Feather. She's amazed she didn't fall off the altar in the night. Her joints are stiff from sleeping in such a cramped position on a hard surface. The posh knocked her into another world. Maybe that's what happened to Don Miguel and Ramón. Maybe they're sleeping it off and will show up before long. If not, she has a burro ride ahead of her. She'll know what Mary felt like, riding into Bethlehem. But until then, what does she do?

The posh has left an acrid taste in her mouth, worse than grass, and her head's exploding with pain. She'll just have to grit her teeth, though she may not have them much longer if they don't get brushed soon.

She looks around, grateful there's no mirror in the room to reflect the damage. She must look like a *real* witch, something for the villagers to fear—mascara smudged, hair awry, clothes wrinkled and streaked with dirt.

In the night, the woman who cares for the chapel slipped inside while Feather was sleeping and left a plate of tortillas and beans. Feather notices it now and dives at the plate, gobbling the food before the mice find it. Then she sits cross-legged, staring at the fragments of Eineeuq piled in the corner. It could be her own mother's bones she's looking at. The thought jolts her, and she remembers Bubbles' fascination with the bones at the museum in Mexico City. Could she have been obsessed with her own mortality?

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Bubbles seems immortal to Feather. She knows her mother is old. She'll die one of these days, but that's all intellectual knowledge, head stuff. Bubbles seems indestructible somehow, not at all like other old people. Maybe she *has* found the fountain of youth. Could the Indians be on to something Feather's too blind to see?

A mouse pokes its nose out of the shards of clay and eyes her. It reminds her of the mouse she read about in a Russian poet's poem. The Russian authorities had imprisoned a woman in Siberia for seven years because she was a poet and therefore dangerous to the state. Glasnost freed her. In solitary confinement, she had shared a tiny cell with a mouse she befriended and secretly wrote poems on a piece of soap, describing her experiences and her inner life. Since she was forbidden to write during this time, she memorized the lines, erasing them from the soap's surface. In this way, she composed and memorized three hundred poems. Impressive.

And Feather can't even remember the woman's name.

More impressive than the poet's endurance and memory, she survived sharing her cell with a mouse. Feather would have gone nuts. If she had to choose between her life and a mouse's, Feather would win.

Right now, though, the mouse is winning their staring contest, driving her out of the chapel again. It's a shock to step into the bright morning light after the chapel's dusky interior. She feels exposed, the spotlight on her. The only gringa around.

In daylight, the village looks different, not so ominous. Feather can hear women and men singing as they go about their work. Children play in the streets. Scrawny dogs and cats dart past, chasing each other. Cooking smoke drifts through the air, along with smells of simmering food and the thumping and shaping of tortillas. No freeway sound in the background. No planes flying overhead. It reminds her of summers at Sage's farm in BC. How easy it was to return to a simpler life—how renewing. Letting go of time restraints. Entering a different concept of time. Kairos versus kronos, timeless time, moments when the clock stands still versus watching time passing.

Feather smiles and waves at some women hanging laundry over scrawny bushes. They turn away, body language making it clear Feather is an outsider. How is she going to find the man with the burro?

Maybe she should just start walking to San Miguel, though she's not sure she remembers the way. No one here is going to tell her. Still, she might run into someone on the road who will give her a ride. What does she have to lose? She lost her virginity long ago. Someone could kidnap her and try to get money from Buddy or Adam. But her half brothers can barely support themselves. Of course, her abductors might kill her if they discover she isn't worth much. Well, she isn't going to take any chances. She'll have to stick it out here until she finds a way back to San Miguel.

The streets are like a maze, designed to confuse. She turns a corner and finds herself right back at the chapel. How did that happen? Maybe someone has shown up there by now. Don Miguel must keep regular hours. If not, how would sick people know when to find him?

She steps inside again, temporarily blinded, her eyes needing to adjust to the dim light. Something runs up her leg. She's sure it's the mouse and screams, swatting at her skirts, about to leap for the altar. Eineeueq has beaten her to it. The statue has been restored to its place of honor, a slight smile on its stylized face, reminding Feather of the Mona Lisa. What does the goddess know? Feather glances into the corner. Someone has removed the broken statue. Or did it reassemble itself? She's ready to believe anything.

The mouse. It's still racing over her body. She rolls on the floor, trying to get rid of it. She can hear it squeaking now, somewhere near her ear. Is it in her hair? She's about to flip out completely when someone says, "Is Don Miguel, señora. He stuck again. Don't keel him."

Feather stops thrashing around and looks at the person who's speaking. She's a woman of indeterminate age, long hair pulled back in a single braid, the one who brought Feather food, though she doesn't know that. At least *she* doesn't seem frightened by the gringa. "¿Habla inglés?"

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"Si. A leetle."

The mouse has stopped wriggling.

"Where's Don Miguel?"

"On top your head, señora."

Feather jumps up. "Let me out of here."

"No, no. Don't move. He won't hurt you."

"You mean the mouse?"

"Si, señora. Don Miguel a mouse. He change himself into animals but sometime can't change back."

"Can he turn into a raven?"

"Si. Anything, señora. He make himself into many animals, just like that." She snaps her fingers. "But hard to become human again."

"Yeah, I know the feeling." Feather feels like an animal herself.

"He need help."

"Look, *I'm* the one who needs help. My purse has been stolen. My mother's been kidnapped. I came here to get Don Miguel to help *me*." Feather stands there, hands on her hips, eyes rolled back in their sockets, trying to see what's happening on top of her head. "Are you a man or a mouse? Get down, pronto."

"You said right words, señora. Look. Don Miguel, he's back."

Leaning against the altar is Don Miguel, panting as if he's just run a marathon. His eyes spin like pinwheels, first in one direction, then the other. His clothes, as rumpled as hers, are intact, except for his red headband that now circles Feather's forehead.

Everything she's accepted as real—the laws of logic and reason, cause and effect—have been challenged. She doesn't know if she's gone crazy, and these people are right to fear her, or if these experiences are real. Maybe she's gone off the deep end and the villagers can sense it. Or maybe she's entered their worldview, their imaginations. Anthropologists have a name for it. Participant observers flip over into participants. Identification with the other.

Feather says, "Jesus!"

“No, he no Jesus. He Don Miguel. You now his woman. He give you his scarf. See? You say right words. Free him. He your slave forever.”

Feather doesn't want him to be her slave. The idea of a man groveling at her feet turns her off completely. And she doesn't like being told she's his woman. But she has to admit that something unusual is happening between them.

Don Miguel groans, holding his head in both hands, clearly in pain. Feather nods sympathetically. It's the posh. Or maybe it's the shock of shifting shapes so suddenly. It would give anyone a headache to be squeezed into a mouse's body. She wonders if Don Miguel can turn himself into a woman, too. The thought stops her. What if he can clone himself? What if he's Don Miguel *and* the young woman who's been talking to her? What if Feather is Don Miguel? What if everyone resembles a completed jigsaw puzzle, made up of other people's fragments?

The possibilities get too confusing.

It seems to be her karma to get hooked up with weirdos. Weirdo or not, being near Don Miguel is electrifying. She's never had this sensation before. Does that mean she's never been in love before? Or *is* it love? Maybe his strange powers are what attract her. She's heard of people falling for their religious leaders and getting involved sexually. Don Miguel could fit that category. But screwing a mouse or a raven? That's too kinky for her. She likes her sex straight up, thank you, like a good martini.

The chapel begins filling up again with villagers needing Don Miguel's skills. Some of them carry sick animals, as well as children. Some are lame. She's sure one of the old men is singing “Old Man River,” and she's taken back to *Showboat* and all those musicals she watched as a child. She thought then that life was one big musical, a romance. And in some ways it is. Lots of people sing and dance to pass the time or make their work easier. The slaves did. American and Canadian Indians use dancing and chanting to communicate with

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nature—to make it rain, to appease the gods. It must be the vibrations from the music that get the nature spirits' attention.

The young woman lights candles and burns incense. Don Miguel closes his eyes and makes swimming motions with his arms through the smoke rising in the tiny space, chanting in a language Feather's never heard before. He sounds a little like Catholic priests she's heard, waving his hands over oozing sores and people doubled over in pain. The woman assists, moving the endless procession of suffering villagers through the chapel.

Feather watches, moved by this man who is making a difference in so many people's lives. She's also touched that he would sacrifice himself and his own comfort to help others. Fingering the crystals she always carries in a pouch inside her bra, her amulet against harm, she mutters a few prayers of her own, wondering if he can help her, waiting her turn. When it comes, he smiles, motioning for Feather to draw near him. Is she imagining that he's looking at her differently, his deep-brown eyes drawing her into his universe? She feels an immediate bond, as if an electrical wire connects them. He's a kind of artist himself, only his transformations involve people, not objects.

Watching her the whole time, he drinks from a Coke bottle filled with posh. Then he hands it to her, indicating she should do the same. Being so close to him makes her giggly and bubbly inside. And when she drinks from the Coke bottle, she's sure she'll explode. The liquid flows into all her veins, reminding her of bronze when it's ready to be poured—a molten, reddish-gold substance burning out the wax shell and replacing it, taking up permanent residence. This is major medicine.

