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There are three things in nature, the Tongue, an Ecclesiastic, and a Woman, which know no moderation in goodness or vice; and when they exceed the bounds of their condition they reach the greatest heights and the lowest depths of goodness and vice. When they are governed by a good spirit, they are most excellent in virtue; but when they are governed by an evil spirit, they indulge the worst possible vices.

— *Malleus Maleficarum*

Maria lay under the bed linen to muffle the sound of her crying. She dared not wake Antonio in his crib. After crying all night for *Ama*, he'd finally fallen asleep. Rising from her bed and wiping her tears, she tiptoed to Antonio and looked at his sweet face, damp with sweat. His black hair, wavy like their mother's, brought more tears to Maria's eyes. It felt like the pit of her stomach had been hollowed out. Sometimes that emptiness was the only feeling she had. But Antonio would likely have no memory at all of their mother-that-was.

"I am thy mother now." She stooped down and kissed the boy's forehead before heading to the kitchen.

In the dark, she made out the copper pot hanging

from the ceiling beam on a rope and chain. Taking a seat on the low three-legged wooden stool, she made a fire on the compacted clay floor under the pot; a task expected of every woman-of-the-house, to make the kitchen warm and cozy before the rest of the family awoke.

Warming herself, Maria pondered the day before her. Today started their week of *auzolan*, when the nearest neighbors came over to help on the farm. She had been looking forward to this. Gloria would work beside her all day and, Maria hoped, let her talk about her mother. The girl longed to share her sorrow and anger. What had her mother done to deserve such a painful death? And what had Maria herself done that the life that now lay before her would be filled with the drudgery from which her mother had wanted so much to spare her?

She shook away the last thought, poking at the firewood with an iron rod. It was selfish to think of herself at a time like this. At least she still had life.

The squeak of the wooden floor planks from her father's room next to the kitchen announced his arrival. She stoked the fire and waited for her father's greeting.

"*In duzu lo?* Did you sleep?"

"*Bai, bai*, yes," Maria answered, still jarred by this greeting. He used to address her with the familiar, "*in dun lo?*" but since her mother's death he greeted her as he did women his own age. Women with duties heavy as his own. She knew her life had changed forever.

He nodded and sat beside Maria in his favorite wicker chair, the first he made after marrying her mother. Its seat sagged and its straps of wicker were frayed, but somehow the chair never broke.

"With Gloria you will be working today," her father began. "*Ezta?* Is that not so?"

"*Bai, bai*," Maria answered. "Yes."

"She has the *indarra* of a man."

"I know," Maria answered, wistfully. *Indarra*. Strength of body, strength of spirit. Her father admired that most in people. She hoped he would see it in her one day.

“Gloria loved your mother well, like a sister.”

“Yes, I know.” Maria almost choked at this, his first mention of her mother—that-was.

Her father pointed to the *pegarra*, the rounded ceramic pitcher sitting on top of the metal holder by the fire. “As young girls, they would meet to fetch water from the river, like you do now,” he said, his voice trailing off. “*Goiz-ean goizik*—really early in the morning. They would walk home, smiling and laughing.”

Maria looked at the fire to keep her tears from her father’s view.

“One day, I rose especially early.” He cleared his throat. “I opened my shutters and looked down at the road. And there walked your mother; a tiny thing, with this jug of water on her head, walking perfectly straight. All of a sudden, she looked at me, with those beautiful blue eyes,” he recalled, squeezing Maria’s hand. “As if filled with Heaven. I knew then God meant her for me.”

She faced her father and smiled—the light that had left at her mother’s death had returned to his eyes.



Father Zabaleta wished to go to Gurrutxetegia again to see how Maria fared, and hoped it would not be too intrusive to visit only three days after Dolores’s funeral. Even so, he needed some pretext so her father would not suspect his intentions. Ten years younger than Isidro, Father Zabaleta was intimidated by him as a child. Renowned as a proud and private man, Dolores’s husband would not tolerate any suggestion that he could not take care of his family himself.

The priest wandered into his library. Perhaps he’d find some inspiration in his favorite room. Devotional objects and curiosities accompanied his books lining the dark panels: his lamb-shaped reliquary with the *verre eg-lomise* panel depicting Saint Francis receiving the stigmata, and his portable triptych of the adoration of the Magi, sat alongside the small stones he used to keep his books

open as he read. His gaze was drawn to an item that had preceded him to this room, a simple cross nailed onto the whitewashed wall opposite the window. As he neared it, he noticed that its ends were rough and uneven, as if the wood had been crudely split by hand. Squinting, he could see the wood itself had rotted; only a thin rope held the crossbeam together.

And then he remembered something else about Isidro — his talent as a woodcarver. He would ask Isidro to make a new crucifix for him. An elaborate one, worthy of his skills that he could work on at his leisure at his farmhouse.

