

# Bough Breaks

by Katherine Vaz

An early image of my mother and me:

I am standing on a wobbly kitchen chair at the stove, where we've cooked up boiled frosting, thick with corn syrup. She dips a toothpick into the bottle of blue food coloring and gives it to me to stab into the glossy white, because she is

teaching me that a drop of blue will make white *whiter*. Mrs. Silva down the road rinsed her hair in bluing to rid it of yellowing, but she overdid it. *This explains the tribe of blue-haired old ladies!*

Mother's nails are shell-pink. On the counter sit glasses of Fizzies, root beer flavor. The Felix the Cat clock ticks on the wall, its tail and eyes going to and fro. She always dresses up even if we're at home, as if she is due at a party in the living room, and on the add-blue-to-make-white-whiter morning, she wears shoes with clear Lucite heels that hold water and tiny, bobbing plastic goldfish.

Her name is Cristina, and I am Filomena. "Philomela" is from mythology, raped and with her tongue cut out by her sister's husband, a king, to insure her silence. Philomela stitches a tapestry revealing the sins against her, and the sisters kill the king's son and serve him to his father for dinner. Philomela turns into a nightingale to escape. In real life, the female of that species is mute.

Strange to have the name I do, because it was Mother who was silent. She never spoke. Or at least not for a long while, not until things took a seismic turn.

Here is the first romantic legend: There once was a fourteen-year-old girl, Isabel Juliana de Sousa Coutinho, in Évora, east of Lisbon, who was forced in the sixteenth century to marry the son of the powerful Marquês de Pombal, despite her being in love with an untitled boy. She refused to utter a word, her sole form of protest. Finally, she was removed to a cloister, where the nuns bought birds to sing her praises. On the verge of her holy vows, Isabel learned that the Marquês had met with ruin, and she was free to marry her true love whereupon—as fairytales have it—they lived happily thereafter.

My mother was a transplant in infancy from the Azores to the heat-staggered California valley town of Tulare, and Isabel's story struck her fancy. My mother was strikingly beautiful and wreathed herself in whatever was dramatic and sparkling. When her father bullied her into marrying an old Fresno landowner, Mother refused to speak, and the husband exploded into violence, and townspeople taunted and pinched her to see if she'd cry out, but she stuck to her pledge never, ever to pronounce a syllable, not to him, not to anyone, not to a world ordering her to be naked with someone she detested, and after he committed suicide and liberated her to finish the parallel to the ancient tale,

she married my father. She was a twenty-five-year-old widow; he was twenty-seven. A catch: Her covenant of silence was grandiose and lifelong, a deal with God that would require her death and the dying of everyone she loved should she break it. This divine-wrath quaintness did not fatally repel my father, at least not at first.

He was storybook handsome, my father, William Flores, changed from Guilherme. Bill Flores. Or plain Bill Flowers. He was, like her, an offshoot of the dairymen surging from the Azores into the aggie lands that we called the Salad Bowl and the Milk Pail. Tulare, a rail town that shuttled produce, was named for the tule rushes—already phantoms in my day—that had whistled like wind instruments around a lake that used to be one of the largest freshwater bodies in the West; it too was long dried up. Tulare was equidistant from the places that gleamed like unattainable fortune to me, two hundred miles from Sacramento and Stockton but also San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Here all fairytales conclude, because I arrived in the mid-fifties, tearing her open in a difficult birth and hastening a troubling inquiry into what *silence* means: She swallowed her screams in childbirth but could not stifle some animal groaning.

No lullabies were awarded me; even humming might rupture her promise to God, though my father remarked that my mother held me fiercely when I was an infant. When, in school, I won, ironically enough, a speech contest, she repeatedly struck the chair in front of her with her program rolled up like a baton, which I resented: Couldn't she applaud?

Her clothing often proclaimed her carrying of music within—a coat with embroidered parrots, a skirt enlivened with appliqué cranes, scarves emblazoned with treble clefs. A brooch of orioles. Her waist was so tiny that it looked like a boy's absurd fantasy of female mystery, and she cinched it with wide patent leather belts. These she decorated with rose quartz smoothed out in her rock tumbler. Men's eyes took her in whole, her polished stones and faux-gem-loaded bracelets like blinding hexes, and women stared too, despising her to the point of their inner fibers fizzling.

Mother found laughter pointless; it was common, it was commotion. Instead, she funneled delight into a possession of her face that blossomed into a rapture that held people spellbound. At Mass, she swayed to the hymns, her skirts flaring on stiff petticoats; her cologne was gardenia. She was mostly Portuguese,

with a Swedish grandmother and a tan complexion. We told people she was born mute, the sort of lie comparable to a person saying he's allergic to something in a restaurant rather than declaring he loathes it. This made Cristina Medeiros Flores even more exotic. Imagine Jackie Kennedy blonde and Latin, and with silent-film glamour, and decked in glinting hand-shaped jewels. I loved brushing her hair—butterscotch- and apricot-toned bands—because I could pretend I was her mommy and she was my dolly, a minor power over her as she drowsily loved it, almost purring. (I never met her parents, the monsters who'd forced her into that early marriage with the rich old man who killed himself; they operated a tourist trap in Reno, where people could pan for "gold" in a hut erected over a manmade stream they'd seeded with pyrite.) Like women of the time, she was not raised to "be" anything, but her solution was to move through her days with uninterrupted grace, never in bedroom slippers. She steeped the laundry water in lavender. Our house teemed with her arts-and-crafts projects. I lack any childhood memory of her embracing me and have to take it on faith that she scarcely let me go after my birth, but sometimes, in the coral stripes of dusk,

we would hold hands outdoors and absorb the crickets playing their legs like bows.

She thrived on acting oblivious to her effect on people. On Saturday mornings, at the Farmers Market, the trucks arrived with freestone nectarines, oranges, alfalfa, milk sloshing in metal cans, Union table grapes, pistachios, and corn, and the women sold sugar cookies for what was referred to as “pin money.” I remain haunted by a particular episode when Mother set up her usual card table to sell the joujous she made from rhinestones and beads. The air was gait-slowingly hot, and her sundress, patterned with trumpeting lilies, had a sweetheart neckline.

The farmwives were in muumuus or dungarees and cotton shirts, the men in jeans or Ben Davis gorilla-label overalls. I was only in the second grade at Our Lady of Grace, but I sensed how the men hovering like fruit flies around Mother were causing ripples of disquiet. Daddy never joined us at the Farmer’s Market. Mother wore, as always, a notepad on a cloth chain hung from her neck with an auxiliary ribbon for a pencil she sharpened daily, and the men were admiring her baubles for sale, the clips with agate chips shaped into butterflies, the belts with sequins in paisley designs copied from the hippies with their

citified free-love. Len Duarte, a foreman at the Tagus fruit ranch, was leaning in especially close as my mother scribbled on the notepad and collected their money and waved her hands to carve the air into mesmerizing shapes. A gaggle of women pointed, fuming, as Mr. Duarte lingered. Other men gathered, and more women collected.

I had stolen a taffy candy off Mrs. Cruz's table, and with it burning like an ember in the pocket of my culottes, I sidled near Mother, alert to danger.

"Here comes the cavalry," said Mr. Marques, a pointed-boot-wearing old Mr. God's Gift. He lifted his hands in mock-terror of me. "Just saying howdy to your mom, Filomena. She's all yours."

There was a tired, familiar comment about my mother perfecting the female ideal, all oo-la-la and none of the yakkity-yak.

Mr. Duarte bought a belt swirling with jute crescent moons that I could no more picture on Mrs. Duarte's barrel middle than I could fly. "Cristina, model it for us!" He wrapped it around her, where it sagged large and she pretended it was a hula-hoop, which the men found worthy of much merriment.



“Mother,” I whispered, “should we go home?”

Mrs. Cruz appeared, and I almost confessed to the stolen candy. “Mrs. Flores,” she said crisply—the men paused in their doggish panting—“as a member of the Merchants Association, I must point out that you have not paid your monthly fee. You cannot sell without a license.”

“Aw, Betty, for God’s sake,” said Mr. Duarte, a cowboy hat shading his grin.

Mother scribbled a question mark and showed it to Mrs. Cruz, who shot a glance over her shoulder that drew the rest of her posse into a huddle.

Mrs. Duarte, her face jiggling like set custard, said, “Go home, Mrs. Flores.”

“Ellie,” said her husband, “leave this poor woman alone.”

“Poor?” Mrs. Cruz snorted.

Mother wrote on a fresh page and held it up. “How much/the \$?”

The women looked at one another. “Fifty dollars,” said Mrs. Duarte.

“Hush my mouth, Ellie,” said Mr. Jamison. “It’s ten, and you know it.”

Mother reached into the metal box where she kept her profits—the lid with glitter dollar signs she’d applied with a glue gun—and handed a ten to Mrs. Duarte. Her wares raked in a lot more than, say, peaches or gingerbread men. She sold out every Saturday, and men were her only customers, buying items their infuriated wives probably threw away, since I never saw anyone wearing them. She dispensed free fives to each member of the female mob, having calculated this would top out neatly at fifty total. The men found this not just comeuppance but more rich comedy, and the women sank into a repressed fury, and Mother radiated absolute pleasure.

Mrs. Cruz grabbed me on our way out and hissed, “You owe me for the candy. I saw you.” Shaken, I gave her a nickel. Mother was far ahead of me, walking on air.

Where is my father in all this, the romantic hero? Guilherme Flores. Bill Flowers. A traveling salesman, he doubled as the knight swooping in at intervals, which fed their fable-like ardor. He did worship her. He was himself good-looking enough to collect his own stares, and he and Mother pooled the adulation from others and poured it around each other. The company that put him on the road, going door to door on the Pacific route, was

Excelsior Chocolates, famous for its buttercreams tinted wild shades, green and blueberry-blue, snug in their frilly compartments with the map to their identities on the lid—a design stolen from the Whitman’s Sampler—though the key to Excelsior’s popularity was their burying a certificate for a prize in every hundredth box, ranging from free nuts-and-chews to angel-food pans to avocado stoves and, annually, nationally, one shiny Cadillac. When Daddy was home, we packed a picnic and went to Rankin Field, where cadets had trained for the war and aerobatic stunt pilots still operated, prop planes buzzing overhead, loop-de-loop. Mother would lean her head on his shoulder.

When I complained about her, he pleaded with me to be patient, because there was someone between her and him—and me—who happened to be God, and her vow never to speak issued from a dire place while driving home the point that women were denied proper voices anyway. (After reading Graham Greene’s *End of the Affair*, wherein Sarah pledges to give up Maurice if God spares him in a bombing, and she adheres ever-after to this even when he survives, I wept over the implacable bargains desperate enough to include the divine.) Mother’s first marriage

had been a horror show, and Daddy hinted, darkly, of her arm still being frail because Husband #1 had been keen on twisting it to force her to talk.

But then came an episode that marked the start of our undoing. Students at my school were not allowed to use the bathroom on the First Thursday of every month, confession day, a penance and bodily mortification meant to bestow extra blessings on First Friday's Mass. Chaining together twelve consecutive First Friday Masses would earn a plenary indulgence, a guarantee that a priest would hear a person's deathbed pleas for forgiveness. Someone always, inevitably wet the floor, and one Thursday was my turn. I pretended it hadn't happened. I was seven. I shivered, so plunged into humiliation that I swam in a multi-colored delirium. One would think my classmates would be hooting, but our twisted bodies were united in empathetic agony. Maria Rios behind me whispered, "Filly, oh, no."

We were supposed to be writing in our vocabulary workbooks. Sister Delfina was patrolling the aisles and faced a dilemma: I was an honors student. She skipped the usual chiding about a failure to control one's body and cut to the sentence, which was to stand in the hallway for a half-hour while holding

the picture of a crying baby. The picture had been carefully cut from a magazine and matted on red construction paper. Manuel, the janitor, offered sorrowful nods whenever he arrived with his mop. When the time was up, a parent was called. I can still picture Mother cradling the phone, the Mother Superior knowing there would be a click of the receiver replaced but no answer, and when Mother came for me, tears were streaming down my face. God seemed so fully in her possession that I never felt I could approach Him, and my generation was prone to rebellion against the Church. But even if I had been religious, the orchestrated cruelty of those First Thursdays would have broken my faith. A syndrome called Catholic Bladder drops some of us who are older now into a panic if we're in public without an available bathroom.

During the long, damp walk to the Buick, Mother hastened in a way that seemed less about my comfort and more about an effort to distance herself from me. I had hoped she would jot maternal outrage on her notepad, hollering down this barbaric rite, sharing incredulity that a ghoulish nun had taken pains to mat the baby picture with such neatness. Instead, she drove us to our house on Laurel Avenue without a single

comforting scrawl and went into the yard to deadhead the roses. After I'd changed, while sitting on my bed and clutching the stuffed toy pig Daddy had bought for me in Seattle, she barged in to leave a note: U need 2 CONTROL yrself Fil-a. U've EMBARRASSED me.