Don Miguel briefly disappears behind the altar. He reappears, wearing a raven mask, and hands her another one, motioning for her to put it on. They face each other in front of Eineueu's statue, performing a kind of ritual dance, a combination boogie, Charleston, Highland fling, and tango. First one and then the other leads, one moment cheek to cheek, the other pelvis to pelvis. Should she tell him now she

practices safe sex, or would he even know what that means? Except her supply of condoms has disappeared with her purse.

Her concerns float away. She forgets her fears of AIDS and venereal disease, forgets her mother, forgets the stolen statue, forgets herself. She soars above the chapel, above the land, free for a while from the world's cares, Don Miguel at her side, both of them light as feathers.

MAMA MIA

Bubbles has been thinking of Victor, a wild Hungarian. Maybe she wrote him off too quickly. She decides to send him a card she picked up in the hotel lobby; it has a picture of the hotel, as well as its address and phone number. Maybe he'll call, and they can at least try phone sex.

But she doesn't hang around waiting for him to call. There's too much to see and do in San Miguel. In the mornings, the Eineeup patrol arrives and carts her off to La Cueva for a good soak and some sun. Later, she returns to the hotel and snoozes during the downpour that happens every day at one p.m. Then she joins her mother on the town, Bubbles' handlers nearby, ready to answer her every need. She calls them "my boys." They're a blend of the Mexican mafia and the Blues Brothers, dressed in black shirts and fedoras, white suits and ties, eyes hidden behind wraparound sunglasses. Attentive to her every move, they're never far away. Even when she's inside the hotel room, she can hear the boys chatting in the hall, waiting for her to emerge.

She rummages through her bag, searching for the treasure she picked up in the Mexico City museum. Maybe she misplaced it. She's been getting a little forgetful lately. Nothing serious, though. She certainly doesn't want to accuse her boys of taking anything. They're almost like kin. She's sure her own family wouldn't have made off with the piece, though she wouldn't put it past her granda to play a trick on her.

Since returning to town, Malcolm has found a British pub to hang out at. When he isn't there, jawing with the locals, he works at the easel he's set up in the jardín, painting people's portraits, picking up a few pesos that pay for his ales. When Bubbles gets tired of traipsing around with her mother, she watches him paint. Or sometimes she accompanies her granny to her Mexican cooking class. It's a stimulating life. Much better than living in Calgary.

When Bubbles and her mother aren't touring or hanging out, they putter through the markets and shops, fingering everything, smelling, looking. They try on dresses and skirts and blouses, flitting in and out of changing rooms, chatting nonstop about the goods and the people. Heather has an opinion on everyone and everything, providing a running commentary on this person and that one. She also hasn't lost her ability to mimic, and she keeps Bubbles in stitches, imitating others when their backs are turned.

Bubbles never thought she'd tire of shopping, but her mother's zeal for exploring has almost worn *her* out. It's as if Heather's life—or lack of one—depends on constant activity.

"Come on, my girl, I've signed us up for a tour this afternoon—fancy houses and gardens." She has joined every local tour she can find, using Feather's plastic cards to pay for the excursions.

Today they're getting ready for another one. Entranced, Bubbles sits on the bed, watching her mother get ready, just as she used to as a child. "You know, you're still a beautiful woman," Bubbles says.

"Beautiful woman, beautiful woman," the parrot repeats over and over, one of the creatures Annie has rescued on her travels.

Heather jumps up and presses her freshly painted lips to the parrot's beak, leaving a ruby red mark. "Oh, you lovely fellow. A true connoisseur of the fairer sex. You shall be my escort for dinner."

"Sex! Sex! Sex!"

She glances at Bubbles, and they both laugh. "Quiet!" she says to the parrot. "The boys will get the wrong idea." She returns to the dressing table and applies mascara to her eyelashes, glancing first at herself in

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the mirror and then at Bubbles. “Aye, I’m still the belle of the ball. Like mother, like daughter.”

These words makes Bubbles feel warm all over, and she sops up the approval. As a girl, she compared herself to her mother, never quite measuring up. Here she is, at the other end of the spectrum, still doing it. She has always been jealous of Heather’s good looks. Bubbles is actually glad her mother cut off that gorgeous mane of hers that drove men wild. It levels the playing field a little.

“Try this, lovey.” Heather drifts to the bed and leans over Bubbles, using a soft brush to apply some blush to her cheeks. Bubbles inhales her mother’s scent, an earthy smell, like soil when it’s turned over in the spring. Memories of Skye overcome her, and she recalls the times she watched her mother get ready to go out, longing to join her. But she never told Bubbles where she was going. She’d just wink and say, “Not a word to me mother and father, now.”

Bubbles wants to wrap her arms around her mother, press her face into the ample bosom, and hang on for dear life, as she wanted to so many years ago. Even then, she feared her mother would never return, sensing she longed to be free of family duties and restraints. Knowing this made Bubbles constantly feel unbalanced, waiting for the other shoe to drop. First, her father had left them and sailed to Canada. Then—

Bubbles restrains herself, afraid if she flings herself at her mother she’ll only be disappointed. There might be nothing to grasp.

One of the chicks pecks at her feet, aiming between the straps on her sandals, startling her. “Get away. Shoo!”

The bird chirps and waddles under the chest of drawers, periodically peeping from beneath it.

“It likes you, dear,” her mother says, handing Bubbles a mirror.

She studies her reflection. Heather’s a real artist, the pale color more subtle than the lipstick Bubbles usually rubs into her skin that makes her resemble a clown. Her cheeks glow the way they did when she was fourteen, and her eyes remind her of Feather’s. The expression in them

seems identical. It startles her to think there's a resemblance between her daughter and herself. Feather has always seemed like a stray, not really connected to Bubbles. They don't look alike in any other way.

She remembers a young Feather, watching her get made up, always wanting a dab of this, a dab of that. But it had irritated Bubbles to have Feather hanging around her then. She seemed like an intruder in Bubbles' world of men—her sons, their father, her brothers. She wanted them for herself. Now she regrets her attitude.

Scowling, she sets the mirror down and looks at Heather. "Where is that girl?"

A frown creases her mother's smooth brow. "What girl?"

"Feather. She should be here by now."

Heather shrugs and slips her feet into her sling-back heels. "She'll turn up. I did, didn't I?"

Bubbles has tried to find Feather since returning to town. She sent out the boys several times to look for her, but they didn't have any luck. She chews on her lower lip, actually more concerned for her own safety than for her daughter's. After all, Feather can take care of herself. But Bubbles' kin could dissolve in a poof as suddenly as they'd appeared. What would she do then?

She'd be alone.

Heather has put on a red-and-green skirt decorated with beads and other ornaments, an embroidered, short-sleeved blouse, and a yellow sash. The earrings that dangle from her earlobes match the decorations on the skirt. She drapes a fringed shawl around her shoulders, snaps her fingers together as if using castanets, and clicks her heels against the floor, almost stepping on a chick. "Olé! Our carriage awaits," she says.

The parrot perches on Heather's shoulder. Bubbles takes her arm, and they march out together, the boys following at a discreet distance, the parrot calling out "Olé" over and over.

One good thing about Feather's disappearance: Heather spends more time with Bubbles now. And she encourages Bubbles to do all the

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things that Feather forbids. They eat ice cream and pastries. They gulp down tamales, soft tacos, and flautas from the street vendors. Bubbles even has taken up smoking again with her mother. They sit in Mama Mia's for hours, sipping tea or beer, puffing away at Mexican cigarillos, neither woman inhaling. They reminisce about the old country or gossip about kin.

Bubbles thought she could step back in time and pick up where they left off, and in some ways they have. They still share some common history they review again and again, keeping it alive. Yet she discarded her sixteen-year-old self long ago, and she's not sure she can remember the girl she was then. And that's the person who had the relationship with Heather, not this ninety-year-old woman, clothed in so many different lives and experiences that it's difficult to discard them all and return to her core. As for Heather, she seems more Mexican now than Scottish.

Still, these conversations remind Bubbles of the ones she and her mother had in Skye and when they first moved to Canada. Heather didn't shut her out as Bubbles did with Feather. Her mother treated her daughter like a confidante, not an enemy. Bubbles felt part of a circle of women then—aunts, cousins, neighbors—who shared the same woes. These talks helped them all to forget their troubles. The women cloaked themselves in the stories they exchanged—some true, most flirting with truth. They invented a life and a community that didn't actually exist but fulfilled some deep need in them.

Even so, Bubbles hasn't had the nerve to ask her mother about what happened when she left Canada. And she's not eager to get into the dying part. Nor has she talked about her own life since then. Looking back, she's ashamed of some things she's done. Still, she's determined to ask Heather about her experiences in Mexico. Otherwise, for all the common blood they share, her mother seems a stranger. An intriguing one, but a stranger, nonetheless. Each woman's life forms a barricade between them that seems insurmountable. Though Bubbles and Feather have their differences, their lives have at least intertwined

over the years. In spite of the physical distance between them, they feel related.



“Let’s have a bite to eat before the tour,” Heather says, and the women head for Mama Mia’s restaurant. Heather struts down the street as if she owns it, waving at the shopkeepers she’s befriended, calling out, “Buenos días, señora, señor.” Strollers turn to stare at the two women and the parrot squawking “Sex! Sex!” Heather’s red, spiked heels click against the stone walkway and make her almost six feet tall. Bubbles hangs on to her mother’s arm and glances up at her, feeling dowdy in the tea colored cotton dress she bought in Puerto Vallarta. A mushroom next to a patch of blossoming daffodils.

