

Queen of Spades

Linah failed miserably at misery. Her gene pool delivered a long line of women who sighed audibly, who held unlit cigarettes like weapons and whispered hot stings behind their hands, but she didn't have the talent. Or the will for it. Her aunts, mother, cousins, and sittu could drink a cup of tea like it was venom and tighten their eyes to barbs. They had several octaves in which they could defame others and a library of non-curse words that reeked of profanity. "That little horse doesn't know how to take care of her children." "It's a house that's worse for having windows." Years of observing the women from the village beat their gold-chained chests didn't afford Linah one bit of talent in *tres désolée*. She never once has said, "Why has God done this to me?"

She opened the shutters of the east balcony of her mother's village home and gazed into the valley, feeling a bit guilty. Her mother who commanded over the phone, "Come home, now," was preparing strong coffee; her sister, Janette, a few blocks away, put her baby, Lisette, in the lap of Sitti Jemah and was probably driving at high speed the short distance through the village—a pack of cigarettes on the dashboard, ready for the whole story. Linah didn't need to or want to talk. The sun was tonic enough; it wrapped around her shoulders and she lifted her eyes, reaching like a sun-worshipping cat.

Why had she come back to Lebanon? Linah lived as far away as she could, had hundreds of reasons not to visit. When she called to report about her divorce from Andrew, the "come home now" dropped like a rock. "Okay, Mama, see you in a week." Being cross-examined and comforted by her mother did not appeal to her; it actually appalled her.

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Linah tried not to wait for the visitors who would number about eight by night. She pushed the whole process over the ledge and into the rocky ground that used to be the family garden. The plot right below the balcony was once a mock cemetery with tomato stakes stabbed into the ground; a little farther down the hill: green beans, squash, lettuce, the light green kind, melons and

corn that sometimes grew, but in drier years, bore dry husks that rattled empty. The back border harbored underground vegetables: potatoes, carrots, and onions. Over on the other side, the trellis her father built before she was born, which still divided the property from her Auntie's, was weighed down with heavy dark purple grapes. No one really lived here anymore and it was sad. The grapes kept coming anyway.

Her mother's slippers slid along the floor as she stepped outside, her hand held a mug advertising an auto glass replacement service. The coffee was the deep dark Arabic kind. A future in there.

"You don't take sugar. Right?" Her mother placed it on the ledge in front of her.

"Ma, why doesn't anyone pick the grapes? They look ready and waiting."

Her mother pulled a cigarette from a long flat box, lit one, and looked at the view through the rising smoke. "Why? We get all the grapes we want in town. This is a mess." Waving smoke spirals around her.

"It's kind of stupid to have all this great land, organic and everything, and not cultivate it." Linah hadn't been home in three years. She'd never cared to come back. She and Andrew lived in Spain in the summers, and stayed in their apartment in Alexandria the rest of the year, making mad dashes to the Sinai to sleep out in the open and supervise the digs he directed. They had a garden put in about three miles from their house. One of the villagers took care of it in exchange for half the vegetables. Linah visited once a year, walked with Rachid and his wife, and they planned the planting, watering, and harvesting schedule, and that was it for her. Gardener by proxy and that was how she preferred it.

The garden below her had been her father's project in the summer. The children — Linah; her older brother, Amir; her older sister, Janette; her younger brother, Pipi — along with some helpers, made up the work force that weeded, hoed, watered, planted, and harvested everything the garden yielded. When Amir entered high school in Beirut, the family stayed in town in their large apartment near the Memorial more often, coming to the village only in the summer. And one by one, each child grew and the family stayed away from the village longer until her father had to schedule

a visit to check on things. He came alone, reported on the garden's poor condition but nothing could be done. Then the war.

"You don't want to do the work, do you?" Her mother sat on an old dining room chair that she had dragged outside.

Linah shook her head. "I barely pay attention to mine."

"See," her mother said. "Everyone talks about how beautiful it is to have a garden, but no one wants to work it."

Her mother coughed a phlegmy smoky gurgle, then put her hand up. "Don't say it, Linah. I warn you."

She sat beside her. "Mom, I have given up. Now that Janette has started smoking again, there's no hope for either of you. I promise to look at pictures on the web of lung cancer patients so I won't be horrified when I have to take care of you."

"You're not going to take care of me. When have you ever taken care of me?"

Linah pressed one open hand against her leg. "Never. And I never will, I'll let you rot in some old-age home with dribble coming out of your mouth on your fine silk blouse that you will insist on wearing although the nurses want you in pajamas."

Her mother leaned back. "Are you my crazy daughter?"

"I am. Ma. I am."

II

Standing at the balcony door, she watched her Auntie's arm go up and down, up and down in the salon. "Our men don't do that. They don't leave marriages because it just doesn't work like a perfect clock hand's gears."