Well, naturally. She thrived on an oddball rule of extreme bodily mastery, plus never a hair out of place. Shame was vile to her. Yet for her sake I endured the savagery of the playground, the mockery about her being pretty but dumb, ha ha. During a bout of shyness, when I failed to answer the greeting of Mrs. Lopes while we were shopping at Coonradt's Five-and-Dime, Mother scribbled: "Ppl will think U're rude if they say hello & U don't!!" It detonated my wrath, this scolding of me for the ways in which being myself were not, after all, so far off her own behavior.

A knell over our widening divide rang out years later, when I was strapped with the task of hosing down our screen door to clear the mesh of the clots of green-and-blue bottle flies, mosquitoes, and stinkbugs. Lynette Duvall and Lisa Ramires were over, tittering loudly to compensate for Mother's quiet, reading in megaphone tones whatever replies appeared on the

notepad, devouring petit fours. When I came in drenched, Mrs. Ramires whinnied, “How nice to have hired help!” They giggled, and my mother joined in with extreme smiling. She wrote: “F. is VERY OBEDIENT.” They hadn’t even saved me any cakes. It seemed so obvious that these women were on a reconnaissance mission to gather gossip. Was gin on the counter; was there disarray they could whisper about, thrilling to a weakness so they could pity instead of hate her? Mrs. Duvall and Mrs. Ramires were from that sizable tribe of nasty tattlers and, heat be damned, nylons chafing their already matronly thighs, with ambitions that would be dead in the water if indeed the idea of ambition ever darkened the tides of their coffee-klatch minds.

I shouted, words strangled, “I am not!”

“You’re not what, querida?” said Mrs. Ramires.

Mother did not defend me. She preferred to curry favor with these harpies.

At the top of my throat lodged the betrayal. Mother had Tulare bamboozled. She wasn’t mute. She was a cheap actress, her life a silly role. She was in love with Love, and God, and a superstition, *and herself*, and an old, old story. But I lacked the

majesty of my Mother's flamboyant remove. Her silence was dappled and strong; mine was angry. I couldn't manage a sound.

"My wordie!" said Mrs. Duvall. "Acorn isn't falling far from the tree!"

They guffawed; they simpered, my mother executing her version of that. They patted her hand, finding her adorable, the puppy performing winsome tricks. She wrote "!!". On her headband was a sunflower she'd sewn with French-knotted seeds.

Those exclamation points were nails through my palm. That night, I went berserk. I trashed her dainty bedroom and tore up her current notepad. She stormed in and slapped me; that noise doomed us to the battlefield. On a shred of paper, she scrawled "Private! NOT YRS! Never go THRU MY THINGS."

I began to jot notes for myself, ideas for stories on scraps. I ate up plays and swallowed them whole; I adored the white spaces allowing me to picture the action on a stage, with my brain supplying the dialogue at high volume. When I turned sixteen, a junior at Tulare Union High—my father had backed me up in my refusal to attend the Catholic school because it lacked a dramatics course—I bloomed into a ballerina version of



him, slender, tall, with jet hair and green eyes mirroring his. It was the era of wearing leotards with mini-skirts or what were called football pants, with laced-up crotches and belled hems, angel-flights. I wore a mint-colored pair despite my mother's notes that they "belonged on valley trash."

The *Visalia Times-Delta* sponsored a contest that year for "Best Fifteen-Minute Play Without Dialogue." Any resident of the county, of any age, was eligible.

I won.

My script—"Camp"—evoked the era, a mere dozen years before my birth, when our Fairgrounds had been converted into an "Assembly Center" to intern Japanese-Americans, all traces evaporated now, except in Daddy's mind; he was a history buff.

The play was stark: Armed men with clipboards forced two Japanese families into a corner of the stage draped with burlap. They sagged against one another. Blue dim lights. A mother set her baby on the ground, (a Chatty Cathy doll), and they consoled each other; mourning made visual. White actors watched from the other half of the stage. Using the dollies that convey produce, ushers rolled in cardboard cherry trees braced so they stood. The branches were cut free of the backing, boughs

like open lace. Artifacts were handed out to the audience: streamers with Japanese names, or linked paper umbrellas (bought at Coonradt's, meant for mai-tais) or wind-chimes shaped as pagodas. I lent my Kokeshi doll, having sewn her an obi so she could double as an ornament. Stepladders were brought out to serve as a hint. The audience awakened to its role: The objects had hooks and loops and were meant for the trees. Someone finally went to the cherry branches; others followed.

What occurred at the Tulare Community Center, though, was that the Japanese actors brought family members who, after decking the trees with memorabilia, began to weep and clutch their kin on stage, and the white actors and then much of the audience rushed into the general embrace. I had not written that, but it brought down the house, the play taking on a life of its own. It was the moment I solidified my desire to be a playwright, so my words might burst alive in a manner I couldn't always predict.

Daddy got to hang a streamer, but the ushers missed giving an item to Mother; only a third of the audience had things bestowed. He murmured he felt so proud he could die, and Mother later wrote "Lovely, F.," but was aloof and dry-eyed and

anxious, which I gave up to her nervousness about the after-party at our home and the residue of the quarrel about my wearing fishnet stockings and sling-back heels. My father had intervened to insist it was my evening, and I'd bested everyone, and if that wasn't grown-up enough for me to choose my outfit then he didn't know what was. I gave myself thick chola-style eyeliner and wore my baby-doll dress with its canary-yellow bow along with the fishnets.

Our house had never been so packed. City Council members conversed, downing drinks; strangers crowded on the sofa with its gold metallic threads. Fancy shoes crunched our gravel walkway, and guests examined the vegetable beds in back. A child in a princess dress occupied the footstool that Mother and I had done in crewel of farm folk with pitchforks. Mother had stenciled waves onto the stucco walls, and they became so alive with her artistic yearning that they lapped into my head. Rich rancher wives peered in nasty amusement at the wall-hangings with smashed limpets she had glued into hill-scapes, and the doors with shellacked images of beaches; look, look, an ashtray shaped as a crab whose shell lifted to hide cigarette butts,

how adorable. People congratulated me, and the Japanese actors bowed in my direction, sipped Dr. Pepper, and did not stay long.

A woman with a tiparillo stood ramrod tall; I imagined myself exhaling the same white spiral. She introduced herself as Adele Meyer, an editor at the *Visalia Times-Delta*. “I was one of your judges,” she said, sending smoke in a knighting angle over my shoulder, her chiffon dress with a keyhole offering a view of the divide of her breasts. “You have a brilliant future.”

I slung an arm around my dad’s waist as he nursed a tumbler of wine, and he draped an arm over my shoulders. My friend Deanna Matos appeared at my other side. Adele parked herself directly in front of my father before tilting her neck at him, an animal gesture that reinforced the rumors that she was dangerous, and exotic, owing to her being not only a divorcée in her early thirties but a breezily happy childless one—imagine! Her skirt was short, her lipstick white, her countenance soothed with amber foundation, and she proceeded to tuck close to his available side, knitting us into a chorus line. Mother showed up, her expression between distress and emptiness. I was caught between Daddy and Deanna; the alluring Adele had her free hand, the one not encircling my father, on his upper chest,

patting him. I stirred, edgy. “Mama,” I said. “You need some help?”

I meant with serving, with the crowd. I really did; I think I did, honestly. But the words came out with the inflection of: So, what’re *you* looking at? Need help, lady?

She shook her head no, threw a mournful grimace at my father, stared a horizontal icicle through Adele, She Who Bestowed my acclaim, and deserted us. Deanna whispered, “Your Mom seems so mad. She’s usually the life of the party.”

Except that this occasion was about me. Not her. I was the one who’d won a prize. She was unbelievable. “Oh, look!” said Adele, cued to getting her paws off my father. “There’s Denise. Denise Baldwin and her son. They’ve moved here from San Francisco. Her husband bought a controlling interest in the Tagus Ranch.”

In the doorway was a dead-ringer for Natalie Wood. Next to her was a teenager in a three-piece suit despite the heat, with a fob looping out of the vest pocket, his black hair combed straight back, his dark skin clear, his bearing that of an Incan high priest masquerading as a successful boy businessman, and I fell, I fell hard and at once and completely, the flames inside me

simultaneously bursting in a haloed array like the legs of anemones, sensitive to the touch and fluttering. All the dashed afflictions: hot face, watery knees, barnyard abdomen, my heart seared.

I stared at his yellow tie, its knot angled upward from the yellow neck-bow on my micro-short dress, and this magnetized him to me.

"I missed you," he said, "in the dark." His name was Riley Francisco Baldwin.

It is the opening line of the adult script of my life. *I miss you, in the dark, I miss you*, even now, that ringing tune can catch me unaware, and I pause to listen.

"What?" I said, so softly I'm not sure the word left me.

"I missed you," said Riley, "in the dark. In the theater. You didn't take a bow. They should have brought the winner, the author, to the stage."

In the clamor of that spontaneous affection at the finish, singling me out had been forgotten. He was right. I'd never had anyone look directly into my eyes before.

"Come in," I said, a foolish thing because he was already past the threshold. His mother chatted with Adele. He regarded

me, and I scanned myself for language. I had a gigantic flare of love for my mother, for her living beyond words and expecting everyone to accommodate that. “Well,” I said.

“Nice to meet someone who’s going places,” he said, surveying the crowd. “We moved here recently, but I don’t plan to stay. Can’t see it.”

A surge of dismay. *I’ll follow you. Tell me where.* I lost every shred of decency and ballast, I forgot that it was my day, I had done something, I had won.

Riley Francisco Baldwin. Mexican and Cherokee on both sides mixed with farmer-white. Named Francisco, I’d later discover, not due to those roots but because his being born in that city meant his parents agreed he would embody its gold-historied luck.

“Oh, there’s Peter. Peter Liveright, the paper’s publisher,” he said. “Would you excuse me? Congratulations, Filomena Flores. A marquee name. I want to act one day. Maybe you’ll write a play, and I’ll star in it.”

*Maybe I’ll do that.* I’d lived in Tulare my entire life; he’d just arrived, and already he knew the newspaper’s publisher? On a first-name basis?

Deanna and Jackie, my best friends, were talking to some of the actors. I stared at the back of Riley Francisco Baldwin, the faint stripes of his charcoal-gray suit. How was he not passing out from the heat? Mother was freshening drinks, highballs and Mateus wine or 7Up, setting out napkins with “Congratulations!” in cursive, replacing platters of Ritz crackers offered with Cheese Ball, a mix of whipped cheddar, Roquefort, cream cheese, and chopped walnuts. I went to help her. I was her shadow, frightened at playing the role of host. Oh, Mommy. I parked myself near the Party Mix, pretzels and corn Chex roasted with margarine. I adjusted the tray of strawberries we’d dipped in chocolate. Her kitten heels clicked across the kitchen’s linoleum and faded toward her bedroom. She was sick of us, of her house turned into an invaders’ braying paradise for me.

What right did she have to sulk? Adele’s forwardness with Daddy had been a reverse dose of Mother’s own medicine.

I joined Riley and his mother huddled with Adele and a few others.

“Star of the hour!” said the man who introduced himself as Peter Liveright.

“What will you try next, dear?” asked Mrs. Baldwin.



Before I could reply—I had no idea what to do next—Adele loomed in and said, “Whatever you do, dearie, do not attempt a dance script.” She rolled her eyes.

Mr. Liveright whistled and said, “We read a lot of travesties. Many ‘leaf falling from the mother tree’ numbers. A lot of idiocy for mimes.”

Had I not been triumphant in a field thick with possibility? I registered a twinge of defensiveness for my fellow playwrights. “It takes something,” I said, “at least to try.”

“A generous view,” said Mr. Liveright, “but it takes talent to know when one lacks talent.” He grabbed the neck of a wine bottle near a porcelain shepherdess.

“No, people can surprise us,” said Riley, pivoting halfway to include me. “A mistake to think our fates can’t change in unpredictable ways.”

“Hear, hear,” said Denise Baldwin. “You’re a stuffed old shirt, Peter.”

Mr. Liveright asked me in a low voice, “Is your mother hard of hearing, also?”

“She hears fine.”

“She’s a celebrity around here,” said a woman in a silvery pantsuit, like a trout with legs. “Quite the dish. My husband says I should be more like Cristina, and I tell him that means he’d be stuck chattering with his mother every Sunday, end of discussion.”

The group laughed, and another woman mentioned wanting to *kill* Cristina Flores, that’s how pretty she was, and a man chimed in with, “I wish I could put her in a box and carry her under my arm.”

More laughter while I was flooded with words I failed to mold into a reply—kill her? carry her in a *box*?—and Riley said, “Where is this amazing creature? Other than avoiding all of you wishing her harm?” How had he failed to spot her at once?

And why couldn’t I have defended her with the same light wit? I excused myself. She was sitting on her chenille bedspread with its yarn flowers. She scarcely looked up.

“Mother,” I said, sinking beside her. “Are you not happy for me?”

She wrote “no i’m good,” the script barely decipherable.

I considered replying: *I’m not asking if you’re good.* You’re good, but so am I, and that’s why the house is full.

