**THE BLESSING**

The priest from St. Catherine’s sprinkled holy water over Hermann’s head and started the rosary. *Who are all these people?* Hermann wondered, staring out at the crowd clustered around his hospital bed. He recognized some of the faces, Evelyn, of course, his wife, standing to his right, gripping a shredded Kleenex. On his left, Raul, his only son, just off the plane from Paris. Everyone else seemed familiar but he couldn’t remember their names.

When the priest finished, Hermann saw his mother standing in the doorway behind the crowd. She was wearing her brown plaid coat and a Dodger beanie, holding the old red Samsonite in one hand. She looked good, much younger than the last time he saw her, in a casket at her funeral four years ago last April. She made her way towards his bed and he realized she wasn’t using her walker.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said.

“Why are you wearing a coat?” he asked. “Isn’t it still August?”

“We’re going on a trip.”

Hermann shook his head. “I’m scheduled for heart surgery in a few minutes.”

“Who you talking to, Pops?” Raul asked.

“Your Nana,” he said.

Raul raised both eyebrows.

“It’s the medication,” Evelyn said. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

Hermann ignored her. “How’s Paris?” he asked. “How’s cooking school?”

“It’s great.” Raul took his hand. “Sorry I’ve been gone so much.”

“I’m proud of you, *mijo*. When am I going to meet your girlfriend?”

“She’s downstairs.” Raul leaned over and whispered. “She’s a little bit afraid of Mom.”

Hermann laughed. “Is she pretty?”

“She’s beautiful.”

“As long as you’re happy. That’s what’s important.”

“I will be, Pops, once you get through this surgery.”

A nurse bustled into the room, checked the IV fluids, felt his pulse, told them that the orderlies were on their way and everyone was going to have to clear out of the room.

Hermann couldn’t remember what it was he wanted to say.

“Thank you,” is all he could come up with.

His eyes blinked open. His mother stood next to him, her coat unbuttoned. She was still wearing the beanie. Her suitcase waited by the door.

“I saw Raul’s girlfriends in the lobby,” she said. “She’s a redhead.”

“Oh. Evelyn won’t like that. She thinks redheads are bad luck.”

His mother’s lips tightened. “Evelyn and her superstitions. She doesn’t think anyone’s good enough for Raul. You never should have married her.”

“We had some good years together. You never really gave her a chance.”

“Mr. Melendez?” The nurse was there. “He’s not awake yet,” she said. “But you can come in for a minute.”

“I’m awake,” Hermann said, but the nurse didn’t hear him.

“I love you, Pops,” Raul said.

“Where’s the girlfriend?” he asked.

Raul leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“It might be a few more hours,” the nurse said.

“Okay,” Raul said. He walked out, his shoulders slumped.

“I guess he didn’t hear me either,” Hermann said.

“You ready?” His mother buttoned her coat and adjusted her beanie in the reflection of the computer screen.

“I’m worried about Raul. I’d like to see him more settled.”

“Let him be. We have to go.”

She took his hand and pulled him up to sitting. He looked into her eyes. They were so peaceful, the worry lines around her eyes erased, the gold flecks in her iris shone. Her grip was firm and he suddenly felt stronger too. He rose. His body was still tethered to all of the medical equipment surrounding the bed but he was free. He stood, not even embarrassed about the thin nightgown wide open in the back, showing off his bony ass. He took his mother’s hand and picked up the suitcase.

They glided out into the hallway together, past the nurses’ station, crowded because it was time for the shift change, past a woman playing a harp, a nice surprise since he’d assumed the music was recorded, past the other patients' rooms, doors open slightly, revealing other people’s troubles.

The waiting room was next to the elevator and full of his family. Lovely Evelyn, surrounded by their four beautiful daughters. The sons-in-law, sturdy and handsome, the ten good looking grandkids, draped around the room, leaning in to each other, watching television, clicking on their little phones. Raul, with his head in his hands, sitting next to a tall redheaded woman. The redhead glanced over at Hermann, stared for a moment, and then winked. She draped one arm around Raul’s shoulder and kissed his neck.

Evelyn clutched her hands to opposite elbows and shivered.

“You cold, Mom?” Raul asked. “You need a sweater?”

“The air-conditioning just cranked up,” his oldest daughter said.

The youngest daughter took a deep breath. “What’s that fragrance?” she asked. “It’s so sweet.”

“Like gardenias,” the second oldest daughter said. “It’s wonderful.”

And then the equipment monitors down the hall in Hermann’s room flashed and beeped, shrieking out warnings, sounding their alarms. The nurses raced towards the noise and everyone in the waiting room chased after them.

Hermann and his mother got in the elevator.

“The redhead might be trouble,” he said, as the doors closed.

“*Claro!*” she said. “But what can we do?”

“Will they be happy together?”

“Who the hell knows? Push the button, *mijo*. We don’t want to be late.”