From a block away, Bubbles hears jazz coming from Mama Mia’s and swings her hips to the beat and snaps her fingers. Heather nods her head in time to the music, the two of them dancing their way into the courtyard. It’s strung with Christmas lights, multicolored paper lanterns, and miniature piñatas. Heather guides them to her favorite table near some green vines and helps Bubbles to sit down. Both women rest their arms on the crisp, emerald-green cloth that contrasts with the white cotton one beneath it. Heather moves a jar that holds fresh yellow daisies to the side, puts the ashtray in the center, and pulls out her pack of cigarillos. “Light up?”

“Si,” Bubbles says and hoots at herself for speaking Spanish.

“Si,” says the parrot, and the two women laugh at the bird.

Heather holds her lighter to Bubbles’ little cigar, and she sucks on it, holding it awkwardly between her thumb and index finger, choking back the coughing fit that threatens. The light reflects in Heather’s eyes, revealing deep shadows there. Bubbles looks away, afraid of what she might see, puffing hard, creating a smoke screen. She likes the way smoke shifts and changes, softening everything. It also puts up a nice protective wall to hide behind.

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Bubbles feels as if she's been reborn and is starting over from scratch, taking baby steps, learning to navigate with this new parent. It isn't what she'd expected or hoped for when she made this journey to reclaim her mother's ashes. She anticipated being her mother's rescuer, returning her remains to the fold of family. But Heather's appearance has thrown a wrench in Bubbles' plans. It's forced her to see that her mother really has changed, and she might not fit into the picture Bubbles had painted for herself of this helpless woman, stranded in Mexico, dependent on others for her survival.

The small salsa band has started playing, and her boys are sitting at a nearby table. She waves at them, tapping her feet in time to the music, nibbling on the plate of assorted cheese and cold cuts her mother has ordered. Bubbles washes them down with tea. The parrot hunches on Heather's shoulder, eyes half-closed. She brushes her cheek against the bird's shiny yellow feathers tinged with red, green, and blue. It turns its head quizzically and then nibbles on Heather's earlobe.

"Sex! Sex!" it caws. Some diners at a nearby table giggle. Heather kisses its beak and then looks around the room, as if searching for someone.

"Are you looking for Jimmy?" Bubbles asks.

"Jimmy?" Heather's eyes get a steely glint to them. "That scoundrel. I'll not see the likes of him again unless it's in hell."

Hell.

The word hovers in the air between them. Exactly where has her mother been all these years? Bubbles doesn't want to know. A pain stabs her side. Unaware of it for days now, she thought it had gone away. What had her mother died from? The question freezes on her tongue. It will never be spoken. What a thing to ask someone. What killed you?

Bubbles says, "You and Jimmy were all lovey-dovey before you left."

Heather throws up her hands, a ring circling each finger. "He just wanted a plaything. Someone he could drop when he wanted to."

"You mean he wasn't going to marry you?"

“Marry me? And give up his respectable life in Mount Royal with his respectable wife whose respectable family had all the respectable money? Not on your life!”

“What a heel.”

“Aye. But I’ll hand it to him. He did get me out of Calgary, and I had a better life here in the few years it lasted than I ever did before. Except for missing my children, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. I met real men for the first time.”

Bubbles’ father not a real man? It’s wrenching to hear him referred to in this way. She’s fond of her dad and wouldn’t want his feelings hurt. She sips her tea and then crosses herself in case he’s listening. But she does wonder what a real man is like. Not wanting to appear ignorant, she doesn’t ask her mother, who seems like such a woman of the world now.

Has Bubbles ever known a real man? Lloyd wasn’t a bad sort. Just dull. Manny was okay when he wasn’t drinking. It was the alcohol that made him change. And she knew others who wanted to marry her, but she turned them down. A minister’s son. An engineer. Maybe they were real men. Maybe she picked the wrong ones. She wants to be loved by a real man before she dies.

“How’d you manage after Jimmy left?”

“I told people’s fortunes and taught English and had a grand time. The whole world was in Mexico City then. I made women friends—Mexican and European—and we helped each other out. I joined Las Mujeres Libres.”

“Lost what?”

“It means ‘the free women.’ We protested. Fought for our rights.”

Her mother, a feminist? Bubbles can’t believe it. A revolutionary? Wait till Feather finds out. This new mother of hers seems so assured. Speaking Spanish like a native. Unafraid of anyone or anything. Of course, what’s there to fear if you’re dead?

Bubbles banishes that thought. Her mother never really died, anyway. She’s been here in Mexico, waiting for her daughter to join

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her. Since Bubbles' granny and granda are here, too, maybe the whole family will turn up, even her father and brothers. She's been looking for them in the crowds at the mercado, as well as on the streets, expecting to bump into more of her clan. They could have a reunion, a real one.

She likes the idea of another fiesta that would last for days, filled with music and dancing and song, tables bulging with food. Pints of beer. She enjoys the slightly blurry feeling it gives her, as if she's floating.

She burps and finishes her tea. At the bottom of the cup, tea leaves form soggy piles. She shows them to her mother, who stares at them and shakes her head. Bubbles asks, "What's wrong?"

"You're going to have a visitor—a tall one."

DON MIGUEL'S WORLD

For hours every night, rain pours from the heavens. But during the day, sunshine floods the land. The intense combination makes everything grow at an accelerated rate—the maize taller than the villagers, fields and hills sprouting with new life. The beans look like something out of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and the golden squash could make carriages equal to Cinderella’s. Everything is abundant.

Feather doesn’t know how long she drifts, in limbo, going deeper into Don Miguel’s world. It had seemed so natural to accompany him to his adobe hut that first night, a ten by twelve room on the outskirts of the village, and to sleep in his bed, a lumpy mattress tucked into one corner of the place. Not pushing for sex, he sang her to sleep the first night while stroking her back. The melancholy tunes were unfamiliar to her. It reminded her of times when Bubbles had nursed her through an illness, rubbing her back and singing Scottish songs. She’s forgotten these more positive times with her mother, the memories buried under resentments she’s amassed over the years.

She awakens in the night to the sound of birds trilling outside. They seem to be singing their hearts out for her—or trying to convey a message. From her mother? Before she fell asleep, Don Miguel had assured her Bubbles was okay. But how could he be so certain? Now he stirs, his naked body pressing closer to her. Wide awake, she listens to

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his musical snores and smells his scent, a mixture of wood smoke and incense and sweat. She can make out his profile in the moon's frail light, and it seems familiar, like the Indian head on the American nickel.

Something rustles nearby, scratchy little mouse feet. Surely Don Miguel isn't doing one of his transformations again. She pulls the covers over her head and burrows beneath them, seeking reassurance in his warm flesh, hoping he isn't into split personalities. He wraps his arms around her, and she melts into them. Their lips meet, and she can taste some of the posh, giving her a little buzz. Or is it the electrical charge the meeting of their mouths gives off?

Their breathing quickens, and she forgets the mouse, her mother, everything. She's falling into the night, the stars, the earth. Everything swirls together, along with the sounds of sucking and smacking and panting. She has him in her mouth, and then she's in his. His tongue probes beneath the covers, beneath her consciousness. She grips his hair, breathless. It feels for a moment as if she's giving birth to him, and she marvels at the miracle.

And then he's inside her, and she's turned inside out and upside down, filled with him and filling him, both of them hanging on to each other. She flings the covers aside, catching a glimpse of stars through a window. They burn into her brain. And then she is landing, softly, returned to earth, the night wrapping around her. Don Miguel nibbles on her ear and sings softly into it, a mournful melody that lulls her back to sleep.

In the morning, he blows in her ear and whispers her name over and over. Bird feathers come from his mouth, drifting past the sleeping woman, colors of the rainbow forming into house finches and red crossbills and tropical mockingbirds, all vocalizing. Their voices merge, sounding like a babbling brook and a squeaky door combined. She wakes to find herself in an aviary.

"What on earth?" She looks at him, leaning over her, and then at a dozen or so birds swooping and soaring and settling on available surfaces.

"Shit happens," he says, laughing. And some of it does drip here and there, just missing the two of them. "I never know when, either. Keeps things interesting."

"I guess," she says. "You're the real thing."

"Not yet. I still have mucho to learn. Mucho mucho. Like how to control this stuff." He waves his hand at the birds.

"How does an average, ordinary shaman learn to speak such good English? I'm just an average, ordinary artist, but my Spanish is for the birds."

"My mother's sister lives in LA, the barrio. She offered to send me to high school there. I'm the oldest and her favorite. I have three sisters, you know? You met one of them, Leticia. She brought you the food—"

"Oh, your helper!"

"My helper."

"Weren't your sisters jealous?"

Don Miguel shrugs. "Maybe. But my aunt was paying for it, so, you know—her choice."

"Must've been hard to start over in a strange country."

"Si. But I kept busy, and I had no time to get into trouble. Worked my way up from a dishwasher to a waiter. Made pretty good money. I was able to send some to my parents, to help them out, and I managed to get through high school and college that way."

"Amazing. Your major?"

"I had a double major, agricultural science and psych."

"Psych? I was going to be a psych major once. I thought it would help me understand my mother."

"What changed your mind?"

"Art," she says. "It didn't make me think so hard."

"Good reason. Let the hands speak." He runs his fingers through his shoulder-length hair.

"Psych and agriculture. What a combination!"

"Si, but my real education started when I returned to Mexico."

"How so?"