“I’ve thought of something,” I said. We had a cutaway view of the party, the fists grabbing Party Mix, my dad holding court. Riley Francisco Baldwin strode to the buffet, where Deanna offered a remark that made him crow with delight. “The old story about Isabel in Portugal doesn’t mention if she started speaking when she was married. I’m thinking it’s okay now, Mother. Okay? Talk to us. You and Daddy and I won’t fall over dead, and if we do, it’s a terrible God.” I had long been confused by her fidelity to a merciless Creator. I burst out with, “This is ridiculous. You’re moping, and sorry, but I want to be glad today, you know, the way you always are unless the spotlight is elsewhere. Mother?”

The Bakelite alarm clock ticked, and she grabbed her throat in a way that made me sit back, and she scribbled, hard and fast, “He crsht m/VBOX.”

*He crushed my voice box?* The first husband? She wrote nothing more. I was instantly acquainted with that phrase “unspeakable acts.” Isabel and the vow and the cloister with the birds and the nice marriage, wordless or not—*that* was the cover-story, the legend—to spare me?—because she’d been attacked, damaged.

“Jesus, Mommy,” I said. “I didn’t know.” She held my hand. She shed no tears.

Riley appeared and grandly inhaled. “A vision,” he said. (Me? Mother? Us together?) “You must be Mrs. Flores.” Mother, repaired, back to the act, beamed and extended her hand as if he should kiss it, and he obeyed and said, in a deliberately stagey, man-on-a-mission tone, “Your husband insisted I escort you back to your fantastic party.” He glanced at me and said, “No hiding out, now.” So, it was *her* fantastic party?

As if heading to a ballroom, their hands joined high, he led her, and I followed. He poured her a glass of wine, and she curtsied, and the breeze, as the door opened and our visitors began to leave, cooled my legs wrapped in their little panes of netting, in the room Mother had decorated as a dry-bed sea, with painted waves and shells. She tapped her throat while Riley entertained her in a manner that made her utterly luminescent. Light-dots flecked her corneas. Guests thanked her, and I figured it was her house, and I’d been applauded already for a brief play on a small stage. As Mrs. Baldwin swept Riley into the exodus, he waved to my mother, and if he gestured goodbye at me, I missed it, because Adele was teasing me about what I’d do for an encore.

When she stepped clear, he had vanished as if I'd imagined him all along. I ate the last dipped strawberry. My father and mother, alone again, collected each other, the waters having receded to show the glinting of the ruins. Mother with a dead man's hands squeezing her larynx, his grip tightening when her wild will, and her wish for a love story as good as any fable, defied him. Father kissed her with a tenderness that made me look away. Why, on today of all days, had she elected to knock me over with the truth?

Filomena Ana Flores. Riley Francisco Baldwin.

Cross out the letters in common—is this game still played by girls in agony?—and what I had left was M; YBDW. Love, Hate, Friendship, Marriage. Love. But this worried me, because the count of the letters did not yield Marriage.

He was President of the Drama Club within a week of joining Tulare Union mid-term, and he wore his Man of the World outfits—once, a zoot suit—despite being surrounded by ripped jeans and beaded necklaces and flyaway hair in headbands and sandals and Indian-print shirts. In drama class, I was a mediocre actress, but he was splendid. I was better,

though—the best in the room—at excavating the meanings of the written plays we studied.

He spoke to me after class, briefly, my heart pumping out faint sentences through my mouth. We discussed how I'd approach our assignments, and at intervals he inquired if I had ideas for a new play; for a long while, I had no notions worth fleshing out. I endured the fifty-minute period for the two minutes of Riley in the hallway before he'd rush off.

One afternoon during my checking-in with Riley, I was due home because Mother wanted to go to Loard's, the ice cream parlor. She had begun to gorge uncontrollably, slabs of coconut cake, onion dips with Fritos, crème de menthe on pineapple, and she craved the banana splits at Loard's, which couldn't be taken home. But she couldn't risk being seen eating fattening things alone; I was the prop to make it seem she needed to placate a child demanding a treat, and I resented her insistence on dragging me into the same drowning pool of butterfat.

"Filomena," he said, "another contest is coming up, and you should enter." Grinning, he handed me a brochure. I studied the sparse black hairs on his upper lip.

“Thanks. I hadn’t heard about it. And it’s Filly. I go by Filly.”

He said “Filomena” sounded grander, better suited to a writer.

He invited me to eat bear claws in the cafeteria, and instead of heading home for ice cream with Mother, I had a passionate, achingly solemn discussion with him about Eugene O’Neill. I’d typed out *Long Day’s Journey* in order to write my own lines that attempted to match his, granting my mother the central role of dwindling toward silence. This was fear; this was copying. But I knew the play so well I taught Riley how the mainline of action spiraled toward the meaning of night. I cannot recall the details of this first—what was it? a date? a study session?—since his hand brushing mine knocked me senseless, and I was tempted by the bear claws but determined to prove I had mastered every form of discipline.

When I sauntered home to Mother’s seething, I said, “Sorry, I forgot.”

She decided not to “speak” with me—she ignored me throughout our dinner of chuck-roast sandwiches, Daddy on the road—and I told myself this was no different from the usual.

Except it was: Her silence was disturbingly, reverberatingly deeper.

Another time, when Daddy went to Artichoke Joe's Bar with friends, she scribbled: "Go brg him HM." Her script was breaking down, abbreviating into a code I sometimes couldn't decipher. This was "Go bring him home," but what was "! F-a U<sub>4</sub> cln rm"? "Filomena, I'm furious at you for not cleaning your room"?

PLS!

Daddy was at Artichoke Joe's having a pint with Elias Archieta and Matt Adão, two of the Tagus Ranch foremen, and though I was only sixteen, Matt asked if I wanted "a belt." I declined, and my father said, "Your mother sent you?" and I said no, I just missed him. On the wall was a plug-in picture of Jesus Praying in the Garden.

We lolled for an hour, Elias doing a brutal imitation of Jimmy Baldwin, Riley's dad, barking out gruff orders, and I worked Riley into the conversation, talking about plays, and Elias said, "Filly, if his father has somewhere to be, he'd step over a man having a heart attack, so I hope his son is different."

"He is," I said. I sipped beer from my father's mug.



“Mr. Baldwin left the city for here,” said Daddy. “Another small fish in a big pond deciding to be a big fish in a small pond.”

Nerve-wracked to hear him speak ill of the Baldwins, I said, “They wanted more land, and here’s where to find it.”

When we arrived home, Mother rifled a beanbag frog from the Our Lady of Grace raffle at his head; he ducked, and it smacked the window. The bottlebrush plants on the other side seemed to waver. She stared at me, hands on widening hips.

“Crissy,” he said, “what in God’s name? I had two beers.”

Quaking with pique, she pointed at me.

“You sent Filly to do your bidding?” he said. “I invited her to sit.” He was able to read her better than anyone.

“Mother,” I said. “Take it easy.”

DONT TL ME 2 tk it EZ missy I askt U 2 brg him HM!! She wrote something furious at him, but he beamed at it, and she lightened up. Clutching each other, they stumbled off, leaving the notepad on an end table, and when I picked it up, a whoosh of motion swept behind me, Mother grabbing it, writing: NOT YRS!!

My glance had revealed: *U’re always gone so when U’re HM, Bill, U can’t be GONE.*

They made no effort to conceal going to bed and staying there, missing dinner. I grilled a cheese sandwich and ate it while reading Arthur Miller in my room. Daddy set out the following day with the winter line of chocolates, the company's refrigerator truck packed to the gills as he kissed us goodbye and pointed the engine toward Mendocino, Eureka, the Oregon Coast, Washington inlets.

Mother punished me in his absence by forbidding me to attend the Valentine's Ball, a warm-up for the prom three months later. (As if Vietnam were in an alternate universe, as if La Raza were not connected to us by arterial roads and fields.) I blamed her when I rounded a corner at school and Riley's hands were raking the hair of a girl whose name, even now, I cannot utter. I backed off, ran. She was milky-white and strong-boned, and she braided her wet hair and when undone it cascaded down her back in ripples. The Girl With Plaited Hair was in none of my classes, but I overheard her telling a friend that he was not very cool in those dumb suits, he was a geek and full of himself, but he was a great kisser, which she'd discovered at the Valentine's Ball, and he was rich and that, along with the kissing, meant a lot in this pathetic town.

When her compact of blusher fell from her leather-fringed purse in the bathroom, I kept it: Mauve Pleasure.

My method for dealing with The Girl With Plaited Hair was the same as when I'd wet the floor in grammar school: I pretended it was not true. I saw him with her occasionally, fleetingly, but I was stronger, with more of what he wanted in the long run, and didn't he corral me after drama class, taking notes when I divulged my analyses of the plays, coaching him for exams he excelled in, thanks to me?

One dinner when Daddy was home, I shared Riley's alerting me to a new playwriting challenge: The Lions Club was sponsoring a national high-school contest. Scripts had to be submitted to one of twenty California regional panels, and three plays in each group would be selected for staging. Judges in each division would attend performances staggered throughout a week in May. Regional victors would compete for the Northern championship or the Southern one, prior to a face-off to determine best in California. Round-robin playoffs would follow with other state winners, leading to a Western versus Eastern match and a national champion by summer's end.

I did not admit I was fretting about how to write a starring role for Riley Francisco Baldwin, but I did chirp out, as Mother gestured at me to pass the mashed potatoes, “I have a feeling. I’m going to win.”

Mother wrote, “Pride is a sin.” The page was stained with gravy. She’d spelled out each word. She slopped a new starchy wallop of potatoes onto her plate.

Daddy said, “Of course you will, Ballerina!”

“I’ll rock and sock them.” The rock-’em, sock-’em robots were a board game.

“Filly, you’ll knock and block them.” It was the era of Muhammad Ali.

“I’ll stalk and talk them.” “Talk” slipped out, and my use of it made no sense, though Freud would argue it had dislodged from a furious, fermented place.

Mother frowned and polished off her Swiss steak. My job had been to de-string the snow-peas and sauté them, and I’d botched it; they were unpleasantly raw.

Daddy refilled his wine glass and poured a dose into my empty water glass with its chipped outline of bathing beauties.

Mother slammed my glass away from me.

“For heaven’s sake, Crissy,” he said. “A little wine won’t kill her.”

“Maybe she wants to kill me,” I said. I stopped. Mother eyed me with a rage that was, immediately, murderous. “I won’t spill, that would give me a chill.”

He and I roared with idiots’ laughter. He was, I detected warily, drunker than I realized. Mother jumped to her feet, slammed her plate in the sink, and returned with a quart-sized carton of Rocky Road, her lips in a flatline.

“Seriously, Ballerina,” said Daddy, ignoring her serving herself dessert before we’d finished. “Tell me about your play.” Mother actively disregarded us as I told him airily the key would be to focus on my characters, and he asked me to explain, and I got showoff-y about Ionesco and Beckett, a smug snot-nose about how “white space can speak volumes,” and Daddy flashed a worried smile at my stony mother but said, “Gosh, Filly, where’d you get so smart? Not from your old dad or mom.”

I was stealing his attention, and I loved him and he loved me. Mother rapped her spoon on the table, smearing ice cream on the plastic-lace cloth.

“Order in the court,” I said.

He squeezed my hand to stop the runaway game and said, “I’m impressed, Ballerina. Isn’t she a beauty, Crissy?”

There are words for the rivalry of father and son; there are fewer, or none, for that state of affairs with a mother and daughter, so I don’t blame my father for being unclear why my mother was steamed that he was enjoying me, though he understood as well as I did that we were ganging up to needle her. When she went early to bed, after he and I sang along with “Up On the Roof” on the radio while we washed the dishes, I said, subdued, ashamed of myself, “Can’t we pay for surgery, Daddy? To fix her vocal cords.”

He stopped scraping the skillet and said, “What do you mean?”

I mentioned that she had told me that her voice box had been crushed, and surely there was a specialist who could...I didn’t know. Restraining the cords? Fix her? With an implant? *Because how did he stand it?*

“Filly,” he said, his black eyes basting me with a world weariness that usually takes centuries of history to instill in a culture, “I have no idea why she told you that, but we’ve been to

doctors, and her larynx got bruised but it's fine, or she'd be dead."

I clutched the sopping dishrag. Mother's explanation during my celebration was a lie? She could speak if she wanted to, as I'd always thought before? Like a child, she'd invented a story to make me forgive her for being a killjoy that day.

My father told me what he swore was the truth, as best he knew it, given that my mother was damaged in body, mind, and spirit, but not in soul. That was the saving grace: No one had her soul. Husband #1 beat her to break her protest. You want to talk miracles, it's a wonder her skin is flawless. He broke her left foot with a concrete block. Ripped out her hair. Choked her like crazy, sure. Her parents wouldn't take her back. He was a man of property. He once pulled off her blouse in public and left her on the street. The townspeople to the rescue? Are you joking? A gang once fell upon her in an alley, a man pissing in her mouth that other men pried open. All because she refused to speak. To show she did not consent to a forced marriage. People go wild when someone stands out, even if it's with quiet. They need to pummel world-class beauty until it's as wrecked as they are.

Think I'm making this up? I asked around. Rape? Certainly. She couldn't fend off her husband. She still never cried out.