Father Zabaleta smiled at the idea. Such a crucifix could take months to make; he would have to visit Gur-rutxetegia often to check on its progress.



The sun bore down on Maria from a cloudless sky. She stopped digging and looked at the green hills where she used to play with her brother. Sharp pebbles poked through her *abarkak* and cut her soles. Her face glistened with sweat and her cheeks felt as red as her scarf. The girl hoped for a cool breeze, but the air stayed still. *No relief will come*, she thought. *Not even Sundays bring me rest.*

Maria had taken her mother's place with the *laia* at her father's side. A double-pointed spade, the unwieldy *laia* required both hands, at least for her. She threw her weight on it as she dug and tried to twist it into the ground, but she barely scratched the surface of the parched earth. Her blistered hands bled with each twist.

"*Segi hadi, segi*," her father said, softly. "Keep going. Just break up the soil a little. I will make the furrows."

"*Bai, bai*," Maria said, pulling her *laia* from the ground.

She bit her lip and ignored her pain; she would be as uncomplaining as her father. She had straightened her back to shove the *laia* into the ground again when her father gestured for her to stop.

"The priest has come," he said, pointing to the dirt road leading from the village. "We must welcome him."

“Yes, Aita,” Maria said, thankful for a reason to rest. “I will run in and ready the table. Let me take your hoe in for you.”

Her father handed his hoe over and smiled, the closest he came to compliments. She lived for that smile.



That night around the fire, the day’s work done, Maria’s father pulled up the chair her mother—that-was had used. The girl’s heart jumped that a story came:

“One summer a woman-of-the-house was weeding her wheat patch,” her father began, and Maria smiled in recognition. “In the afternoons she went home to breast-feed her baby. When she got back to the field, she would find some more wheat weeded yet her hoe was just where she had left it. She could not think who was doing this.”

Maria tickled her little brother. “Who could it be?”

“One day,” her father continued, “she was feeling curious and decided to play a trick on her unknown helper. Pretending to go home, she suddenly turned back, and caught sight of a *lamina*—a siren—weeding her wheat. The woman-of-the-house asked her what she was doing there, and the *lamina* replied that she was just helping her with the weeding. She told her that she wanted to carry on helping her but that she would like some soup in the evening. That night and the following nights, the *lamina* stopped by for her soup. At last the woman grew weary of always giving. One night, she told her husband what was happening and that she could not go on feeding her every day. Her husband promised to think of something.”

“That night he put on some of his wife’s clothes and sent his wife to bed.” Her father took Maria’s scarf from the chair back where it lay and put it over his head, tying it under his neck. “The *lamina* came to the door as usual.”

“Oh, no!” Maria said to her brother’s giggles.

“The husband opened the door and made a big fire, and they both warmed themselves round it. The *lamina* said to him: ‘Last night you were spinning very nicely—

*pira pira,*’ her father squeaked out the siren’s voice—‘how come you’re making such a mess tonight—*purdulun purdulun?*’”

‘Last night I was like that, and tonight like this.’

Something in the siren’s sly mind tells her she is with a different spinner this time.

‘And who are you then?’

‘Myself.’ He puts the pan on the fire with plenty of fat.

‘Let me have a lick.’

The “woman-of-the-house” does not answer.

‘Let me have a lick!’ The *lamina* leans over the frying pan and makes a sucking motion. At that, the spinner takes the pan by the handle and pours scalding oil over the siren, who flies up the chimney, howling. When her *lamina* friends see her wailing, they ask: ‘What is the matter? Who did this to you?’

‘Myself!’ Her father winks at Maria.

‘Ah, what do you want then?’ Maria says in her best *lamina* voice. ‘If you did it to yourself, you alone are to blame!’



Her knees throbbing at the kneeler, Maria mouthed the words of the Lord’s Prayer as her mind wandered to the stone block set into the granite aisle floor, right before the altar. It seemed to be a gravestone for a very important person. A figure like a crown was carved where the head would be if the man was laying down, and curved shapes like fancy letters covered the rest of the block, which was longer than she was tall.

Her cheeks flushed with anger, and she bowed her head so no one would see. Who was this person that he received such a fine gravestone in the church itself, when her mother—that-was only got the wooden casket her father made for her and a place in the dirt? She recited the next verse, hoping to take the words into her heart:

*And forgive us our trespasses*

*As we forgive those who trespass against us*

Peeking to her left, she saw an old woman, one gnarled hand clasping her wooden rosary, the other gripping the pew in front of her to keep herself steady. Maria turned to her right, her gaze caught by an old man too frail to kneel at all during the prayer.