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He strokes her hair, and butterflies circle them, wings fluttering against their faces.

“Butterflies! You *are* good.”

“Not good enough. Don Pedro, an old shaman, took me under his wing, so to speak. To apprentice. Unfortunately, he became senile and forgot some of the teachings. I’ve had to fill in the gaps myself. I’m still trying.” He waves at some plants on the windowsill and the garden outside. “That’s my laboratory. Trial and error. Sometimes more error and trial than success. You’re my witness.”

“Why become a shaman?”

Don Miguel studies his hands, not much bigger than hers. The fingernails are chipped, and the cracked skin around them seems permanently filled with dirt. “Caring for the village people—and the earth—has become a dying art. I wanted to keep the tradition alive. Improve their farming skills. Give them some hope. Everyone’s so poor here.”

She nods. She knows what it’s like to be poor. There’s nothing romantic about it, the need to eke out a living. No power. No control over your life.

“Why not find another teacher?”

He shakes his head. “It’s not so easy. No one wants to share his secrets. Shamans and brujos and curanderos kill each other if they feel their power is threatened. This life I’ve chosen can be very dangerous. I have to be careful not to get involved in old blood feuds—or start new ones. So it’s hard to find a teacher I can trust or who would trust me. I’m already suspect because I speak English so well and have lived in the States.”

He leans over and nibbles on one of her earlobes, tugging it slightly with his teeth, sending shivers all over her body. Both of his hands cup her breasts, fingers lightly rubbing her nipples, as if they are a talisman. Yellow daisies sprout from them. He plucks one and hands it to her. “For you, *senorita*.”

She puts it behind one ear, her vagina responding to his touch, her body doing a call and response, all nerve endings aflame. They stay in bed the whole morning, talking and exploring each other, unwilling to let the day claim them.

Eventually, he gets up and steps outside, naked, the birds following. A few moments later, he returns alone, carrying a basket filled with oranges, avocados, guavas, and apricots. “All from trees in my jardín, senorita.”

She drapes a sheet around herself toga style, not wanting to call attention to the parts of her body that are shifting because of age; she hates to think where they’ll end up.

“That sheet becomes you. You look like a goddess.” He bows, sets the basket on the mattress, and offers her a knife and a plate. Then he joins her.

The two of them sit there, cross-legged, intent on stripping the skins away and sucking on the succulent flesh beneath, juice dripping from their chins.

After, he takes the plates and knives and sets them on the counter. Then he pumps water into a basin and splashes it onto his face. While he shaves with a straight razor, he studies himself in a mirror hanging on the wall, meticulously harvesting every stray hair.

Feather sits, legs crossed, ogling his well-defined buttocks and testicles. The ripe twin sacks protrude between his spread legs. She enjoys them as only a sculptor could, longing to get her hands on them.

He rinses his face, drying it with a well-worn hand towel. Then he grabs white cotton trousers from a hook and steps into them, zipping the fly and causing some of his best features to disappear.

She flops on her stomach and props her head on her hands, watching him move around the tiny space. It’s even more primitive than Sage’s homestead, the floor covering woven from maguey plants. Otherwise, there’s no similarity. Books and vials and colored glass bottles cover the available surfaces—bookshelves, a table, a counter, and windowsills. Stacks of chipped dishes fill the shelves above the sink, and a propane

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lantern sits on the table, as well as a small camp stove. Two handmade wooden chairs with woven seats are the only other things in the room except for wall hangings—a gallery of masks, contemporary retablos, sketches, pottery, prints, and paintings.

Don Miguel slips his feet into scarred black huaraches and pulls a peasant shirt over his head, peering out at her from its neck opening.

She laughs. “Who on earth *are* you?”

“Just your average, ordinary shaman,” he says, blowing on his fingernails and buffing them on his chest. The Mexican flag appears, draped over one shoulder, serape style.

“Yeah, right!”

They laugh together, and he holds the flag in front of him, thrusting it like a matador’s cape.

“What’s the emblem in the center?”

“This?” He points at an eagle. The claws of one foot cling to a cactus and the other foot holds a snake. “It symbolizes the Aztecs. According to a beautiful legend, the gods told them they’d know where to build their city when they saw an eagle perched on a prickly pear tree, devouring a serpent. They saw this mythical eagle on a marshy lake that is now the main plaza in Mexico City.”

“Wow! Quite a story. What about the colors, red and green?”

“Green stands for the Independence Movement. Red represents the Spaniards that joined in the quest for Independence—the blood of the National Heroes. White is the purity of the Catholic faith, better left unmentioned, if you ask me. It’s done more harm than good. Taking us away from our true roots. Our own gods. Mixing up our rituals with theirs. It’s confused people.”

“How so?”

“Don’t get me started on that! I’ll never get out of here.” He tosses the flag onto the mattress.

“Just a quick recap, then,” she says, pushing the flag aside.

He crouches next to her and taps the ground. “It’s all tied to the land. See?”

A corn stalk pushes through the floor covering. She watches it grow in front of her eyes, tips touching the ceiling in minutes, golden corn concealed in its husks. “Holy moly!”

“It’s holy, all right. Corn’s our main plant. We rely on agriculture for survival. Our religious beliefs and practices involve the spirits found in seeds, crops, and other forces—you know, like the rain and sun.”

“Are these spirits something you can see?”

“Only when you eat certain mushrooms. Then you can see everything.”

“Guess I’ll stick to weed.”

Don Miguel’s eyes grow darker, and he suddenly seems very foreign to her. From another planet. But this is what she wants—a real shaman. She hopes to shake loose the consciousness that shaped her and get closer to the goddess. Now that she has the chance, she’s afraid to lose herself.

“The Catholic creed clashes with our customs. We believe we’re involved with many powerful beings and gods, not just Jesus: Our Sacred Mother, Our Sacred Father, the Sacred Water, the Sacred Fire, the Sacred Earth, and the Zidqhamy.”

“Zidqhamy?”

Don Miguel laughs. “I know it sounds weird. It means ‘respected great lord.’ We think Christ limits us and our access to the spirit world.”

“How do you connect with your gods?”

“We must keep good relations with all the powerful beings. Not abuse the earth or her young. Treat everyone and everything with reverence. When things aren’t going well, it usually means we’ve screwed up. If we can get right with the spirits, everything gets better. Our diseases go away. We produce enough food for everyone.”

“What’s your job then?”

“Well, we’re human. We mess up. I try to teach them respect for the earth through good planting practices. And I help them get back in harmony with our gods if they’re sick. That’s what you saw me doing in the chapel.”

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She rolls onto her back and lazily watches spiders spinning webs on the ceiling, a whole family of them. Shuddering, she's grateful she didn't know they were there earlier. Next to mice, spiders are her least favorite creatures. She feels as if she's being drawn into a different kind of web, and she's afraid to find out who's at the center.

"Where does your money come from?"

He waves his arm. "We all scratch out a livelihood, doing a little of this, a little of that."

"But *you* have an education. You could make some money and help them out that way."

"It isn't just money they need. It's pride. Having a tradition gives them that pride. Pride in their past. In who they are."

Feather isn't convinced. Pride doesn't put food in the cupboard. But it's a noble cause, and it makes her respect Don Miguel as well as desire him. She hasn't felt that way about a man for a long time. But what is *her* tradition? Her mother's Scottish roots? Or something else?

"Does that make you the head man, then?"

"Sort of. They look to me for guidance and healing. Since they trust me, it's easier to heal them. Suggestion goes a long way. But so do the old medicines, the herbs and potions. Depends on the kind of illness—the body or the spirit. The body heals fast, but the spirit doesn't. They believe in powerful beings and gods. It makes my work easier. I just mediate."



Nothing seems more urgent to Feather than being right where she is, cooking and cleaning along with the village women, who now accept her because she's Don Miguel's new companion. They give her clothes to wear, and they watch her make her own sculpture of Eineeuq. She adds a few personal touches—an extra ripple or two of flesh, an inquisitive expression on her face, dimples in her cheeks. She also includes her mother's birthmark, a mouse on her side. Bubbles claims

that *her* mother was frightened by a mouse when carrying Bubbles. Feather wonders if this is why she's attracted to Don Miguel.

One morning she wakes up—an unsettling dream of fornicating skeletons gnawing at her, feathers digging into her skin from the lumpy mattress—and remembers. Her mother isn't immortal. She needs her daughter. The police could have her by now. Feather has to find her.

Don Miguel has already risen, as he does each day at first light, mixing potions from herbs and the other plants he grows and gathers in the foothills. He's always experimenting, sometimes paying the price of his research, as happened when he got stuck as a mouse. He's still trying to figure out how to change Ramón back from a raven so Feather can get her purse returned, which she left in his taxi. The taxi seems to have been transformed into something also. Maybe a watermelon.

She dresses quickly, putting on a pair of tie-dyed trousers that belong to Don Miguel—they look like something from the Arabian Knights—and a billowing, white pirate shirt. She leaves a note for him, letting him know where she's going. Then she climbs onto his horse and lets the animal show her the way to San Miguel. It's nighttime before she arrives on the outskirts of town, her bottom numb and blistered, the insides of her legs rubbed raw.

After tying up the horse and hobbling up the stairs, she reaches their room. The door is unlocked, and she's greeted by chickens pecking at grain on the floor and squawking, a parrot screeching, an iguana perched on the TV, several tarantulas crawling across the ceiling, a calf bawling in the bathtub, four kittens meowing from a basket in the bathroom sink, a scrawny dog sprawled on the bed and chewing on his fleas, and a young coyote cowering under a chair.