She was eerily gorgeous, so a woman in a shop cracked a jam jar against her head. Tomatoes got thrown once, as if she were in vaudeville. She would not submit. *I'll never get over her, Filomena. I fell in love from afar and went to the police myself. Nothing. Her husband was the Chief's nephew. He locked her away for hours at a time, closets, the basement, and that's why she has an extreme need to be seen. Sometimes I broke into that house to rescue her, and no one else did, and our story began.* That sick fuck was never arrested, despite Cristina beseeching the police herself, writing HELP ME over and over, because back then, rape didn't exist in marriage, and her skin healed so bizarrely through the magic of her will that they didn't believe her. You try writing a convincing complaint when you're perfectly outfitted and speechless and drop-dead beautiful—funny term, that. She was too scared to run away and had no idea where to go. That criminal finally did her and me, and you and the world, the favor of blowing out his brains with a rifle. Fucking good riddance.



Sorry she lied to you, Filly, but a doctor can't fix what ails her. Her throat is healed, it's everything else that won't be, I've quit praying for that. She begged God to take that man away and went to the extreme of pleading that her vow would stay everlasting if she could stop waking every morning thinking it was her last.

My father gazed over my shoulder. I couldn't speak for a while. I said, finally, hoarse, my tone altered, *But how do you stand it, Daddy?*

"I tell myself her affliction, the not-talking, is based on actual damage," he said, ready to go to her. "Because, Filly, in the ways that matter, it is." I asked him to give her my apologies, and I would repeat them at breakfast. And I did, and Mother cocked her head and nodded and smiled at me before heading out on errands.

I would include her in my play. No, I'd make her the star. Contestants were supposed to assign the roles, and I wasn't good enough myself under the lights, but Riley was, and Mother would be, as suited her, the wild card.

In the weeks of dreaming up a script, fragments of scenes jolted through me. Someone would win San Joaquin Valley, then

Northern California, State, West, Nationals...if I scaled that far, I'd earn Riley's devotion and we would marry and be a Broadway or Paramount Pictures duo. Though I spotted him with The Girl With Plaited Hair, I was about to catapult with him to the heights. Our cafeteria dates—or whatever they were—lasted longer. I excited him about Chekhov. Let The Girl With Plaited Hair braid her wet mop into her futureless future.

One Saturday, when my mother was napping and my father was flinging chocolates around Sonoma, I roused enough courage to go uninvited to the house of Denise and Jimmy and Riley Francisco Baldwin. They lived in one of those Eichler homes favored by well-to-do families, glass framing an inner courtyard with a fountain that separated two sizable wings encased in slate-gray walls. Chinese lions guarded the rock garden with colored footlights, and I patted the one with her foot on her cub, for luck.

Mrs. Baldwin answered my knock, her hair pushed back in a terry-cloth band as if she'd stepped from the shower. She wore no make-up, which made her eyes beady; my mother was almost never seen like this even in front of my father and me, and

she certainly would have never answered the door without “her face on.”

“Filomena,” she said, “is there a problem?”

“May I ask Riley about our play? It’s important.” She waved me in. The sound of the fountain tapped my nerves quiet. I was inside an extravagance of glass. Maybe I was an insect under a magnifying lens, and the sun was about to torch my limbs. Riley appeared in a button-down madras-print dress shirt and the sort of Levis scorned as too neat. “Filomena,” he said, not very warmly. “What brings you here?”

I said I had a great idea, but before I plunged in, I needed to check if he thought it would work. Uh, him being in a major role and all, as we’d talked about?

He looked behind himself, as if expecting a rescuer to lurch from the nether regions. Mrs. Baldwin instructed us to sit in the living area, and Riley should be a good host and listen, and she’d bring us lemonade.

Eichler designs were noted for their openness and cleanness, and I had a frisson of awareness that I lived in the clutter of my mother’s making. He and I perched opposite a

photograph of a wave that filled the full wall with a roaring of water. It was silver, azure, an un-shy thing, the only décor.

We sat far apart on the modern couch, deep blue on silver legs.

A clock with umber spokes, without numbers, the second-hand ticking and the minute hand clacking, hypnotized him—couldn't he *help me out* here?—until his mother returned to set our lemonade on opal coasters on the glass coffee table.

"Filomena," he said, bristling, "it's not a good idea just to show up."

Why? Why? Why CAN'T YOU ASK ME TO GO SOMEWHERE?

"I need to talk through my idea before I lose it," I said, "and I rushed here because I—well, you're such a good actor you can tell me if it works, before I carve it in stone, and—"

"So, tell me." His line sliced the exact middle between impatience and attention.

I gulped tart lemonade. My notion was to tell my mother's story through a *Glass Menagerie* filter: Instead of a fragile daughter in isolation, I'd create a mute widow (sorry, Daddy!) who creates glittery surroundings but refuses to break out of her

shell. Her teenaged son and daughter argue over whether to let her drift farther into dreams—favored by the girl, named Charlotte—or to find her a suitor, which the son insists upon, and he offers a speech about the objects she’s created being a shield against the world. “That’s you, Riley,” I said. “The boy who wants her to find love and take her talents to a grander place. Shall I name him Francis?”

He shrugged. Go on.

She falls for a suitor who breaks her heart, after which other actors enact her history in pantomime, in front of her stunned children, the grotesque past that explains her withdrawal. They were innocent of it. She begins to flip through magazines, and cook dinner, and dust the house...and she throws out the enchanting objects she’s made and sits at a television. The special world she created is gone. Well done, children: You made me ordinary.

Her daughter Charlotte asks, “Mother, are you all right?”

The scarred heroine walks to the footlights and takes in the audience. She says, “I am.” She delivers it in a way that encompasses all permutations. *Here I am, myself, Cristina.* Although she is normalized into talking like everyone else, her

two-word declaration signals farther-reaching powers. She needs only herself to triumph. No more chores or television. Watch out for what she'll do—and say—now.

Or she means it ironically: She's broken and obediently mouthing what Charlotte wants to hear, but she's defeated, more damaged than ever.

Riley argued this conclusion was too hazy. I conceded that might be true, that I was peddling arty ambiguity. But Mother would give it a spin emerging from within herself. I would allow for her being, in the end, my co-author.

His nose was slightly crooked, and I wanted to touch where the bone curved. "But your mother won't be able to speak at the end."

"She can hold up a sign. My play's a work in progress." My secret idea was that the sign would be a crutch, there if needed, but it would indeed be the moment Mother spoke, her past gone and my language to her rescue. Telling the town: *Here I am. I'm speaking like you, but I never was like you, and now I'll be a bigger force to reckon with, talking back.* I would launch her made new, with a face-saving green light, freed, thanks to me, of her own ludicrous curse.

Jimmy Baldwin lumbered into our midst, ruddy- and hatchet-faced, with a bolo tie and tight jeans, right out of central casting for Landed Gentry Jackass. Denise tiptoed in to ask if we wanted Pop-Tarts; she had the brown-sugar ones.

“You look like what the cat dragged in, Denise,” said Jimmy. “Jesus H., we’ve got a guest. What’s your name, darlin’?”

I went scarlet. “Filly.” He asked; I answered; I was an idiot.

He yodeled. “Filly is right! You’re a legs-that-don’t-quit one, aren’t you, I’m a half mind to eat you up.” The wolf’s stare, the horseman’s bow-curved stance. I shrank inside myself. The snaps on his shirt were polished white.

“Christ, Dad,” said Riley. “What does that even mean?”

“Means you can’t see sexy when it’s got its tits in your face, but I can.”

Mrs. Baldwin got rooted to the spot.

“Denise, get my jacket. I’m not wasting my Saturday here with you looking like what you dumped out of the vacuum cleaner bag.”

What should I say? *She looks like Natalie Wood, although that’s way beside the point, you ogre.* This was too ugly to be real; it was Mother’s first husband.

I said, trembling, “Get on with that.” A town phrase tossed out at random to mean, mildly, shut up.

“I’ll get it on with you, honey pot,” he whooped. “Got some fight in her, I declare, Riley. Look at that, girl, he goes all quiet, same as his mother.”

Denise fetched her husband’s jacket. Riley’s head tilted downward. Long seconds ticked on the numberless clock until the front door shut behind Jimmy, and Denise evaporated into some reach of the house. Riley went away a thousand miles, and I laid a hand on his arm. “Take you for a drive?” I said, barely above a whisper.

To my surprise, he agreed. We rode to the Tulare Water Tower designed as a glass of milk with a straw pertly sticking up and “We’ve Got It” in bold letters to praise the dairy folks, and I said, “It’s a good sign. ‘We’ve got it.’ The competition. Riley?”

He was as far from me in the passenger’s seat as he could manage while still being in my Mustang. “I hate him,” he blurted, sobbing. “I don’t know how to save her.”

He scooted over to drop his head on my shoulder, and my arm went around him as I thought: *This is a moment in my life. I don’t know what to say, and I’m a failure at rescuing mothers,*



*but I'm with the boy I love.* An hour away, in the National Forest, stretched the world's biggest tree, a giant sequoia two-hundred-and-fifty-feet high. A rare swelling of affection for my hometown inundated me, with its carillon tower copying a major one in a harbor of the Azores, where I'd never been and which my parents seldom mentioned, yet those islands glinted as mine. "She knows how much you love her, even if you can't say it out loud," I said. I fished a tissue out of my carpetbag.

The Girl With Plaited Hair was slutty, and I was a brain, and Riley Francisco Baldwin probably had one of those complexes about keeping those kingdoms separate. Mother, holy. Smart girl, holy. Frowsy hair and blue make-up, there resided the earth. But then he kissed me, and we necked and groped as if with limited air in a bell jar, and on the verge of tidal throbbing, I stopped him because I needed assurance—yes, I was this young—that he was wholly mine.

I didn't foresee he'd pretend it never happened, that he'd ignore me, so I had to grab him after class and beg him to come over to rehearse the play with my mother, who had read it and, I said pointedly, "kissed me, she was so pleased."

My stomach's lining had felt flayed when I'd given my play to Mother, handed over my retelling of her with the enactments of choking, fists flying, and onlookers shoving her, for black-clothed extras to perform in silhouette behind a white sheet. While she stayed inside to read, I sat in boiling sunshine near the hollyhocks. The garden was my father's; he had a green touch, propping up stalks of fava beans and warbling at them; he cast down geranium stems that blossomed by morning. The yard faded in his absence and surged to attention the moment he walked outside, home, in his canvas shoes.

Mother appeared holding my pages against her chest. Her eyes, a shade of caramel, bore cataracts of water held intact by cataracts of light. She wore her periwinkle shoes with the clip-ons of garlands she'd made. Her dress was a fuchsia Hawaiian print. Palm trees, leis, hula girls. She stood in the doorway's arch. I regretted the final *I am*, because though I wanted to release her, I was terrified at what might come from that manhandled throat, unused since she'd been a few years older than I was now. I'd never heard a single enunciated syllable from her.

I went toward her and stopped a few feet away. She held up what she'd written on the final page: "F., this is SO FINE. My Billy told U everything I C."

I wish I'd looked directly at her. I studied the homemade roses on her feet.

Though she did not hug me, she anointed my forehead with a kiss. Her lips left stiffly raised strands of my hair as she withdrew. I touched her wrists, held them a little. She let me. Then she went into the house, to start the lentil soup for dinner.

My script got tapped for one of the three spots vying for San Joaquin Valley Regional Champ.

Riley showed up for the read-through bearing tulips, cellophane crinkling as he thrust them at Mother. Lupe Borges from school would play Charlotte, the daughter, but she had the flu, so I'd read her parts for now, and the cast behind the sheet enacting Cristina Flowers' horrific past would assemble at a later rehearsal. "You look smashing," said Riley at Mother in her best cocktail dress, silk with embroidered swans, wings spread in orange sky. Her crinoline petticoats, layered to a can-can-girl degree, rustled as she set the tulips in a vase. Daddy was on the road.

I'd gone to the Fernandes Bakery for bear claws, which I set on the coffee table. Mother patted her midsection and wrote: "No! I have a role to think about!" Almost overnight, she'd slimmed down to her old self of a man being able to span her waist with his hands.

Riley said, "You look fabulous, but right you are, Mrs. Flores. We need to be in fighting form. No pastries for me either." He planted himself on the gold-metallic sofa, and Mother's voluminous skirts took up the adjacent space. She crossed her ankles demurely. I described the play's outline, the difficulty of the emotional—

"I need to suggest one thing," said Riley. He was, for him, dressed down, in chinos, topsiders, and a T-shirt from the World Ag Expo. His hands chopped up and down at loaf-of-bread distance for emphasis. "This will require a lot of you, Mrs. Flores, but your bravery in telling your story will increase the admiration I already have, and the rest of the washouts in the contest won't know what hit them." He took her hand. "Mrs. Flores," he said, "is this story okay with you?"

I said, "Riley, Mother told me she's pleased. Yes, she's brave to allow this. I know. I wrote it." He was giving off not a

scintilla of a sign that we had kissed in my car, much less that this history would repeat itself.

He looked at me as if he weren't sure when I'd entered the living room. "Right, Filomena. Your words. But her...her *all* on that stage."