Janette pushed her chair back, causing a squeal that silenced the pockets of conversation for a second. She posed, "They just cheat. That's their coping mechanism." The kettle whistled.

Aunt Mia pointed at Janette's back as she exited to the kitchen. "Ya, it's time for her to get over it. She's going to poison herself."

Linah was relieved that discussing Andrew's decision to go across the Sahara, leaving her behind, was deferred for the moment by the recollection of Janette's husband's affair with his secretary. Antoine dismissed the girl as soon as Janette decided she knew about it. Of course, she had always known about it, ever since it started in her third month of pregnancy.

“What did you expect when you’re not, you know,” Mia waved her hand down her body. “Physically available?”

Linah didn’t understand why her brothers got away with so much while she and her sister had to endure these crazy suppositions. Amir, safe in France. Pipi, well. . . .

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When Mia had arrived earlier with a basket of plums, Oreos, and Kleenex, she stood Linah in front of her, checked her up and down. “My dear girl, my eyes, has he hurt you?”

“I hope you’re not checking for bruises, Mia.” Her mother approached and deflected her sister-in-law with a hug. “Andrew was obviously not that kind of man.”

Linah flicked fake sweat off her brow as her mother led Mia to the salon.

The saga of the parting from Andrew disappointed the audience, she knew. “So he’s very excited by this new project. It’s a two-year commitment, and so he didn’t want to keep me tied down while he was away that long.”

The silence that followed felt like a cup that was a quarter full and someone was waiting for the rest of the drink. Come on, spill it.

“That’s all. We didn’t fight, no one had an affair, no addictions or diseases.” She shrugged. “Sorry.”

Mia glanced at Linah’s mother as if she knew the verifiable truth.

“That’s what she told me too.”

Linah stood up. “I’m hungry. What’s around, Ma?” She dashed to the kitchen but still could hear the chatter.

“Okay, so why are they dissolving a marriage? It’s not like they were going steady or something,” Janette said.

“It’s too easy to divorce these days,” said Auntie. “My husbands were both gone for years at a time and doing who knows what? But they sent money and came back to die.”

Linah leaned against the refrigerator clutching a package of biscuits. She had withheld recounting her hours of trying to convince Andrew that their marriage could support his two-year stint in Mauritania. No no, he maintained, it would be an unreasonable request. Here’s the secret part, the part she would only tell Pipi if

he were here. She imagined or knew, conjectured or verified, even fantasized, that Andrew had a crush on a girl, Magdalena, who was on the graduate program team that would accompany him. Andrew was too formal to have an affair—an old school scientist who did not understand his colleagues' conference flings. Not him. He would first cut ties with Linah, then leave home, and get very far away to make his move on this student. Stranded in the desert with his somewhat socially awkward self, he could be suave without the competition of rugby players and grad bar scenes.

What made Linah believe this? When he recited the names of the team members, he forgot to mention her. Linah noticed her name on the travel permission slips he had piled on his desk.

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The quarter moon was so generous with light that Linah could see the snarly garden and the fine leaves of plants and the jagged ones of weeds. They looked like a cluster of birds with their wings slightly opened. A small breeze ruffled through and lifted everything slightly and then they rested. Linah bent over the railing, judged the distance between herself and the ground.

"Linah, my baby, are you keeping the house?" Auntie called to her.

She stepped back toward the fog of smoke and conversation. "The Alex apartment's in Andrew's name, but he's trying to get it transferred. The place in Barcelona is in mine. He doesn't want it either."

"That's good, that's good," Mia punctured the air. "Don't let him have a spoon, not a spoon."

Linah opened her hands. "We're not in a property war. Don't worry. He is giving up almost everything since he's going to be traveling. But I don't care."

Ironically, none of them, not even her mother or her sister, had ever visited her and Andrew. Although Linah had begged her mother to visit every year, said she would pay the ticket, said they would have a beautiful time. Her mother said, No. Not until she had children. So she never saw her house. Amir and his wife, Madeline, brought the nieces to her in Spain, where they peeled oranges in chaises by the sea, but no one else came or even asked what her homes were like.

“It’s the women with big hearts that get in trouble. They lose everything.” Auntie told the story of her friend who felt sorry for her husband who couldn’t keep a job. She divorced him and let him have whatever he wanted because he was broken inside. Then *she* had to get a job to buy everything she once had. Imagine.

The circle broke up while Janette ran home to the baby and Mia took a nap. Her mother and the girl Maza would make dinner and Auntie would sit in the kitchen and smoke through every preparation. The quiet went down smooth as cognac. Linah inhaled and put her elbows on the balcony’s ledge. She examined her hand in the moonlight and it twinkled on the sapphire ring. A ring she had bought herself. It’s no good to ruminate. She wasn’t a rooted thing either. What she worried about with Andrew’s leaving was not him, really, but what she became with him—a traveler, a stargazer, with her hands in the sand, exploring the past.