Bubbles sits at the center of this scene, knitting socks, oblivious to what's going on around her. Mouth open, eyes fixed on the lit TV screen, she moves her head from side to side, trying to keep track of the characters. She's found a Mexican version of *The Young and the Restless*, dubbed in English, and though she can't always understand what the actors are saying, she can watch their actions and

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make up her own dialogue. Intent on the program, she doesn't notice Feather's arrival.

She hugs Bubbles tightly and starts to cry. "You scared the hell out of me," Feather says. "I thought you were kidnapped. What a relief to see you—alive!"

"You know they can't kill an old bird like me," Bubbles says, cackling, the parrot repeating what she says. "Where were *you* all this time? I almost called the cops, but Granda would have none of it. 'Those miserable beggars,' he said. 'They'll just rob you blind.'"

Feather listens while her mother tells of her adventures as Eineeuq. She seems different. Her voice is that of a much younger woman—full, resonant, vibrant. Her blue eyes aren't glazed over with cataracts as with some older people but look bright—alive. It's as if Feather is finally seeing Bubbles fully, not through the prism of her discontent.

She remembers the friends and neighbors that attended her mother's ninetieth birthday party acting as if Bubbles had accomplished something great just because she could still enjoy life. A piper played songs that Bubbles had sang and danced to as a young woman. Inspired, she'd jumped up, prancing in front of the group, doing a modified sword dance and Highland fling, trying to get everyone to join her. Most were too inhibited. They could only stare, trying to fathom her secret—her *joie de vivre*.

Feather feels she's truly seeing her mother for the first time. And she's amazed, too. "Jeez, Mum, where did all these animals come from? It's a bloody zoo in here."

"Oh, you know Granny. She's still saving animals. She's always coming home with a stray or two."

A chicken nips at Feather's bare toes. She squeals. The parrot squeals, too. Bubbles looks around. "Where'd that pig come from? What in the dickens is going on? Granny'll have sheep in here next."

"It wasn't a pig, it was me squealing. The parrot imitated me."

"That's okay, dear. You don't have to apologize."

Feather stands there, trying to figure out what just took place between herself and her mother. Maybe she's still high on Don Miguel. Or maybe her mother has been imbibing ale.

A news announcer flashes on the screen: "Some elders from a village near San Miguel have returned the sculpture that recently disappeared under mysterious circumstances from The National Museum of Anthropology. The elders think the rain goddess Eineeug gave birth to it. The statue dropped from her womb. The officials have ended their investigation, and the villagers have received the fifty thousand dollar reward."

Feather throws up her arms. "Did you hear that, Mamacita? The sculpture you stole has been found. What did you do with it?"

Bubbles glares at her. "They took it from me. They're the thieves."

"Who are they?"

"The people who took me to the fiesta. They were just after the statue. That's all. They got it."

"But *you* stole it from The National Museum of Anthropology."

Bubbles shakes her head violently. "I never stole anything. It was sitting there in that museum. It didn't have any price tag on it or anything. So I put it in my purse. I wanted a little keepsake of Mexico. Something to remember my mother by. A souvenir."

"They don't put price tags on things in museums. They're not for sale. You could have been thrown in the cooler. You want to die in a Mexican jail?"

Bubbles resumes her knitting. "I'm not going to die. I told you, I've found the fountain of youth. I just need someone to help me bottle it. I've got a real gold mine here."

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

Feather spends the next few days making arrangements to stay on in the area. She rents a house on the outskirts of San Miguel till the end of the year, and her family moves into it, along with all the animals. The sun has turned the five of them brown, and at times it's hard to tell them apart from the natives.

Annie spends her time cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, knitting, and caring for their growing collection of creatures, including rabbits and a goat. For her, it's better than being in heaven. A donkey came with the place, and she rides it into town every day to the mercado and El Chorro, weaving in and out of the crowds of people, her other animals trailing behind. She tosses them bits of food and grain, clucking like a mother hen herself, knitting needles clicking all the while. The rainbow colored blanket she's been working on is now finished and covers the donkey's back. She's started on another, with plans to eventually make blankets for all the donkeys in Mexico. The one she's working on trails behind her, picking up any stray that happens along.

The expatriate artist community has embraced Heather and claimed her as one of their own. She spends her days drifting from café to café, reading palms and tea leaves and cards. She makes a nice living from it, enough to pay for new clothes and beer, chatting up everyone she sees.

Malcolm has started painting a mural on a building in downtown San Miguel, some of the local men helping him. They've been discussing

the painting late into the night over beer—what story it should portray. Malcolm wants Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora MacDonald in it, the woman who saved Charlie's life by helping him escape the English.

One man protests. "Hell, why put gringos in our mural?"

"Very good question, sir," Malcolm says. "Charlie wanted to claim his rightful place, just as you do, and the powers that be wouldn't let him. He had the real claim to the throne. Dame Flora was always very sympathetic to the downtrodden and risked her life for his. I want to make them honorary Mexicans. We'll show them meeting with the early people of this land. Extending their hands in welcome."

After a lengthy discussion, they all agree on what the mural should include and begin working on it.

Bubbles tries to talk Feather into helping her bottle the water and sell it, but she can't tear Feather away from the sculpture she's making. She's been taking bits of wool and toilet paper and cloth with her. A regular scavenger. "What in the devil can you make with toilet paper?" Bubbles says.

Feather says, "It's a surprise. I'll unveil it on Día de los Muertos."

Bubbles huffs, "As if the dead give a damn for art. You act like some great artist, the way you're carrying on. I could have been one myself. I've made things all my life. Stuffed animals, bread—it's no different from making sculptures, clothes. And don't forget those dolls I stitched together for years. I supported myself that way after I left Manny."

"I know, Mum, I know!" And she runs off, leaving her mother talking to herself.

People couldn't keep their hands off Bubbles' dolls when they saw them. If she'd been discovered, the dolls could've made her famous. Her own designs, too. Upside-down dolls they were called. She made them out of fabric, something like Feather's doing now. One end of the doll was a little white girl, the other a little dark-skinned girl. Both had braids that she made out of heavy wool. The white girl's was an egg yolk yellow, the dark one's black as wet earth. Both shared the same

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gingham skirt, but the pattern and background color was different, depending on which doll you were viewing.

Bubbles had a lot of fun with those dolls. Trimming the skirt with lace. Stitching in long eyelashes. Painting their lips. And no one taught her how to do these things. She just knew. It came naturally to her. Feather must get it from her mother.

Now that her granny has taken over the knitting needles and wool, when she isn't at La Cueva, Bubbles has started sewing again to pass the time. She feels more suited to sewing than knitting. She carries the patterns for things around in her head, just waiting to be cut out.

She's making her mother, Feather, and herself nice new outfits for the Día de los Muertos festival. Feather has told her that the women all wear new clothes then, and Bubbles isn't going to be upstaged. Of course, her granny wouldn't wear anything new. She's too set in her ways. But Bubbles wants to be modern and up-to-date.

Feather spends most of her time working on her new sculpture, making some parts of it at the Instituto. The rest of the time she works at Don Miguel's village where the piece will be unveiled.

It makes Bubbles mad that Feather's met someone she's bonkers over but Bubbles hasn't connected with a man yet. She's been thinking more and more of Victor. Maybe she's been too hasty writing him off.

The house they've rented has never been so clean. Annie and Heather have been scrubbing tiles and dusting surfaces and washing everything in sight for days, getting the place in order, just as other women are doing all throughout Mexico, preparing for Día de los Muertos on November first and second. A buzz fills the air, like an electrical charge, in anticipation of the fiesta.

Annie has been baking, making scones and tasty tarts, some sweet, filled with jams and jellies, the others like meat pies she made for years in Scotland. She's been hanging out with the women at El Chorro and has learned how to make death bread, a kind of wheaten bread without fat, sugar, or salt, baked for this day only, shaped like a rabbit, a bird, a

pig, a chicken—any kind of animal. It's to be fed to the dead ancestors. Annie makes plenty, not wanting anyone to go hungry.

Heather has been making skeletons and rows of paper funeral processions with coffins, cutting them out of paper, burning some around the edges with her cigarette. She likes the smell of burning paper and the look it gives the cutouts—as if they've survived some devastation. They hang from doorways and ceilings, roused with each breeze that drifts through the place.

She also forms paper puppets of skeletons and walks around, singing old Gaelic songs, a puppet in each hand, making legs wobble and dance and arms swing and wave. Bubbles looks at them enviously. She's forgotten that her mother has a knack for such things. She remembers sitting in the kitchen with her in Skye, cutting figures out of cookie dough or paper that they dyed different colors.

A similar scene is being repeated all over Mexico in preparation for Día de los Muertos. New dresses and ribbons and shoes appear in the poorest huts. So does new crockery of all kinds, fine parti-colored mats, little baskets of palm leaves, and bright colored schikales—the fruit of the *crescentia alata*. The celebration blends the old and new religion, past and present.



Floating in on the wings of love, Feather stops by during the morning of October thirty-first, planning to join the family later that day for a special dinner. Annie looks up from her baking and says, "You look like the cat that's swallowed the mouse."

"I think it's the other way around, but please, don't mention mice to me, Granny. They give me hives. Jeez, this place smells great. You're cooking up a storm."