Mother wrote: I'm honored my talented F. wants to tell every-1 My Story.

We marched through the first act. Mother's role was a bodily one, a dance with her teenaged children played by Riley and me, and we quarreled about whether to leave Mom alone or push her toward a suitor, with Mother emoting and moving around us. "I get a say in what goes on in this house!" I yelled at a climactic point, so loudly he stared.

"You can't dictate someone else's life, Charlotte," he screamed in reply. He was supposed to pull Mother in distress toward the door, to inflict a date on her. Riley paused, his hand on her. "Filomena, I'm seeing a problem," he said. He wanted the son to champion letting her continue in her craft-y, fragile world; let the daughter strong-arm her toward marriage. He said, "Since men mistreated her, the son pulling her arm seems, I don't know, Filomena. Too rough."

“I like the script I wrote, Riley.” And I liked kissing you.

“Me too. But her son would feel she’s incredibly wonderful the way she is.”

Mother shrugged, deferring to me. It was hard to disagree about the son’s continuance of male force. I agreed to recalibrate my original plan.

We shouted the arguments in the second act and did the somber passages when Cristina has her heart broken after witnessing a new love embracing someone else in a dim half of the stage. Mother worked her face in a way I’d never seen, into a bearing so distraught that I stepped back from her, flabbergasted. Why did I mind that Riley reacted like that too? He emitted a vibration I could have sliced with a knife as he said, thunderstruck, “Cristina, you’re a movie star. My God.”

When we came to the end, I was nervous: Would she speak? Save it for the premiere? Refuse flat-out to comply at any time?

Before we could find out, Riley announced, “I thought up a better finish! Mrs. Flores! Cristina.” He guided her back to the sofa. I stood with my loose-leaf pages, the wooden performer. Mother’s swans were buoyed around her. He said, “The script

says you can hold up a sign, Cristina. But! How about ‘I am’ in sign language? Did you know I have a great-aunt who’s deaf?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said. I’d styled my hair with the curling iron. I had on my black jeans skirt and a black ribbed tank top and Portuguese gold earrings, the ornate, dripping style called the Queen’s.

He traced letters onto her palm as a warm-up.

He pointed at his chest with a slightly curved hand and moved it the length of his torso and said, “This is ‘I am’ in sign language.” I got startled to the root of me: It was as sensual as anything I’d seen in real life as opposed to a film. A sweeping gesture that doesn’t touch the self but offers it, and he ended with a flourish: hand moving open-palm toward the audience, the other hand rising open-palmed to join it. It was an ethereal minor masterpiece about the impossibility of connecting and the desire to do so.

My mother did it, tenderly.

“Wow,” said Riley Francisco Baldwin. “Starlight, star bright.”

He had rehearsed a number of signed phrases, guiding her fingers with his, a method of touching her that the townsmen

hadn't been shrewd enough to devise, including *I love you* (middle and ring finger down, pointer finger and thumb tipping an "L" toward the beloved; it looked like *Star Trek's* Spock pulling a gun.)

"We're off to a fabulous start," he said. "Cristina, do you agree? Filomena?"

"Sure," I said. "Do you like what I've written?" Do you still have your tongue in your head, after the way I tried to suction it loose and go home with it?

"That goes without saying, Filomena! I take your talent for granted. Apologies."

Mother wrote: Stay for dinner? F. made caldeirada.

"Sorry, Cristina, but I'm afraid I have other plans. I'm kicking myself, believe me." He leapt up the second she did.

I'd made an Azorean fish stew, praying that the scent of sautéing onions lingered; I'd read that frying them triggers an uncanny desire in men. Was he off to meet The Girl With Plaited Hair? My misery must have penetrated my mother, because she regarded me with as much fondness as I'd known her to have and wrote, "F., I'll help you WIN."



Riley said, "I'm sorry, Filomena. You didn't go to any trouble, did you?"

"No," I said. "No."

What followed was a small incident...but it was a flamethrower through my skull. We sat patiently as she wrote that it would be only her and me, but could he reach down the strawberry-pattern, special-occasion soup bowls?

"Let me at them," he said.

This required our kitchen stepladder; either she or I could have managed it, but Riley mounted the rungs and...my mother put a steadying hand on the small of his back. Kept it there.

I endured it. He finished. Ah, look, strawberry-patterned bowls.

His goodbye was a smack in the vicinity of my ear lobe and a friendly kiss on her jaw. She and I had the saffron-laced soup I'd spent two hours making; our silence was saggy instead of buoyant, and after refusing dessert, she put "I'm Into Something Good" on the record player and swayed by herself, graceful in her own slipstream. She laid her palms, with their traces of his sign language, flat on the bay window warm in sunset. She wrote: *R. is lovely I'll adopt him as a son & he'll b Ur brother.*

What—what—is the female equivalent term for ball-breaking and emasculating, for a woman de-sexualizing a girl? Unman, geld, neuter, castrate. Characterizing him as a brother dispelled the spores of my desire she was detecting; with one word, she called him her boy and plucked him from my arena.

She'd once driven me to an East Bay town called Castro Valley, (distance from Tulare, one-hundred-and-eighty miles), because the Monarch butterflies had, in their famous migration, decided that a corridor of that town's high school was worthy of a divergence. They spiraled above us, everyone snapping pictures of an orange rope like a dragon's tail broken into scales past the rattletrap lockers. Afterward, she and I played miniature golf at the Golden Tee and drank grape sodas. Mother wrote, "Such a miracle, F.!" Was that outing to make up for cruelties, or was she so damaged by cruelty she saw nothing as I did? Because the Monarch day was pure, that I know, that I do remember. It granted me insight into her wish to honor a God who offered such color and whimsy, and I did not have to be devout to believe, suddenly, thanks to my mother, that we can allow ourselves to perceive how all things are inflated with an ethereal air.

Riley and Mother rehearsed daily with Lupe Borges and the cast at Tulare Union. The role of Bad Suitor was taken up by Deanna's Uncle Carlos. They became tightly knit, and I was unsure what more to offer. I wasn't a director; Riley was superb at that.

If *The Girl With Plaited Hair* remained in the picture, I wasn't aware of it even in the part of me that abjured denial. He threw himself into fine-tuning his part and consulted me more than ever about class assignments. We conferred about my rewrites as the first round of the contest approached. Twice, to my puzzlement, we necked behind the bleachers, before I again broke away first, still wanting a declaration, a certainty. As before, none of this seemed on the table for discussion.

He and my mother expanded their—whatever it was. Bond, conspiracy. He fussed over her, complimented her, once plucked a splinter from the pad of her hand and dabbed a star in Mercurochrome over the wound. He claimed that their going all the way to a sit-in overnight at UC Berkeley (two hundred and twenty-eight miles) to protest the war was part of a shared belief in peace but also to expand the dimensions of Francis and Cristina in the play, the mute widow sensing that she can't raise

a voice, but her body can register a protest. Still open was the question of how she'd treat my ending, which I left ambiguous. Let Mother spring its meaning at the premiere, since she refused to reveal anything at rehearsals, merely smiling and walking off.

She came home aglow from Berkeley, grabbing her wrists to demonstrate being hauled off by the police. She couldn't have called about being delayed, but Riley had phoned to bay with excitement, "I'll take good care of her, don't worry." My outlaw mother waltzed back on fire, playing loud radio as she made spaghetti, and I bit my tongue because I needed her to perform so I could win. I'd taken to hiding, willing Riley to call me, which he sometimes did to speculate about "our competition," never bringing up why we weren't going on a normal date. He always extended his regards to "the spectacular Cristina." I'd inquire after his mother, and he'd get quiet and say, "Well, you know."

Denise Baldwin soon appeared in the steamed, up-close flesh. My father was home, arm around Mother as she wrote things, like a parent cheering on a child's schoolwork, until stern knocking interrupted them. I emerged from my lair.

Denise was shaking on the porch, and Daddy said, "Mrs. Baldwin, come in."

“No,” she said, crackling crisp. “No, thank you.” She was in a boxy, pastel suit, the type favored by Jesus ladies who handed out the “Are You Saved?” brochures.

“All right,” said Daddy, amused, and why not? His bride was joyful, his homecoming endearing. “Shall we come out there into the cold with you?” he said.

“I fail to see why you must top outrage with rudeness,” said Mrs. Baldwin.

“Hello, Mrs. Baldwin,” I said.

She seemed to be sucking on something sour. “I’ll be brief,” she said.

“I’m all ears,” said Daddy.

“Are you all ears, Mr. Flores? Because a lot of talk seems to sail past you. This woman—” and she pointed a finger at Mother, “kidnapped my son, took him overnight upstate. To a protest involving the police! In the rat’s hole called Berkeley.”

“Hmm,” said Daddy. “You need a drink or something, Denise?”

“You think this is funny? Our politics do not extend to that sort of—*display*.”

I was of an age when I assumed that someone I wanted to like would automatically share my worldview.

“Mr. Flores, we won’t allow your wife to seduce our boy, whether in actual fact or in suggesting he turn into a long-haired degenerate who doesn’t respect the law.”

My father laughed, and Mother’s deliberate impassivity worked Denise into a worse lather. “If she kidnapped Riley, then I should request a ransom,” said Daddy.

“You are flippant as well as irresponsible. Your wife is—wanton.”

“Mrs. Baldwin,” I said, afraid she’d insist Riley drop out of the play, “it was Riley’s idea to protest the war, he told me that, and he needed a grown-up to drive, and Mother did him a favor.” This was accurate but felt improvised on the spot. “It’s good she put herself on the line. Riley’s fired up about the play. It’s next week. See you there.”

Her lovely visage shifted, and I glimpsed a few layers below it, to the face that would go on to be ravaged by drink. “She gets to do whatever she wants, doesn’t she,” she spat in my mother’s direction. It wasn’t far off what I thought almost daily myself.

“She sure does,” said my father. “It’s harder for her voice to get counted, so I’m glad Riley gave her that platform. I thank Filomena for building a stage for them. We’ll expect you there, Denise. No business like show business.” With a firm click, he closed the door. He turned to my mother and said, “Really, Crissy. Were you flirting with a child? What in heaven’s name goes through that head of yours?” and he went for a drive and came home late, after I was in bed.

I stole a look the next day at her notepad. She’d scrawled: “He’s only a boy & that’s all, nothing/wrong! Bill! I did nothing WRONG.”

All was forgiven, as always, because my dad wanted peace to surround the premiere of “In Cristina’s Words.” My affection for him was unstinting: his easy smile, his wit. His gardening, his embraces.

Came the Big Night. I was beset with a sensation of wanting to call it off. Stouffer’s lasagna was for supper, my gut churning, but Mother was so serene she seemed in a chamber of a floating world. The role dressed her all in white, and she emerged with her costume altered. She’d sewn miniature electrical lights

connected on thin white wire onto the bodice and skirt, with a cord tucked in back, inside the white belt.

I said nothing. I was in black, ready to blend into the dark. Daddy commented about bragging one day that he'd known us when. I'd heard Riley speak my words, but now an audience would hear him, see him. Judge him, and me, and Mother, Lupe Borges, Carlos the shiftless suitor, and the volunteers enacting terror behind a screen, so unbridled they were chilling.

Tulare Union's auditorium smelled of salted snacks and citrus cologne, and my friends Deanna and Jackie wished me luck, their words underwater. Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin were present but self-contained. The judges, two women and a man, seemed suave but prickly. My dad said, "No matter what, Pumpkin, you're my star, my pumpkin and star," and he choked up, and I said, "Thanks, Daddy. I'm glad you're here." I sat with him as the lights dimmed, and much of life, I sensed, was like this. Something arranged and then feared and then underway and then done, strangers chiming in with their judgment. He clutched my hand, and when he found a line particularly good, he squeezed harder, grip and blood as semaphore. At one point, Riley/Francis yells at Lupe/Charlotte, "You're a fine one to talk



about her needing love! You're lonelier than a turtle in its shell!"  
I told myself I must not cry.

The audience was rapt, their attention billowing in waves. Mother wrapped the show in a parcel and tucked it under her arm. She was so injured yet self-aware that a savior's complex leapt from me to her, because I didn't know how else to lend myself. The tiny bulbs dotting her dress caught klieg refractions, tossed sparks. A stunner in a dreamland laced with torment. There is a passage in "In Cristina's Words" when her children despair of her future, and she displays a star ornament on her palm, and her gaze enters it. No one could have done this better. She added an actual, electrical lighting up of the star. How and when in the darkness had she found an outlet and replaced the stage star with one that could be plugged in? She tilted its blaze toward us, as if to say, *This story is about you too...does everyone argue about how you should behave? Force you to retreat to a stargazing of your own making?* Her expression collapsed into what I'd seen in photos of Bernini's Teresa in Ecstasy, and the audience gasped. It was sublime, it was erotic, it was Mother more talented than anyone knew. Riley pivoted to behold it. Her face kaleidoscopic, her carriage a work of art. As if her

wordlessness were not about her past or a promise but a method of training her body to intensify emotions that elicited an array of them from others.