*And lead us not into temptation  
But deliver us from evil*

How could God take her mother, still so beautiful and full of life, when these poor souls would surely have welcomed the chance to leave their suffering behind and join Him in Heaven?

She crossed herself, ashamed she could think such a thing. She did not really wish them ill. God would know that. But why did He have to take her mother now, when she still needed her so much?



The priest waited in the windowless sacristy, folding the stole he wore for Mass. He longed to feel the warmth of the summer day. After placing the stole in the wardrobe, he cracked open the door and regarded the parishioners praying in the pews. The sun streamed in through the stained glass, bringing the fervency of their petitions into sharp relief against the somber darkness of the church.

He stepped back into the vesting room to give his parishioners privacy. After footsteps receded many times down the stone aisle, the priest pushed the door open again; the pews seemed empty. Looking toward the altar draped with a white linen cloth, he noticed that the lectionary still sat on its silver holder, open.

“*Hara!*” Father Zabaleta said. “I forgot again!”

Making his way to the altar, he noticed one person in the last pew, not at the kneeler in supplication but seated, head bent in apparent prayer. He would not have noticed her were it not for her hair—it blazed the color of fire.

*Kanpotarra*—an outsider. He squinted to get a better look. Yes; no one in this village could afford her finery. White roses embroidered in the mesh of her *mantilla* accentuated the red of her hair. In one hand dangled a rosary made of shiny black stones; in the other she held a leather book, bound with gold clasps affixed to red ribbon.

He felt defensive, recalling the disdain with which his well-heeled brothers used to treat him at the seminary. Then, remembering those who treated him kindly just because of his lack of wealth and refinement, he relaxed.

He forced a smile. “*Egun on,*” he greeted her, putting the lectionary under his arm. “Good day.”

“*Xuri,*” the woman said. “And to you.” She came from the French side, then; only they used this form of address. But quite presumptuous of her to omit “Father.”

Unaccustomed to talking to women outside the confessional, he fell silent.

Perhaps she sensed his unease. “Your church is beautiful . . . *Aita Zabaleta.*” Her use of the Basque word for Father was lyrical.

“Yes, thank you,” he said. She remembered his title this time; but how did she know his name?

The woman rose, her silk skirts rustling as she approached the altar. She gazed upon the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows poised between the two marble columns.

“The *Mater Dolorosa* exudes spiritual strength, does she not?”

“Indeed,” the priest said. “A model for us all.”

The woman clutched her book to her chest, making the gold-encrusted title visible: *Biblia Sacra*. She could read Latin as well, then. “I can almost hear the lament she cries through her parted lips, as red as the blood of her crucified son. Her anguish bares itself in her clasped hands against her heart.”

Father Zabaleta nodded in assent, though he had not regarded Our Lady with such discerning eyes. Looking at the Virgin again, he noticed her face was completely concealed from the side where he stood, by the blue headdress



she wore. He stood next to the woman, directly in front of the statue. He noticed now the thin pieces of wood of which the headdress was made and the gold border lining its edges, its design as elaborate as the lace on his vestments. He looked at the Virgin's countenance again—rather, for the first time—full in the face. The arch of her brow and downward gaze of her brown eyes communicated a sorrow as deep as he'd seen on Maria's face at her mother's funeral. The glass tears trickling down the Virgin's blotched cheeks caught the light of the altar candle, and the priest took a step back at the realism.

"It is as if Our Lady cries still," said the woman, softly.

Father Zabaleta heard her voice as if from far away; his awareness of her presence had dissipated in his adoration of the statue. That she'd witnessed it discomfited him. He thought of a polite way to end their encounter.

"Zera—Well." He pointed to the lectionary under his arm. "I have to put away this book."

"And I must attend to the lessons in mine. Until we meet again, Aita Zabaleta." She bowed and headed out, her *mantilla* dancing about her face.

The priest stood staring until the heavy iron door closed behind her. Such an articulate and refined woman; what brought her to this small village?



Her father gone to bring in the sheep from pasture, Maria looked forward to the time alone with her books. She went into the room she shared with her brother. Smiling at the napping Antonio, she went quietly to her own bed and slowly lifted the linen mattresses. She picked up the two books hidden between the ears of corn stuffing that was the bottom layer over the criss-crossed rope supports then tiptoed into the kitchen.

Seated on the bench along the two windows so she could see her father coming, she cradled the smaller book in the palm of her hand, carefully opening the clasp across the gold-edged pages. She looked with wonder on the black

ink etching on the opening page: Jesus, his eyes gazing lovingly at her, pointing to his “Sacred Heart” covered with thorns, dripping with blood. A girl about her age kneeled in front of him, hands clasped together and eyes on Jesus’ face, as if praying for the strength to do His will. Maria wondered about the girl. She drew her index finger across the small letters underneath the picture. *They probably say who she is*, she thought wistfully. *Now I will never know.*

Maria heard the cackle of hens that usually warned of her father’s arrival and looked out the window. A red-headed stranger, richly gowned in black, came up the road. The woman took purposeful strides, looking around as she walked rather than looking down to signal modesty, as Maria had been taught to do. She wore a beautiful *mantilla* and held a book under her arm. Maria stood up, agape. A book? What would a woman be doing with a book?