Flour dust covers Annie and the table where she's working, giving her a ghostly hue. She's wearing her usual faded housedress, a no-frills white apron protecting it. "Aye. We Scots have been celebrating All

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Saints' Day for longer than I can remember. All Hallow's Eve is the night before All Saints' Day in Scotland, you know?"

"I remember reading that somewhere."

"Well, you can thank your Celtic ancestors for Halloween. November first was the beginning of winter and the Celtic New Year. It gets dark early in Scotland. Not much daylight in the winter months." She frowns, remembering those dark and gloomy winter days, giving the dough an extra punch.

"Wow! I didn't know November first is the Celtic New Year."

"Aye, Halloween marks the season of decreasing sunlight. We Scots lit bonfires in protest. We also made offerings of dainty foods and sweets to witches and other evil spirits. They travel the earth on this evening, playing tricks on us. Then we all disguised ourselves as one of the roaming spirits so we'd seem like one of them and not be attacked by the demons." She looks over her shoulder, as if expecting a roving spirit to land on her at any moment.

"Makes sense."

"Aye, it does. You know the old saying, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." Annie takes her sharp knife and deftly cuts out animal shapes from the death bread, turning her attention fully to her cooking. She's also learned how to make the special dishes for this Mexican celebration—sweet maize porridge, stewed chickens, tamales, and little tortillas. She shuffles pots around, darting back and forth between table and stove, cats and dogs and chickens under foot. "Away with you now, I'm cooking!" She shoos them out the door, slamming it after them.



Every room has been made orderly, except for Bubbles'. She's been working steadily in her spare time (sometimes during the night, her need for sleep lessening with each passing year) on the old sewing machine Feather dug up for her in town. Her mouth filled with straight pins, and her feet working the treadle, Bubbles cuts and sews, a flurry of

motion and industry. Paper patterns she's clipped out and discarded fly around the room. Bits of fabric pile up on all available surfaces. A stack of women's magazines she's used for inspiration are piled haphazardly on a bureau, ready to scatter onto the floor with the slightest motion.

She had to rip out seams a few times when she discovered she attached the sleeves from Feather's dress to her mother's, or sewed up the neck openings, or cut out the wrong pattern. But she's getting back into the swing of it now and has almost finished. Just some final touches are left.

She keeps the door locked, not wanting anyone to see *her* creations. If Feather can be secretive and hide her sculpture from them all, to be unveiled on November second, then Bubbles can conceal her work, too.

She has also concealed something else. Three weeks earlier, Bubbles received a phone call from Victor. She nearly fell off her chair when he told her he'd booked into Posada de Las Monjas, their old digs. "You're here?" she screeched, unbelieving, thinking he was calling from Calgary.

"I told you vonce I vas a traveling man. Here I am, Victor Frank, at your service."

The first time she sees him, she feels dizzy as a teenager and has to hold onto his arm so she doesn't keel over. Did she take her blood pressure pill that morning? If she doesn't take it regularly, she gets dizzy spells. He bends down and gives her a big hug and kiss, smack on the lips. She grabs hold of his lapels, afraid she'll collapse from bliss, startled to meet his gray eyes. He's real! He's really there!

"You look vonderful, Bubbles. Your skin's brown. What's happened to you?"

She just gives him her Mona Lisa smile. Later, she takes him to La Cueva, explaining its rejuvenating powers.

She doesn't want any competition, so she's kept Victor to herself all this time. Heather is quite a looker, and so is Feather. It pays to be

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careful. It's hard for Bubbles to keep a secret, but she wants to make sure Victor is her man before introducing him to the family.

Now when the young men from the village come each day in their car to transport her to La Cueva, or wherever else she wants to go, they stop at the hotel and pick up Victor, too. She's taken him into the cave and shown him the water she wants to bottle that's gushing from the springs. He's agreed to become her business partner, having the necessary savvy to handle the marketing part of the deal. After traveling the world, he knows about these things. But she is the mastermind.

Poetry has started to flow from her like water. Whenever she picks up a pen, lines drip from it, Victor the source of her inspiration.

*My heart is in the Highlands,
My feet roam all the glens,
But you're by far the fairest
Of all my country's men.*

*I've waited for a lifetime
For someone just like you,
A man with dark and curly hair
Whose heart is mine and true.*

Of course, he doesn't have dark hair any longer, or many curls left—his hair is now gray and thinning rapidly. But he showed her a picture of himself when he was a young man. The dark curls tumbled over his forehead like some Greek god's. He was a good-looking man. She's added that picture to the collection she keeps in her bra, and she's given him one of herself when she was in her early twenties, slim and demure and a looker. She's even shown him her poetry. He smiled fondly, patting her arm and telling her, "It's very good. You should publish it."

She feels like a tree in spring and imagines herself sprouting flowering branches—a plum tree, blossoms breaking out all over. She's

never felt so alive, so loved. On top of the world. And imagine, Victor came all the way to Mexico to see her.

It's been hard to restrain herself at times. She's been getting the urge for something more than hugs and kisses, those long Mexican siestas the perfect time to give in to her awakening fires. But she doesn't want to rush into anything. Still, she can't wait too long at her age. Each day counts.

Bubbles has another secret. She's been playing the Mexican lottery. She doesn't like it as much as scratchies. There are no images to stimulate her imagination, and no satisfaction when the crowns or cowboys line up. But she uses the same principle to win: you have to put out to get anything back. She's been putting out, and she's been having a real winning streak, the numbers all coming in her direction. She hides her winnings in her bra and is making plans on how to spend it. A Ford Bronco still sounds good to her, and she has the money to buy one now herself. She also wants to travel. To Budapest. To Paris. To Rome. And, of course, to her homeland—Skye.

Then there are all the poor people in Mexico. She feels sorry for them and wants to share her wealth, though they did pretty well from her already, getting the reward for the sculpture she pinched. Everything's coming her way. She plans to live till at least a hundred twenty-six.



At seven p.m. on October thirty-first, they all gather around the rectangular plank table in the kitchen. Bubbles has unveiled Victor, and he looms over all of them. An angular, lanky man, he looks embarrassed about his size, folding back into himself like a lawn chair, his trousers too short, just barely reaching his ankles. Bubbles stands next to him, the top of her white head barely reaching his chest. She looks up at him adoringly, bursting out of the blue dress she bought for her ninetieth birthday party, having put on a few pounds since then.

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Feather introduces Don Miguel, his muslin kilt showing off his knees and calves. He looks like one of the primitive statues in the anthropology museum in Mexico. Ill at ease, he shuffles his sandaled feet and glances around the room, which for once is free of animals. He brushes his ear with one hand, and a rose appears out of nowhere that he drops, hiding it under his foot.

Malcolm—who has put on his dress kilt for the occasion (a meeting with his ancestors), complete with sporran and a dirk tucked into the knee-high socks that Annie has knit him—shakes Don Miguel's hand. Don Miguel's palm releases an egg that breaks and splatters. He apologizes, untying the hankie wrapped around his forehead and moping up albumen from Malcolm's hand and kilt. Malcolm leans over conspiratorially, holding the back of his hand up to his mouth in a stage whisper, "r's" rolling like rivers.

"Your legs are almost as good as mine, sir."

If Don Miguel had been light-skinned, you would have seen him blush. But he responds, "Does the kilt make me an honorary Scot?"

"Aye, and me an honorary Mexican."

Everyone laughs, the humor easing the tension of meeting new people. Don Miguel gets particularly flustered with gringos, his nervousness setting off effects he usually can control, like the erection that's slowly lifting his kilt—a wrap-around skirt called a *sapeta*. He drops into the nearest chair and grabs Feather's hand, pulling her down next to him.

Heather's dinner partner is one of the life-sized skeleton puppets she's made, dressed in white pants with a short white jacket, a rainbow colored serape over his shoulder, a white hat shading his bony face.

Malcolm reaches over to shake the skeleton's hand and nods at his daughter.

"You've a right smart lad, there, Heather. He'll keep you on your toes."

Heather just smiles mysteriously and drags on the cigarette extending from her long gold cigarette holder, waving it around like a

baton while she guides her dinner partner to his chair. She sits down, linking arms with the skeleton.

Candlelight flickers on the tabletop amid the hibiscus and marigolds and roses. The gathered faces waver in and out of the light, the strong scent from the blooms competing with the food odors. Annie sets the food on the table, and everyone passes the dishes one to another.

Feather addresses Malcolm. "You and Don Miguel have something else in common."

"And what might that be, lass?"

"You're always talking about the Scots seeking their independence from England. The Indians are after the same thing. They want freedom to practice the old ways—pre-Hispanic."

"Aye, the Spanish were a greedy bunch, as power hungry as the English." Malcolm gets red in the face and slams the table with his fist, startling everyone. "Those English dogs destroyed the clans. They wiped out our religion, our language. They changed our dress, even our hairstyles. Our whole way of life was disrupted!" He grabs his glass of ale and downs it, wiping the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"And what of the Hungarians?" Malcolm asks Victor. "What freedom do they want?"

Victor shrugs, trying to speak around the food in his mouth. "I'm just a simple man. I don't know much about zese things." Victor wipes his mouth with a napkin. "But I talk to Canadians, and they say, 'I'm Canadian, not American. I'm different.' They don't like being overshadowed by America. So, you see, Canadians don't feel free, either."