The Suitor skewed his performance sufficiently toward an archetype, the villain facilitating the Failure of Love. Mother visibly ached with disappointment. Riley and Lupe did a fine job of reacting to the punches and choking of a woman behind the screen.

What would she do at the end? That's what I was waiting to discover: if she'd say "I am," how she'd say it, or not.

"Mother," said Lupe/Charlotte after the devastation of Cristina's/Cristina's heartbreak. "Are you all right?"

I held my breath. Riley and company saw the wisdom of my letting this moment speak, not knowing beforehand, because their tension and curiosity were as real as mine.

Cristina strolled to the edge of the stage. Her children had stuffed her scintillating creations into a barrel. It was not in my script, but she plucked them out to hang them in their original spots. She draped the white sheet—also not what I'd written—back in place over a high wire, cutting herself off from Francis

and Charlotte, isolating herself in her glass-menagerie version of existence.

She'd hidden more strings of white lights among the props and proceeded to hang them on hooks she'd apparently stuck into the sheet. The audience leaned forward, and so did I. What was she doing? I'd been dying since birth to hear her speak, and I'd made a whole construct, an entire play, to wrest that out of her. I wondered what Riley and Lupe were thinking behind the white backdrop, where she'd confined them. They stood as starkly as the anonymous players who'd enacted abuse against her. Did Mother think my asking her to please speak, vows be damned, put me in that category?

She plugged in the strings of lights hanging from the sheet, and over the outlines of her children, the white blinking like fireflies spelled out:

I AM.

All lines, easy to shape.

She unwound the cord tucked into her belt and plugged it into a socket, awakening the lights she'd sewn onto her dress, and then she posed in front of the final words in the solitary kingdom of her design, holding out her arms. The lights of I AM

appeared to feed into an explosion of constellations over her body. And there it was: I am my own self, I like myself as I am, I shall not speak, I shall defy my daughter and this play and all of you, but not God or myself.

The audience leapt to its feet. My father followed suit. I got up slowly. My mother was as exhilarated as a diva, expansive. Was pride no longer a sin? Riley, Lupe, Carlos, and the crew joined her, ceding to her the center. My dad ushered me to the stage for a bow. Mother applauded me. I must point that out. Riley applauded too. Everyone did.

At the reception in the gym, well-wishers surrounded the cast. Did I mind that she'd rewritten the finale so drastically? Her voice would have rattled but appeased me and electrified the town. But in the long run, it made sense for a mute woman to assert her differences, to declare that she could create beauty more vivid than anything the so-called real world provided, and she would not yelp obediently, on command. I drew her side to my side. She didn't pull away. I said, "Brava, Mommy. Everyone loved you," and her beaming was my reward.

Riley danced with Mother, and my father with me, after which Charles Petrini, my drama teacher, shared some Hawaiian

punch with me and said I would remain a prize, no matter what any judges declared. Riley asked me to slow-dance to “Love (Can Make You Happy),” and I should have been beside myself at this first full embrace, but it was like clutching a marionette. It felt dutiful on his part, and he made it a point of keeping a hand well above the tail of my spine, avoiding even a modicum of a suggestive touch, inducing in me a flare of hatred. We were awful dancers. But then he said pointblank, “You’re amazing, Filomena,” and I thanked him, and I counted his words as a better gift. Deanna partnered with Matt Adão, and Riley found my mother again, for “Crystal Blue Persuasion.” Mr. Baldwin, his social self, charming, no trace of crassness, said to me, “Congratulations, young lady.”

Mrs. Baldwin stared at her son with my mother and hissed, “Jimmy, do something.”

Mother and Riley were dancing a respectable space apart, nothing untoward. Jimmy said, “The co-stars continue in good form, I’d say, Denise.”

“Jimmy,” she said. She glared at Mother again.

“Boys are boys, right?” he said at me.

I said, “I suppose so.” He didn’t mind his son’s hands on the town beauty. It must have been solely his wife who’d been upset at the Berkeley adventure. The number ended, and Riley asked his mother to join him on the floor. She consented, and I feared having to pair up with Jimmy. But he only said, “I like people who excel. Well done,” and he shook my hand and excused himself to speak with work associates. Did the dragon breathe fire only in private? I danced a last time with my dad, and with Deanna, and when I looked beseechingly at Riley, hoping a second encounter would magically improve the first, he said he’d neglected Lupe, his co-star, and went to her. The last number found me with my mother, her in the white dress she’d remade in lights like theatrical lightning bugs, me in black like a night sky. Her eyes with their sheen met mine, and when I put my head on her shoulder—I let her lead our shuffling—she gripped my hair, holding me in place against her. I could not recall ever sensing her actual heartbeat, but there it was, radiating into my own chest. I felt the hard bumps of the star-lights she’d attached to herself. Oh, Mother: I cannot recall the song, having entered a soundproof chamber to be with you. And

then this span of grace was over, and it was time to be on our way.

“In Cristina’s Words” won the Regional title and advanced to the Northern California match-ups. Reviewers noted that Cristina Flores was superb, majestic, and grand, and Lupe Borges helped carry the show. Riley was “adequate.” One commentary slammed the production as “overwrought” and “derivative of Tennessee Williams.”

The Northern California championship went to “Martin” by Regina Hendricks of Castlemont High in Oakland, about Black teenagers mourning the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. by chaining their stories onto those of their grandparents. It deserved to win; I’d despised that reviewer accusing me of using Williams’ blueprint because it was true. I’d told a fable from my eccentric house, but the form, the girders, had not really been mine, and the verdict gave me an unexpected lesson in being gracious in defeat. The national winner was from a small town in rural Massachusetts, the story of a family surviving the death of a child—it cut close to the bone, and I admired that it relied on honesty, no flourishes—true pain. I entered a phase of not being sure I was good enough. My mother, however, kept her hunger

for attention, got arrogant, held her head high, offered condescending nods. Her wardrobe, never abashed, became so extravagant she seemed on a detour from the Waldorf-Astoria when she shopped at Safeway.

The Girl With Plaited Hair moved on to some biker thug, but Riley ignored me. Instead of noticing that I was grieving that my first love had died before arrival, Mother scrawled notes commanding me to CHR é. *Cheer up.*

Pig Day at the Farmer's Market. My father avoided it because he retained nightmarish memories of the matanças of his youth, the slaughtering at festivals, the shrieking of stabbed pigs, the nauseating floral decorations dolling up the eviscerating slit of the flesh hanging from trees. But Mother was on the church committee to raise money for missions in the Philippines by serving desserts and salads along with "farmed" spareribs, carted in from the valley after a mass killing, which men wearing "Kiss the Cook" aprons would barbecue. My friend Deanna refused to attend with me, and I felt bereft and guilty because she was likely exhausted with my bellyaching about my mute sex-bomb



mother, my suave and chocolate-toting mystery-dad, and the whole Riley-thing.

A petting zoo included a miserable-looking llama and a pen of pigs that loved me because they scented out that none of their brethren's bodies were incorporated into mine; I shared my father's aversion to pork. Also present was the horrifying incarnation of Ellie Duarte as the Pig Lady, in a stretchy pink outfit and a snout. At the Our Lady of Grace booth, Terri Teixeira was garbed in the type of full-bodied apron worn by butchers and Mrs. Santa Claus as she supervised the display on the gingham tablecloth of three-bean salads and marshmallow ambrosia. Leila Lopes was arguing that the lime Jell-O ring should stay refrigerated in the community center until the ribs arrived. Smoke rose from the grills while the men drank from long-necked beers. Lisa Ramires was vehement about putting "HAS NUTS" on an index card to flag Jeannie LaMott's brownies. Mother was in a lemony sundress with sequined fruits. She was in one of her cavorting moods, and I almost said aloud, "They're going to kill her before I get to do it myself." She was ignoring the ladies calling for her as she dallied near the grill-men, twirling in her bouffant dress, overestimating the town's reverence. When

Betty Cruz slammed a Corning-ware dish, Mother gave a mocking jump. I wanted to find somewhere to hide.

When I spotted Adele Meyer at a picnic table, I joined her, knowing it would annoy my mother. Adele wore a mini-dress with a Peter Pan collar and greeted me warmly. I ran into her on occasion. She seemed to have come into a windfall, an inheritance, because she'd quit working at the newspaper and suddenly lacked the tension of almost everyone I knew, a tension always rooted in worry about money. Now she was on the board of art organizations and involved with the Chamber of Commerce, a sponsor of dopey Pig Day—the only possible explanation for her photogenic presence.

"You're shaking, mon petit chou," said Adele, lighting a menthol Virginia Slim. She should have lived in the roaring twenties. Her French-manicured nails were white.

"I worry about my mom, Miss Meyer. She's pissing off the other ladies. She offers to help out and then never does."

"Mmm." Adele blew a jet of cigarette smoke; I'd never seen her eat food. "It's Adele, first of all, Filly. Call me Adele."

My mother was doing a tap dance, the men egging her on.

"Not subtle, is she," said Adele.

“I guess not. I never know what to do with her, what to say, Adele, you know? She’s a victim of—”

“She is a monster. The type who devours her young.”

A whoop arose as Mother mounted one of the ponies trotting round and round, tethered to a platform, meant for the children. She was keeping the men from getting on with their One Task of barbecuing, and the aggrieved wives were glaring. On the table was an industrial-sized jar that once held mayonnaise, dollar bills stuffed inside. Her Tinkerbell whimsy continued as she hopped off the pony when mariachis began playing in the bandshell, and she danced with the men and clapped to the music. They seized the chance to spin her, and she bestowed merry kisses on cheeks, creating a minor frenzy of pushing to get to her, to claim a turn. The men pecked her back, daring to get closer to her mouth, with Mr. Teixeira anointing her ear, then her temple. Every female witness froze as much as I did, willing this to stop. One man dipped her and, upon releasing her, spanked her rear. But then she grabbed Mr. Cruz and gave him a movie-level hot kiss, to whoops and catcalls.

Betty Cruz sped over and threw an elbow to jolt my mother off-balance. Adele, putting out her cigarette under her

espadrille, assessed the danger a split second before I did. She straightened and said, “Uh oh. Someone should—”

A woman grabbed the huge mayo jar and swung it at my mother’s head. She ducked, and the glass fell and shattered, a call to the women to unleash a pageant of petty acts. Pinching Mother, shoving her. Adele stood and said, “I’ll find a phone in case we should call the police. Go to her. Now. Hurry up, Filomena.”

And I did. Still at a substantial distance, I watched Babette Martin shouting a few inches from my mother’s face, and Mother stumbled backward, and the men began pulling women away from their Cristina. Mr. Cruz stood to the side, receiving his wife’s outpouring of rage. A woman grabbed a hank of Mother’s hair. I began to run. Lisa Ramires had been bearing a platter of chicken breasts toward the barbecue, and she dropped it near the salads so she could slap Cristina in her lemon dress in the center of the little mob. When Mother slapped Lisa in return, the shouting and shoving escalated. I was knocking people aside, yelling, “Mother! Mommy!”

And then the planet stopped spinning and split open.

Cristina Flores bellowed. Fists on her knees, mouth open, she screamed, “FILOMENA!” Unearthly, wrenching. Syllables loud and clear, gushing out of a well thought dry. “FILOMENA!” She collapsed to sit on the ground, scratches bloody on her face.

“Mommy!” I cried. “I’m here!”

“She can talk?” said someone.

People are predictably, dumbly amazed when their fangs draw blood and the victim howls. Everyone was sorry, everyone subdued.

“You’re all right, Mommy.” I shoved Mrs. Cruz hard so I could reach my dazed mother, her dress torn, looking up from where she sat. The shattered jar was like a broken glass jaw. Mother said, “Oh, Filly. Thank you, Filly.”

“Up you go, Mother,” I said, helping her rise. “You’re okay.” She simply hadn’t known how much everyone hated her.

“I am not,” said my mother, a haunted channeling from her chest.

A police siren. Adele must have put in the call.

“I’ll take you home, Mama,” I said. “Your poor dress. Your beautiful dress. You’re the prettiest woman anywhere.” I willed her to look at me, and she did.

“Where did you go?” asked Mother mournfully. “Filly, I couldn’t see where you went.”

Calmly she said to the police, “I am fine. No need for you.”

*Oh, Mom. The first words I ever heard from you were my name. I do love you, you impossible woman. If you’d been born in my generation, you’d already be a fashion designer, actress, artisan. What a tour de force, to have kept silent this long. I couldn’t manage that a single day.*

Our home entered into mourning for her lost glory. She required assistance with climbing out of bed, and I fed her cinnamon toast. To select an outfit, I said, “Isn’t this your favorite, Mommy?” and draped a notepad on her, urging her to write things if she preferred. Lupe Borges dropped by; everyone who’d been in my play offered aid and kind words. Now she was a housewife in her mid-forties whose gaudy jewelry wasn’t wanted. Sometimes her voice flowed, but more often it came out as cawing, jagged words catching in her throat. Once I sang her a lullaby. *Rock-a-bye, baby...on the treetop...thy cradle is green; Father’s a nobleman, Mother’s a queen...* My father became attentive. They exchanged live words. He gave up the farther

reaches of the Pacific route for Excelsior Chocolates to care for his wife, though the real reason for sticking close to home would not be apparent for a while.