Then she glanced at her own books, those objects of her secret delight, and smiled. She, too, had books! She opened the trunk that held the kitchen cloths and linens, hid the books inside, and stared at the approaching stranger.

Shiny black combs kept the *mantilla* off the woman’s face; her pink cheeks and lips set off the *mantilla*’s white roses perfectly. A rosary dangled at the woman’s waist. Maria watched the woman pass the big oak tree and go down the crossroad toward the front door. She heard three quick knocks.

Maria smoothed her skirt and vest, nervous now. Who could this woman be?

She thought of her brother. Whatever this woman wanted, Antonio best not know about it. He would probably say something to their father. She walked quickly down the stairs and lifted the door-latch before the woman could knock again. She nodded at the woman in greeting.

“Good afternoon,” the woman said, in an unfamiliar accent. “My name is Sabine Elizalde; I came to pay respects to the family. You must be Maria.”

“Yes,” Maria said, keeping her hand on the door-latch. “You must want to see my father. He works outside still.”

The woman moved closer to the door and put her hand on the latch. “I thought as much; he works at the sheep shed at this hour, does he not? Fortunately for me, it is you I wished to see.” Maria gaped at the visitor, who smiled as if waiting for something. “May I come in?” she said. “I have something for you.”

“Something for me?” Without thinking, Maria released her hold on the door and the woman passed over the threshold. The girl wondered if this was a good idea; why did the stranger want to see her without her father present?

She led her up to the kitchen and closed the door to the hallway. She opened the round table that folded into the high-backed bench in front of the fire, then moved the wicker chair to the far corner to the table. Her mother had always kept the best chair in that corner, to be used if special guests should come.

No one had used it before now. The woman sat down and put her book on the table in plain view. Maria sat next to her on the high-backed bench, at a loss for words. Her mother had been the one to talk to visitors. She wondered what she should say to the woman; then she noticed a little red book dangling from a metal chain at the woman’s waist. Perhaps she could ask her about that?

But the visitor spoke first. “I knew not your mother—that—was, though my mother Milagros loved her well; she lived in these parts many years ago.” She undid the shiny black combs in her hair and placed the *mantilla* on the table near Maria. “My mother taught her how to make this.”

“So beautiful.” The girl fingered the *mantilla*. “With the smooth lace and fine embroidery.”

“Your mother wore this on her wedding day; the only fine thing she owned, my mother tells me. I came to return it to you.”

About to thank the woman for this wonderful reminder of her mother, a question came to her and Maria asked

instead, "If this belonged to my mother, why do you have it?"

The visitor looked at the girl, her gaze soft. "She sent it to me as a thank you, right before she passed." She leaned in and touched the girl's hand. "For I had agreed to come here and take you to Donibane Garazi, to live and learn with my mother."

Maria's heart fell at this reminder of her loss. Tears burst from her eyes and she covered them with her hands. Embarrassed at showing her grief so openly to a complete stranger, she stood up and turned away. She felt the woman's hand on her shoulder and let her tears fall.

"Be not ashamed to cry, Maria," the woman said softly. "My father died suddenly when I was about your age. I miss him still."

Maria turned around and saw her eyes were ringed red. She let the woman hold her and they wept together until Maria pulled away to wipe her nose with her hand.

"Here," the woman said, handing the girl a linen handkerchief with some curved lines embroidered on it. Maria did not know what they said, but knew they were letters. She looked at her hands, blistered and callused against the smooth white linen. She rubbed her wrists, still sore from days at the *laia*. She imagined her mother on her wedding day, beautiful and happy. And on her deathbed, groaning in agony.

*I will not work myself to death, Maria decided. I will make another kind of life.*

She took out her books from the trunk and laid them on the table. "Doña Elizalde, I thank you for returning the beautiful *mantilla* to me." She handed it back to her and took up her books. "But it would honor my mother's memory more if you would keep the *mantilla* . . . in payment . . . for teaching me to read."

Maria felt her heartbeat in her temples and her mouth went dry; she thought of the girl in the book and prayed her offer would be accepted.

"Your eagerness to learn will suffice, *maitea*." The last

word sounded almost as sweet to Maria as when her mother used to say it. "But please call me Sabine." She glanced at the pile of books and squeezed Maria's hand. "For you and I are equal in the eyes of God."