Bubbles smiles and nods, proud of Victor, but not understanding a word that's being uttered, lost in her fantasies of white wedding dresses and a big wedding. She never had a real wedding, not the kind young girls have today. She could be a December bride.

"Then I propose a toast. To freedom!" Malcolm raises his glass of ale and tips the other raised glasses.

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“To freedom,” they all echo.

Victor clears his throat and raises his glass again. “I want to make another toast. I proposed to Bubbles last night, and she agreed to be my wife.”

Feather has been sitting there in shock, trying to get used to this new man her mother has pulled out of a magician’s hat. But marriage? And at ninety? Does he think her mother has money? Can Bubbles’ heart stand the excitement?

Feather manages a wan smile. She grabs her ale, gulping it down before raising the glass in answer to Victor’s toast, congratulating the two of them. Her mother’s done it again. She’s victorious. A modern Joan of Arc. Transcending death in her own way. Leading the battle against it.

Heather says to Annie, “Tell us the story about the Queen of the Mists again. You always told it on All Hallow’s Eve.”

“Aye. Let’s see if I can remember it.” Annie has been dishing up more food. She takes her place again at one end of the table and starts knitting. The clicking of needles mesmerizes her listeners, stitching together their disparate worlds.

“It was back in ancient times, when the Celts lived in Scotland. There were lots of them, you know? A young hunter-warrior named Aras—a very handsome lad, worthy of any mother’s love—had left his hunting party behind him, venturing much farther than usual. He hoped to find a herd of deer.

“Aras excelled at everything and was envied by all for his god-like strength, his skill as a hunter, and his prize-winning poetry.

“But he was so intent on looking for deer, he hadn’t paid attention to where he was going. All at once, he found himself on the shores of an unfamiliar loch where heather and lavender grew, a mist almost hiding it from view.” Annie’s voice lowers to a whisper and becomes very dramatic.

“Suddenly, the mist parted, and a woman rider galloped toward him on a white horse, gliding over the water’s surface. Her long golden hair

fanned out, leaving a trail behind her. A silver crown concealed her brow. Aras had never seen a woman so beautiful. Though small boned and fragile-looking, she seemed larger than life, draped in a dark-red silk mantle, the heavenly constellations embedded in the material.

“Drawing closer to Aras, she reined in the horse, easily passing from water to land. He was struck dumb and just stood there, frozen, staring, his bow and arrow drawn.” Annie stops and takes a bite of food. Then she continues.

“‘Good sir,’ the woman said, ‘don’t mistake me for a deer.’

“Aras apologized, his bow and arrow clattering to the ground. The horsewoman said, ‘My name is Miam of the Golden Hair. For seven years and seven days, I’ve been searching for you. I first saw you when out riding with my father, the king, and I fell in love with your strong limbs, your singing voice, and your wonderful poetry. My father has now given me permission to make myself visible to you and ask you to marry me. Will you come with me to my father’s country?’”

Getting into it now, Annie almost looks like Miam. Feather can picture her once also having long golden hair.

“‘In the Land of the Young, Tír na nÓg, my father’s kingdom, you’ll have anything you could want—horses faster than the wind, hounds faster than the horses. You’ll have warriors to serve you and huntsmen. Each night, hundreds of maidens will sing you to sleep in my arms. The Land of the Young shall be your kingdom, and I shall be your loving queen.’”

Bubbles looks up at Victor. She could be *his* queen.

“Recovering his voice, Aras stutters, ‘My lady, I am honored. I accept your proposal and will go anywhere with you.’

“Miam extends her hand, and Aras climbs onto the white horse, sitting behind her, arms around her waist. The bells in the horse’s mane jingled as they rode away into their new life together.

“All was as she had described it and more. He had never lived in such luxury or in a land more beautiful. Their palace was filled with fine art, furniture, tapestries, and furs. From it, Aras could see forests, oceans,

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sprawling hills covered with orchards and heather, and mountains with rivers cascading down. Anything he desired, he received. The only things lost to him were his homeland, family, and friends.

“He did wonder, though, as you might also wonder, why old people lived in the Land of the Young. He asked one of his elderly servants, ‘Why are there old people here?’

“She said, ‘We were much older when we came here, and since that day, we have never aged. The children were once old but became young also.’

“Aras never stopped marveling at all the wonders he saw in this new land. Still, he wasn’t completely satisfied. He realized what it was he missed—time. Time never passed in his kingdom.

“One day, Miam asked Aras why he seemed so gloomy. He said, ‘I miss my family and my companions.’ Not wanting to deny him anything, she agreed to let him return to his homeland once more on All Hallow’s Eve, the one time when they could make the crossing from the Land of the Young. But she warned him not to dismount and to return before midnight. If his foot ever touched the earth there, he could not return to the Land of the Young.

“Excited about seeing his loved ones again, he flew over the land and then the water on his faithful black stallion, coming at last to his former place. But nothing looked the same as when he left. Houses stood where once there were trees. New villages had popped up. And when he stopped people, mentioning his family name, no one knew them. He called out his friends’ names, his parents’, his dogs’. No response.

“Brokenhearted, he turned around, ready to return to his kingdom. But he turned his horse too sharply. It stumbled, throwing him to the ground. Immediately, Aras began to change. His clothing turned to dust, and his hair to white powder. All his centuries in the Land of the Young amassed in that moment, and he became a man of several hundred years, a pile of dust, leaving Miam to mourn endlessly, forever yearning to be reunited with her husband.”

Not a dry eye in the house, they're all sniffing and wiping away tears.

"Every All Hallow's Eve, the Queen of the Mists sets out on her white horse to search for Aras. To this day, some people still see her, galloping across the glens.

"Ever since, the veil between the worlds lifts on All Hallow's Eve so the dead and the living can mingle, and our own Celtic past can live on in our hearts."

They all sit silently for a few minutes after Annie finishes her story, lost in thought. Then Malcolm clears his throat and raises his glass. "It's time to invite our dead ancestors to come and join us. Let's begin our night-long vigil for the dead."



On November first, Feather, Bubbles, and Heather had followed the Mexican tradition and helped Annie prepare a special meal for the dead that they left out before going to bed. Earlier in the day, Bubbles had gone through a minor crisis. She lost her false teeth, both sets, and refused to let any of the men see her until she found them, which she did later on, inside her curler bag.

Annie stayed up all night, finishing her last garment. Bubbles, Feather, and Malcolm put the finishing touches on their creations, ready for viewing on November 2.

In the night, the living dreamed of the departed—uncles and aunts, nieces and cousins, parents and grandparents. The rooms fairly burst with the assembled throng, holding a ceilidh, dancing to fiddle music and singing the old songs. Annie and Malcolm and Heather said their goodbyes in Gaelic, "Beannachd Leibh," and drifted over the Sierra Madres toward Skye.



Feather awakens with the words from the songs and the music on her lips.

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*Oh, where, and oh, where is your Highland laddie gone?
Oh, where, and oh, where is your Highland laddie gone?
He's gone to fight the foe for King George upon the throne,
And it's oh, in my heart, I wish him safe at home.*

The house seems strangely quiet. No cooking smells come from the kitchen. Malcolm's voice can't be heard singing in the shower. Heather's incessant chatter has been silenced.

Feather gets up first, leaving Don Miguel sleeping, and creeps into the kitchen. All the animals are there, finishing up the banquet left out for the dead, licking the plates clean.

Feather shoos them outside, hearing some echo of Annie in her voice, before searching the house for the others. The bedrooms they used only the day before are empty. A few clothes remain scattered about—a kilt, a sporran, an apron. Otherwise, it's as if they never existed. Has she only imagined all this? An artist's wild invention?

Feather leaves her mother sleeping, not wanting to upset her just yet, and goes back to her room, fighting the tears. This was supposed to be a day of celebration.

Don Miguel opens his eyes, yawning and stretching. He gropes under the pillow and pulls out her purse, the one that had disappeared along with Ramón, as well as a sparrow. "My gift for you, señora, on this special day."

She throws herself on the bed and bursts into tears. Don Miguel takes her in his arms and strokes her back, a puzzled expression on his face. "My gifts make you cry? I thought you'd be happy to have your purse back, and you said you love birds. You always sing, 'I wish I were a tiny sparrow, and I had wings so I could fly. I'd fly away to my one true lover, and there I'd stay until I die.'"

"They're gone! Annie, Malcolm, and Heather are gone. Flown the coop." And she wails even louder.

"There, there. Is natural. This is Meh-he-co. Death lives with us every moment—in our music, in our poetry, in our fiestas. In our games, our

loves, our thoughts. Everything. Death is everywhere. You've seen it yourself. We're fascinated by death."

Feather sits up, wearing a pair of slippers her mother has made her and a lacy nightgown she gave her for Christmas the previous year. "Well, I'm not fascinated by death. I'm Can-*eh*-dian. We get enough of death during our bitter winters. Everything konks out. Kaput! Except the fir trees, and they just stay around because they have nowhere else to go. You don't know what it's like. The ground freezes over. Nothing grows. It's the pits. You don't have to deal with that here."

"But life returns in the spring?"

"I've heard that stuff before, resurrection and all that. Of course, things start growing again in the spring. But it's all new life. Bunnies and baby lambs and chicks. Not the dead. They don't come back."

"We don't think of it like that. Leaving this life isn't so bad in our eyes. We don't crave for the goods we're leaving, and we don't worry about those who survive us. They still have the fertile earth and the endless sky."