The other members of the “In Cristina’s Words” cast might have lit into Riley for being the only one not to contact her, or he’d heard the word circulating in town, because he commenced showing up with gifts. How could I tell him he should stop making her happy? She brightened to see him. Fresh calamity was set in motion as their crush flourished. One time she dressed for his sake in a peppermint-pink number with a peplum and gold-braid trim, and he held her hand, cooing, “We’re worried. Your daughter and me.” Her voice gurgled and her jaw worked, as if she were ejecting a baby bird. Riley’s eyes widened, and despite everything, despite this display, I was filled with desire and sorrow again, because he looked deeper, kind and handsome in his peculiar way. When she said, “In this dress, I look like a baton-twirler,” he replied, “No, you look nice.” He’d hug me briefly whenever he left while whispering his dismay, asking what we should do.

I had no idea. Especially since it was clear that he’d fallen even more deeply in love with my mother despite his plan to

attend UCLA. They enacted, in my presence, a tearful farewell. They promised to stay in touch with letters.

Meanwhile I attended the University of California at Santa Barbara—a laughable attempt to prove I had moved on from Tulare and my parents and would keep a suitable distance from Riley. It made me lonely, adrift. In the manner of late-bloomers, I needed long recovery periods after my love affairs, all of them short, fiery, and inane. Somehow, I managed to write a play performed to excellent reviews in an abandoned lamp shop off Sawtelle Boulevard in Los Angeles.

I invited Riley Francisco Baldwin to one of the matinees. He was in pre-law at UCLA, and wonder of wonders, we had a marvelous reunion and went on to trade stupendously imbecilic, philosophical letters, since he was minoring in Theology. Is God all center and no circumference (Aquinas)? If patience is the “companion of wisdom,” (St. Augustine), what is the role of ambition? What hills are ours to die on? Why did Einstein proclaim we “can’t blame gravity for falling in love”? If Shakespeare said love looks with the mind and not the eyes, what is the role of attraction? Why does looking sharp make us feel sharp? What appalls about beauty to the point of assault? What



*is* the effect of gamma rays on man-in-the-moon marigolds? Why doesn't the milk truck stop anywhere anymore? Why did Confucius call silence the friend that never betrays?

Now and again our letters focused on the state of Cristina Flores. Because he continued to exchange imbecilic, philosophical letters and calls with her too. He found her counsel "wise." He sought to cure her anger. I mostly ignored it, going home rarely, avoiding my mother's complaints and outrage over nothing, over the sins and slights of others and the increasingly long absences of my father. My own fear about what this might portend expanded my reluctance to contact her.

After my undergrad years, I moved to Los Angeles, presumably to be nearer to stage and screen, though I was lying even to myself; it was also to be nearer to Riley Francisco Baldwin, who made just enough time for me to keep me on the hook without being a true boyfriend. We did not sleep together. Riley had a girlfriend named Tanya at one point. I had more brief affairs that even I knew were undertaken because they wouldn't last, in case Riley finally woke up to a love that, try as I might, I was incapable of extinguishing. I was not unaware that Mother's ongoing attachment to him, including visits when he returned to

Tulare, was part of his allure—I wanted to defeat her, to make it plain that he was not my brother but someone who adored me better, best. I used the torment from this to fuel success: At age twenty, I had a show at the Long Beach Playhouse about the daughter of a traveling salesman dating a wealthy boy with valley money; it would garner nice reviews and a year-long run.

Then came a shock, with more shockers on its heels. I shaped them in my favored new form, because otherwise I would not be able to voice or endure them.

#### **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*Riley Francisco Baldwin*

early 20s,  
Mexican-  
Cherokee-white

*Filomena Maria Flores*

early 20s, Luso-  
American

*Cristina Medeiros Flores*

40s, Luso-  
American

*William Flores*

40s, Luso-  
American

*Adele Norris Meyer*

30s, willowy as a  
model

## **SETTINGS**

Studio Apartment, West Los Angeles

A dorm room, Los Angeles/split stage with studio apartment.

Tulare home.

Arts & Crafts upscale home, Berkeley Hills.

Italian restaurant, Los Angeles.

## **TIME**

1981-2. The present.

## **ACT I**

### **Scene 1**

**SETTING:**

The white-beamed interior of  
Filomena's studio apartment  
suggests a ski chalet in Los

Angeles. There is a SOUND of cars. An orchid rests on a sill.

The stage is divided by a wall, with RILEY FRANCISCO BALDWIN in a dorm room littered with clothing.

AT RISE:

FILOMENA FLORES drinks coffee. The furnishings are spare.

FILOMENA

(into phone)

Riley, the war is over. You don't need to hide in a seminary.

RILEY

(also into phone, crossly)

But I want to be a Franciscan.

*Filomena stares out a window.*

RILEY

Filomena?

FILOMENA

I'm picturing you in a brown-sack dress and  
knotted cord.

(laughs hysterically)

RILEY

Jeez, Fill. I want to be a fucking priest.

FILOMENA

What about law school? What about me, us, your  
friends?

RILEY

Your mother helped me decide. I can do more  
about social justice as a priest. St. Francis said,  
'Preach the Gospel at all times, and when  
necessary, use words.'

FILOMENA

My mother. Telling you to sit in dry-dock, where  
no woman can have you. Official leave from normal  
life.

RILEY

She and I are close. I knew you wouldn't  
understand.

FILOMENA

No, I do. A parish gives you a job so you don't have  
to compete with your moneybags dad. All those  
women hanging on your every word in sermons.  
Fuck you.

RILEY

Fuck you back.

*Both slam down phones.*

(BLACKOUT – SCENE END)

ACT II

(All Scenes in Act II occur one year after Act I.)

Scene 1

SETTING:

A stucco-walled living room features craft projects visible everywhere, walls, furniture, etc.

AT RISE:

CRISTINA FLORES, in a housedress and heavy make-up, is a faded beauty. Her daughter, FILOMENA FLORES, is tense. Lights blink on a Christmas tree. Artificial snow forms stenciled bells on the window.

Cristina ties ribbons on  
wreaths. She drinks wine.

FILOMENA

Where's Dad?

CRISTINA

Working. Big holiday demand for chocolates.

FILOMENA

Did you talk Riley into being a priest?

CRISTINA

Glad you think I have that much power, dear.  
You're blind.

FILOMENA

Could we please have a nice Christmas?

CRISTINA



You can't wait to get away from me! Just like your dad!

FILOMENA

I'M HERE! Mom, where is he?

*Cristina gulps wine, tearful.*

FILOMENA (CONT.)

Adele. He's with Adele Meyer. Isn't he.

CRISTINA

Think I didn't see it coming? YOU should have seen it coming with Riley. He was always confused, and religion is a good answer. You should try it. I have photos of him in the seminary. Want to see them?

FILOMENA

No. Mom, you need to make friends. Jeannie LaMott. Cindy Marques. They like you.

CRISTINA

Good-oh. I don't like them.

FILOMENA

Then suffer.

CRISTINA

(pauses with glass at lips)

You bitter child. Writing stories instead of living them. You let that nice Graham go because a family would get in the way of your *career*. You seduce men and toss them away.

FILOMENA

Seducing men! You wouldn't know about that!  
You're only the world's biggest tease.

(vulnerable)

I always thought he'd be in my life, Mom. Riley.

CRISTINA

I thought my Bill would always be in mine. And you, too.

FILOMENA

I. Am. Here. Do you have Dad's address?

CRISTINA

You are not going to see him. That Glamour Puss.

FILOMENA

I'm mad at him. But I need to see him.

CRISTINA

You do that, you're not my daughter.

FILOMENA

Nope, Mom. You're stuck with me.

CRISTINA

I won't speak to you if you talk to that woman.

FILOMENA

Since you spent ages pretending you were mute, no  
big loss.

CRISTINA

(slamming craft items to the floor)

Riley is more of a child to me than you are!

FILOMENA

HE CAN'T BE YOUR CHILD, BECAUSE THEN  
YOU CAN'T FUCK HIM! HURRY, BEFORE HE'S  
ORDAINED! PLEASE, BOTH OF YOU, GET IT  
OVER WITH! GO FUCK RILEY IN L.A. Before he  
has to give parishioners advice on fixing their lives.

CRISTINA

You're...ugly. Get out of my house.

FILOMENA

(grabbing her jacket)

Merry Christmas. It's been real.

(BLACKOUT – SCENE END)

Scene 2

SETTING:

Upscale Berkeley Arts &  
Crafts  
house, polished maplewood.  
Evergreens are visible through  
enormous windows.

A wedding. A cake, champagne, chairs adorned with chiffon bows. ADELE MEYER, in a white bridal mini-dress, kisses WILLIAM FLORES in front of a MINISTER.

Two dozen GUESTS LAUGH at the prolonged kiss. Filomena sits mute. A beaming Adele turns, revealing that she's pregnant.

(BLACKOUT – SCENE END)

ACT III

Scene 1

SETTING: Mezzaluna Restaurant, Los Angeles, has half-moon wallpaper. The old-style WAITERS wear bowties.

AT RISE: FILOMENA's bobbed hair shows the passage of time from Act I. She wears a lace dress. She eats a breadstick, checks her watch. ITALIAN OPERA plays. RILEY enters. He's gained weight. His hand rests on his middle.

FILOMENA

Oh, Riley. Dear Riley.

*She leaps up to kiss him. He smiles.*

RILEY

Filomena. Lovely as always. Sorry I'm late.

*The WAITER comes by.*

RILEY

(to waiter)

The osso bucco and a Scotch. Filomena?

FILOMENA

(to waiter)

I don't drink. Sage ravioli, please. Two fennel  
salads.

(to Riley)

Last overload of meat and liquor before the vows?

RILEY

Starting right in with the hard time?

FILOMENA

No. I'm glad to see you. Sorry we've been out of touch.

RILEY

Your mother keeps me up to date. As much as she can, since you won't speak to her.

FILOMENA

She's the one who won't talk to me, Riley. Is that why you wanted to meet? First saintly project, fix bad Filomena.

RILEY

Reach out to Cristina. She can be difficult. I have her reading books about forgiveness. She's not sure you love her, but she forgives you.

FILOMENA



For what? I love her, Riley. She's my mother. The divorce is hard on her. Adele's having a baby. I have reached out to Mom, just for the record.

*The scotch and salads arrive.*

RILEY

I agree with her that divorce is the easy way out.

FILOMENA

If you're referring to my father, he's perfectly happy. I've forgiven Adele. She's been great with me.

RILEY

'Happy' is a blanket term for doing the easiest thing.

FILOMENA

Nothing about my mother has ever been easy. You have some nerve lecturing me about parents.

RILEY

Guess I don't think much of marriage.

FILOMENA

You're supposed to be able to counsel parishioners.  
Who'll be married, a lot of them, Riley.

RILEY

Yes, but I think it's an outmoded institution.

FILOMENA

The priesthood isn't outmoded? Or an institution?  
(She and Riley gaze at each other. He  
grabs her hand.)

RILEY

I'm nervous, seeing you. I'm being argumentative,  
because all us boys try to be cool holy men, we sit  
up late, debating. Defining right and wrong from

the comfort of our dorm. You're my friend, Fill.  
Cristina said you've got a play on Broadway?

FILOMENA

No, I have a play in Long Beach. Big difference. My  
mother has trouble keeping real-life stories  
straight.

RILEY

She wouldn't deliberately lie.

FILOMENA

Did I say she lied?

(awkward silence)

I'm seeing an architect. We're trying to decide if we  
should live together. Will that meet your approval?

RILEY

If you have to wonder too much about whether to  
live with someone, the answer is probably no.

FILOMENA

Lots of relationships thrive on uncertainty. Riley,  
do you ever think of me? With any regret.

RILEY

Why would I regret knowing you?

*Their main courses arrive.*

FILOMENA

I forgive my crazy mother. And you for being in the  
seminary. What's the word for what you are? You  
know, pre-priest.

*She eats ravioli. He carves osso bucco off the bone.*

RILEY

Ordinandi. I thought you were the wordsmith.

FILOMENA

I don't know everything, Riley.

RILEY

You know how beautiful you are? You got dressed up for me.

*He tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. She GASPS. He moves his chair closer.*

RILEY (CONT.)

Filomena. I'll have plenty of rules soon. We've been arguing about them at the seminary. The prohibition against celibacy. It's foolish. But the guys want me to put my--whatever--where my mouth is.

FILOMENA

(faintly)

What?

RILEY

I know you'd like to fuck me. So great.

FILOMENA

Uh. Wow.

RILEY

I said I'd prove before we got ordained that celibacy  
is for the birds. Would do you say?

(Filomena, trembling, leaps up. She  
dashes money from her evening bag  
on the table and fights tears.)

FILOMENA

So I'm convenient. A poker chip in a boys' gab fest.  
So you can be the renegade priest. Ask my mother  
for that kind of help, Riley. You make me sick.

(BLACKOUT – END)

Adele Meyer Flores gave birth to a baby girl; she and my father named her Helene. He thrived in the Berkeley Hills, cosseted by Adele's riches, where he remade himself, with her connections, into a sportswriter for the *Chronicle*, growing past everyone's assumption that he was merely a handsome toy plucked by Adele for home use. She became replete with warmth. On their first anniversary, Adele and my dad unearthed the remainder of the pistachio-cardamom wedding cake from the freezer, and Adele dished out crepes for friends amid piano playing and games of Hearts, where, for the first time, I succeeded in shooting the moon. Adele gently tossed me, her new, grown stepdaughter, into the magical rings of people with wherewithal in the arts. She took me to New York, to assure me that shows on Broadway were populated with flesh-and-blood people like me, and she lavished opera gloves on me at Bloomingdale's before tea at the Plaza.

A second child, Michael Charles Flores, was born, and I was his godmother.

I no longer remember what triggered a long spell of the cold war with my mother in my early thirties, though likely it sprang from my fondness for Adele. I was living in Los Angeles with Wyatt

O'Malley, the architect I'd mentioned to Riley during the horror-show evening at Mezzaluna, when Riley petitioned me to rumple the sheets with him so he could gain luster as a rebel-priest. Wyatt and I were planning to wed; we remain together all these years later. I was teaching playwriting at USC, and my plays began appearing throughout California, especially at the Long Beach Playhouse and—a triumph—Berkeley Rep, and Chicago opened welcoming arms in its byways, and even New York did that, off-Broadway. But I missed my mother awfully, so I do recall, with a clarity like ice flooding my arteries, when I got a phone call from Scott Bellini, a public defender for Tulare's Superior Court, telling me that Cristina Medeiros Flores had been arrested for assault.

Scott Bellini had a stripped-bare voice, but there was rising excitement in it, a sensing of a gift about to cap his thankless career. Cameras, he said, would eat my mother clean up. "She took a baseball bat to a stranger, Miss Flores, and he's in traction. Busted ribs, perforated liver. Dislocated shoulder, broken jaw. Golly."

Someone named Bobby Miller had been beating his wife Susan for ages; she went by Sunny, because she tried to radiate



cheer so her children would not be overly frightened by daddy's fists landing on her for the felonies of late dinner, a mismatched sock. Three times, she called the police; three times, they tossed him into the drunk tank before packing him home with a bored warning. He installed irrigation pipes, and a coworker sick of Bobby's lordly and combative ways relayed details to a female reporter at the *Visalia Times-Delta*. Photos of Bobby Miller and Sunny Miller appeared on page five for a piece about domestic violence. But Bobby faced no real reckoning, not only because no warrant existed for a specific crime but due to his being miraculously wreathed with goodwill and forgiveness by declaring that "Jesus my Lord has saved me." This lie would turn out to be highly significant to my mother.

I mentioned to Scott Bellini that my mother had been almost murdered by her first husband, now dead. The police had done nada.

The invisible man on the other end of the line scratched on a notepad.

While at a toy store, thinking that Cindy Marques might like a stuffed giraffe while recovering from pneumonia, my mother had seen Sunny purchasing a caboose for a Lionel train

set. This might have been for one of her boys, but my guess is that it was for Bobby. According to the police report, my mother zeroed in on the purple thumbprints on Sunny's neck, and when a deer-in-headlights Sunny turned to Cristina, she better displayed what my mother, with her theatrical precision about colors, called "an eye haloed by aubergine bruising."

Bobby at the exit barked at his wife to hurry up. Cristina grabbed a baseball bat from the sports rack, and onlookers confirmed that she "whaled" on him. Surprise caught him off-guard; here was a cinched-waist beauty with a jeweled belt and a skirt with appliqués of dolphins swinging a weapon with dazzling force. She clocked the bat under his jaw; she slammed it onto his shoulder blades and later insisted she'd been aiming for his skull. That brought him to his knees. She swung wood against bones, and when he was screaming at the sound of cracking, my mother lifted the bat to do God knows what, whereupon a clerk, jolted at last into action, disarmed her.

"Well," I said. How I miss those telephones with their spiral cords. One could straighten the curls, entwine fingers through them.

“Thing is, Miss Flores,” said Mr. Bellini, “she refuses to stop saying, ‘I was trying to kill him.’ We could plead aggravated assault. And, or, battery. He’ll need surgery on his liver, and physical therapy. Jesus. She doesn’t seem the violent type. She looks like—is it okay to say this? About your mother? Whoa. Va-va-va-voom, tanned Grace Kelly. Y’all are Portuguese, yes? Hot passions, hot tempers? I shouldn’t say that. Sorry. Anyhow. The prosecutor is calling it attempted murder. With assault, she’ll get a sentence—tons of witnesses—but it’ll be a lot lighter, so could you talk to her? Tell her to stop saying, ‘No, no, I was trying to murder him.’ The newspapers are going nuts.”

This is not the story of the trial of Cristina Medeiros Flores—but the upshot is that Scott Bellini in fact underestimated the attention she would receive. Coverage went from local to statewide to national; television stations went berserk. *Ms. Magazine* would put her on a cover with tape in an X over her mouth. Her native Azores would welcome her for a TV segment, though she’d emigrated with her parents in infancy. (They never came from Reno to the courthouse, never got in touch.) Sunny would divorce her husband, take her children, and get a job as an assistant at a law firm in Fullerton.

My mother was found guilty only of misdemeanor assault—this is miraculous—and spent one month in jail, whereupon her fame exploded into celebrity status. She wrote a giddy letter to a reporter about looking “just awful” in orange. She handed them their headlines.

But the day I bailed her out pre-trial marked a last twist to the storyline of Mother and me. While driving her back to our Tulare house, I said, “Mommy, for God’s sake, what got into you? Stop saying you were trying to kill him.”

She was as ebullient as I’d ever seen her, hair coiffed under a rhinestone headband. Her skin had always been flawless, but she looked downright dewy and—young. Time-reversed young. We did not mention our estrangement. She smiled and said, “But I was trying to kill him, Filly.”

“You can’t say that on the stand.”

“Why not?” After we arrived home, she blurted something that shocked me. We were in the living room with the doors lacquered with beach pictures, the limpets on her artworks faded. “Filly,” she said. She’d changed into her shoes with blue sequins, to match the eyes of the peacocks on her frothy skirt. “I broke my vow with God, and He punished me terribly.”

I went to sit beside her. Even knowing her story, I've always struggled to accept that people will seriously attend upon invented mandates regarding the other world. I still tended to characterize her former muteness as an attention-seeking act. But she had promised never, ever to speak with her vocal cords if God relieved her of her first husband. "I lost my Bill after breaking my vow, and I lost you. Didn't I," she said.

"Mommy," I said. I told her that I was here now. I was here. "I like to think—" I stopped; I held her hand, as we'd done when I was a child but rarely since. "The first thing you said aloud was my name, and God probably likes that." I wanted to add, "I certainly did," but I couldn't manage it.

"Bobby Miller kept *braying* in that newspaper article that Jesus was 'calling the shots' in his life, and that reminded me of—." Her turn to pause. Her nails were mother-of-pearl; how had she kept them unchipped in jail? She'd made herself popular in the holding cell by helping the other women style their hair. "It reminded me of Riley. I found something out, and it makes all his nonsense about finding God, and getting a holy message about a vocation—that's how he put it in letters, that God was

whispering at him—into a mockery. Are you in touch with Riley?”

Oh, Jesus, take the wheel. “No, Mommy. He was long ago.”

And she fetched a printout for me. One day, she’d been fiddling with this new thing called the World Wide Web on the public computer in the library. She and Riley Francisco Baldwin were no longer communicating due to distance, life moving onward. He was a priest in San Bernardino. Sometimes she read over his letters, tied in bundles with candy-pink ribbons. Typing his name on a whim produced a link called Priests Accused in the State of California of Molestation. It was easy to locate the name of Baldwin, Father Francis, near the top. He’d engaged in an affair with a sixteen-year-old girl, admitting to the entanglement in front of his congregation. Her parents filed a civil suit but backed out when the archdiocese’s lawyers warned they’d push a case for her being not only consensual but of sufficient maturity to have initiated the liaison. Their age difference had been sixteen years. He had been furtive and predatory with a girl as unformed as I had been when he broke my heart.

“I burned all the words he sent me,” said my mother, “because they were lies. Then Bobby Miller started spouting the same malarkey. Thinking God is an easy joke.”

“Riley was a confused boy who grew into a confused man.” I shrugged. “I was young too. We all were, Mommy.” My gut seized up with disgust—but gratitude flooded in unbidden too, because I had never appreciated the depth of my mother’s distress in violating a sacred vow. So, Riley’s purpose in my life was to lead me to this moment, to be a side trip in my longing to discover my mother? With his stand-out, stand-alone manner of dressing, with the abusive man hounding him and lurching about the house; with the drive to act, to get attention. The dreams of being larger than life to the point of touching God. To find—old-fashioned—a hallowing.

“Mommy,” I said. “How about if you go back to it? Not speaking. Tell God you’re sorry, but you just had to say my name one day, and then the words kept coming, but now they can stop.”

“I have to testify.”

She looked so pleased about her trial! I told her she could write on her notepads, and I bought her new ones that afternoon,

and together we made a cloth necklace and sharpened the sort of little pencils used in bowling alleys to keep score.

People went wild for the gorgeous mute on trial. I delivered her back to silence, where she resides still, now in advanced old age. She has never uttered another word. Funny how the fullness of forgiveness comes via a small thing, a touch of the senses: The day following the revelation about Riley, she disappeared for a while and, after a visit to Deanna, I returned home to find an apricot pie. A speck of leaf in the pie signaled that she had driven to the orchards where we'd gone as a family. I'd told her as a child that the fruit straight from the tree was my favorite taste in the world.

A last glory: She got offered the lead in a film called "Killer Blondies, Kiss," and, as the saying goes, it went straight to cult. My mother had the good sense to play it for humor; it featured a drop-dead pretty, deaf-mute assassin who trains other (sumptuous) women to mete out justice. She does not go to prison; there is no final act where she is put to the test, dared to speak. (This star-turn film with my mother remains available in late-night shows at theaters, on YouTube, on Hulu. The comments are lathed with drooling.) She was in a few more



pictures before resisting further offers, having decided she was no longer physically perfect.

Her residuals from her grandest acclaim, of audiences in her thrall, enabled her to buy (it was within reach back then) a duplex in Russian Hill. She insisted I move in with Wyatt, and she lived in the top part with the view of Alcatraz and would trundle down, notepad dangling over her chest, to care for Katie when our sweet girl was born. I have never told her about Riley's propositioning of me in the restaurant, because he was already destroyed, and I didn't want my mother to think I was saying he loved me better. (Nor did I want Killer Blondie to kneecap him.) We were never again in touch with him, though Googling once revealed to me that he lived alone in Riverside, ushered into ignominious premature retirement.

Adele was diagnosed with early Alzheimer's. I was not present when my mother went to visit her, but Adele's son reported how moved he was when Cristina brushed Adele's hair, evoking the times I'd turned my mommy's blonde tresses into a silk waterfall. Mother crawled into bed with her, and the image of that will, if I'm spared Adele's fate, never leave me. I can sense the rise and fall of their chests in tandem, breath warm. Adele's

children, Helene and Michael, watched over her when my father came each Sunday for supper with us. He cared for his second wife honorably, but he still could read his Cristina better than anyone, and their friendship was renewed. Bill Flores stayed a sportswriter at the *Chronicle* into his dotage. My stepbrother and stepsister became cartoonists, and I adore them.

God welcomed back, I choose to believe, His beautiful beloved and injured, errant Cristina, who wrote one day that all women should vow to be silent until they are free. I don't agree that silence achieves that, but I grant her whatever she wants to declare.

Until Parkinson's, a mild version, possessed my mother, she took up painting miniatures of Shaker-like bucolic scenes. Farm animals, mostly, some in human clothing—those were popular at fairs and got featured in an issue of *Sunset Magazine*. Cindy Marques helped her set up a mail-order business on one of her visits from the valley.

In the days of texting, my lifelong friend Deanna—a teacher in Oakland, where she raised a family—declared that my mother had built that code long before people began to tap out U and B and 4VR, and ROFL.

I replied: Yes, she invented all that, IMHO!

All along I should have recognized how God Almighty chose and kept her as His own, and I hold fast to a moment in which He displayed His worship of her: One day when Lupe and Riley came to rehearse the play in which Mother would drape herself with electrical fireflies, Lupe suggested we cook supper together, a celebration. We went out to the vegetable bed, and sunset ringed us with gold and rose-gold, the shades of wedding bands. Mother wrote on her notepad: "Wndrfl." Wonderful.

With exquisite timing, Daddy arrived. Across the void, he and my mother drank in the sight of each other. Her belt with quartz daisies, her dress with swans.

And a songbird, yellow like a concentration of sun, hovered, wings beating. My father drew closer, tired from his travels, and Riley Francisco Baldwin reached for my hand and squeezed it in amazement. Because the tiny bird, as if summoned by St. Francis in the flesh made female and stunning, settled onto the outstretched finger of Cristina Medeiros Flores, and she did not speak. But she moved her lips in a way it heard, because with an opening of its throat, the bird began to sing.



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