Feather crosses her arms in front of her chest, feeling suddenly very young and very small and very pissed off, remembering all the losses she's had in her life. "That's all very well for you to say, but it's only words. Death is reality. It hurts. It takes away!"

"No, no, no. Death isn't just a black, dismal specter. That's why we celebrate the dead on this day every year—and have for centuries. It's a time of reunion with returning souls—it's not somber. The other world is much like this one. The worlds of the living and the dead are fluid, constantly interacting."

"Okay, big shot, so what's happened to my grandmother and great-grandparents? Was all this just magic? Sleight of hand? More of your tricks?"

"No tricks. It's Meh-he—"

"-co! I know, I know."

"No, you don't know. You're not listening to me. The real and the magical have always existed for us at the same time. Death's a cycle

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in constant movement—life is extended toward death and vice versa. Death becomes the essence of life itself. Life arises out of death.”

Feather looks thoughtful, a frown creasing her forehead. “Well, I guess if orgasm’s a little death, as the French claim, then maybe death’s a major orgasm, and we get a taste of it every time we make love. I can see death be-coming the essence of life then.”

“Good one! See, you’re be-coming more Mexican every second.”

Her mother calls out from the other room. “Feather, when’s the party begin? I don’t want to be late.”



The plan was to start out in San Miguel, so they can see Malcolm’s mural first, unless it’s also vamoosed. And then Feather will drive them to Don Miguel’s village to join in the celebrations there and to unveil her sculpture. But first Bubbles wants to show Feather the outfits she’s made for them.

“Look,” she says, “I made identical dresses—one for you, one for me, and one for mother.”

Feather doesn’t know a gentle way to tell Bubbles what’s happened, so she just blurts out, “You can cancel the one for your mother. She’s gone. They’re all gone.”

Bubbles opens the closet door and reaches inside. “Never mind. They’ll be back. They’re the darnedest people, always on the go.”

“You don’t get it, Mum. They won’t be back.”

“Oh, I know them better than you do. You never know when they’ll turn up. Never mind. I’ll just hang on to Mother’s outfit till she returns.”

“Have it your way.”

She hands Feather a hanger with a skirt and top—a plaid, form-fitting peasant blouse that scoops down in the front and back, reminiscent of the one the widow wore in Skye. The skirt is gold lamé. “Look, dear, you can hold up the hem of the skirt at each side, and you’ll look like a butterfly.” And she demonstrates, slipping on her skirt, twirling slowly.

"It's just great—really unique. We'll be twins."

"Well, we would've been triplets if Mother hadn't left. She's always running off like that. You'd think she'd know better by now."

"Yeah, you'd think so."

An hour later, mother and daughter are wearing their new outfits. Bubbles insisted that they each tie a red scarf around their hips to accent them. They've picked up Victor (during the ride, Bubbles keeps them entertained by singing in Gaelic some of the old songs her granny had taught her), and the four of them pull up in front of the building where Malcolm painted his mural. A crowd has gathered already, and people are pointing and exclaiming, thinking they recognize themselves in the painting.

Victor helps Bubbles out of the Toyota that Feather picked up for a song when she decided to stay on indefinitely. She's needed it to go back and forth to Don Miguel's village. He might prefer to rough it, but Feather's still healing from her horseback ride. Bubbles leans on Victor's arm and looks up into his face adoringly.

"Look, Mum, you're in the mural. And there's Annie. She's Dame Flora, and Malcolm's Bonnie Prince Charlie—as a young man. Look, he's got hair! And he's as tall as Flora. How sweet. Charlie's about to kiss Flora's hand. Annie would never let him do that. Oh my, Granny is there, too. Jeez, he's put the whole damn family in it. Isn't that your uncle Callum? And look, there's Ian."

Bubbles stares, her mouth open. She pops a mint in it. They always soothe her. Her granda's even included the girl in yellow, only now it's clear what's in her hand. She's carrying a flower—a bluebell of Scotland. No wonder Bubbles is always pinching flowers. That girl must have stolen hers, too, and tried to hide it.

Malcolm's painted from memory everyone he could think of, dressed as peasants, all carrying guns, and he's given them the same skin color as the Indians, except for himself and Flora and the girl. By including guns, Malcolm must have fooled his helpers into thinking he was painting a revolutionary Mexican mural.

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“Okay, Mum. Let’s go. We can come back and see this later. We need to be at Don Miguel’s village to unveil my sculpture. I think you’ll like it.”



People from surrounding villages have walked for hours to join the festivities. Women wear brightly colored ribbons in their hair. Both men and women have tied vivid bandanas around their hips and sashes around their waists. Lace trims women’s skirts and aprons. The men’s pant legs are embroidered with flower and bird shapes, and multicolored serapes drape over their shoulders. Some of the younger girls wear lacy white dresses. Everyone carries flowers and food.

Several villagers have already started dancing in the streets. The musicians—a fiddler, guitarist, and accordionist—are dressed as skeletons. The minute Bubbles steps out of the car, her hips start swaying. Her feet catch the rhythms and take her into the midst of the dancers. A man dressed as a skeleton whirls her around the square. He returns her to where Feather and the others are standing, waiting for the unveiling of Feather’s sculpture to begin. Draped from view, it stands in the center of the plaza.

The music stops, and Bubbles grabs Feather’s arm. She says, “Someone’s peeing. Can’t you hear it?”

“Shh, Mum. No one’s peeing.”

“Listen, it’s plain as day.”

Bubbles is right, as usual, only it isn’t peeing she’s hearing. Feather grabs the end of a rope holding the sculpture covering in place and pulls it. First, Bubbles’ head comes into view, the V of vexation clearly marked between her brows. Then her naked torso, opulent breasts meeting her round belly, water gushing out of the erect nipples. And, finally, the other V appears, demurely sculpted, framed by Bubbles’ shapely thighs. Feather hasn’t forgotten the mouse birthmark on her side.

Standing over ten feet tall and set on a six-foot base, the statue surveys the village and surrounding countryside.

Everyone gasps at the full effect and shouts, “Eineeug, Eineeug! She live here now! Forever! We never go hungry again!”

A cheer goes up, and once again Bubbles is flying through the air, carried aloft in the arms of the men. She doesn’t quite understand how she’s connected with food, but she’s happy to hear that these people will be fed. Her heart breaks to think of anyone going hungry. And she’s proud of Feather. That girl finally got it dead on. She’s an artist, all right.

Feather has assembled the sculpture—made of ceramics—piece by piece, firing it in a kiln Don Miguel made for her, the glaze a subtle earth tone. She used toilet paper and bits of fabric to construct the model for it, and the center of the piece is hollow, leaving space for a water pump, located near the heart chakra, so the water will endlessly circulate until they need to replace the pump.



As night falls, they all move in procession from the square to the cemetery. Bubbles leads the way, holding on to Victor’s arm. He carries a pail of water from her fountain. They find themselves walking on the last garment Annie had knitted, mysteriously appearing here now, carpeting the path and cushioning their footsteps. Everyone else carries torches, lanterns, and flowers.

As they pass among the graves, the children strew them with flowers. Bubbles dips her fingers into the water and sprinkles it about, some of it landing on the ground, some on the people. No one minds. The women light candles, long tapers that they stick into the ground, creating a magical setting, welcoming the dead. All is hushed. Grasshoppers chirp. Candlelight glints off Bubbles’ two gold butterfly barrettes, clasping her halo of white hair.

F L I N G !

Later, rockets will flare, dancing will resume, and the merrymaking will continue into the night. Laughter and children's voices will float above them all, Bubbles' the loudest.

But for the moment, all is quiet. Feather feels she, too, has found the fountain of youth. She'll never be the same again.

Linking arms, Feather and Bubbles gaze at the new moon making its way into the sky, the glittering constellations surrounding it. Bubbles blurts out, "Do you think the stars are where the dead go?"

"Maybe, Mum."

The two of them know they'll see everyone again, if not in the flesh, then their souls hovering as a hummingbird, or fluttering as a butterfly, or floating above the earth as clouds.

THE END

ABOUT LILY IONA MACKENZIE



Lily Iona MacKenzie sprouted on the Canadian prairies under cumulous clouds that bloomed everywhere in Alberta's big sky. They were her first creative writing instructors, scudding across the heavenly blue, constantly changing shape: one minute an elephant, bruised and brooding. The next morphing into a rabbit or a castle. As an adult, Lily continues to seek instruction about fiction from clouds. Just as they provide the earth with much-needed water, she believes that stories have a similar function, preparing the mind to receive new ideas. Magical realism pulses at the heart of her narratives, her work celebrating the imagination.

A high school dropout and a mother at 17, over the years, Lily has supported herself as a stock girl in the Hudson's Bay Company, as a long distance operator for the former Alberta Government Telephones, and as a secretary (Bechtel Corp sponsored her into the States where she now lives). She also was a cocktail waitress at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, briefly broke into the male-dominated world of the docks as a longshoreman (and almost got her legs broken), founded and managed a homeless shelter in Marin County, and eventually earned two Master's degrees (one in English with an emphasis on Creative writing and one in the Humanities).

She has published reviews, interviews, short fiction, poetry, travel pieces, essays, and memoir in over 140 American and Canadian venues. She also teaches writing at the University of San Francisco, paints, and does collage.



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appreciate it!

Thanks, Lily