Linah pushed hard on the ledge, lifted herself up, and swung her legs onto the bannister. She turned her back to the sky, held on tight, and then dropped to the ground, stumbling over the edge of her shoe. Car lights darted around the roads. Dinnertime was bringing the weekend visitors up from town. Linah ducked as if the drivers, blocks away, could detect her standing in the shadow of the house.

In the garden, the grapes soaked up the reflection of the moonlight; blushes of gold in their globes. So persistent and dense. Their smell was winy and strong. Do they ferment here on the vines the way berries do? Would the birds who eat them go drunken crazy and crash into the bridges and walls like they did in Parque Centrale? In late August, their bodies littered the pathway to the boat pond, eyes wide open to the sky.

She slid her feet off the road into the garden and a rock rolled under her instep, tilting her a little to the side. Linah caught herself and moved forward. Suddenly she felt like a wild thing, wanting to run through the town; her energy was anxious and light. She wanted to run so fast she would levitate, rise up above the gravel roads. On the path to the crumbled school house, the cemetery, the church parking lot, she sprinted right down the hillside.

Thirty minutes later, as she returned to the harra, a car rolled into their driveway. Getting near dinnertime—getting near the inquisition, condemnation, retribution, elaboration, exaggeration, defense and sentencing. Of Linah, of Andrew, of men, of marriage,

of not being married, of eating, of not eating, having children, not. . . .

Wind pressed her blouse against her body; the air was getting colder. She raised her knees up to cross the garden, tripping over old tomato stakes and brambles of weeds. The grapes had a celestial attraction, and she touched one right where the light circled its globe. Linah started to pull them down, stack the bunches into the crook of her arm where they hugged her elbow like fingers.

Linah walked back to the house, took her steps slowly, kept her hands out to balance her load. She heard voices, the gathering of women. The conversation felt like an impenetrable wall. When she entered, they turned toward her, and then her mother appeared from the kitchen holding a hot pad. "Linah, my God."

Aunt Mia put down her wine glass. "You know your mother thought you committed suicide."

"Mia, I did not."

Mia turned, "You said, I don't know what happened to her. Doesn't that say it all?"

Linah's mother returned to the kitchen to get a bowl which she lowered under Linah's arms. The grapes fell into deep purple heaps.

Cousin Randa, who had recently arrived with her mother, Aunt Renee, came forward and kissed Linah three times. "Really, dears. Too much drama." She took Linah's hand. "Come, darling, sit with me."

Linah pulled back, kicked off her shoes. "I need to go wash up. You all can start without me."

The bedroom had stone walls that seemed to act like amplifiers. She ignored the voices and just lay on her bed, soaking in the sweat on her back.

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When dinner was finished, Maza came to clean up. She served tea and coffee in the salon where Linah held down a chair like all the women have done for years. The only difference now was the men weren't outside smoking.

"You know, I can't get used to it here without Papa or any of the uncles. It feels so . . ." Linah was afraid of what she might say next.

“Female.” Renee elongated the word; her voice had the baritone of a lifelong smoker.

“That’s not what she means, Mom.” Randa said. “Is it, Linah?”

“No, I . . .”

Mia interwove her fingers. “We are incomplete without our men. It’s the truth. We are families with them. Without them we are nuns.”

Randa shook her head, laughing.

Renee put her hand out toward Mia. “How can you say that when she has just had this tragedy?”

“Oh my God,” Linah rose. “There’s no fucking tragedy. Why does everyone make this a bigger deal than it is? We’re done. Finished. Finito. It is what it was and that’s it. Over.” She retreated into her room, slipped under the sapphire duvet cover and turned toward the wall.

The door opened and the covers lifted; Janette crept into bed with her.

“Remember when we would put the blanket over the headboard and play Bedouin?”

The sisters moved closer.

Linah didn’t sleep. She thought of her father and her brother. When they died, she was nineteen and in France at art school. Pipi was seventeen and would have been having his Baccalaureate if the schools were still open. His mother wanted him to leave immediately, but his father disagreed, arguing that it would look cowardly, unpatriotic. Amir had been gone for a long time, so no one questioned his participation in the war. Instead they pushed on Pipi. His father berated him in town and then when they were in the village, he ordered him to go back and make himself useful to his country.

Nobody knew what militia had killed him, there were so many and he belonged to none of them. He didn’t want to be part of the war. He wanted to move to Rome and paint frescos, corners of churches, stones worn away by time. He said, “I’m just all terra cotta and granite, no color, Linah; I am your boring brother.”

The letters were vague about his death and about her father’s. She could only make out the facts from what her mother said in the ramblings. No one else had any information, Janette was also

gone; the rest of the family scattered about taking care of their own. Whoever killed him must have known they would kill their father too. Her mother said when he heard the news, he wept, his body in shivers, and collapsed then and there, tumbling the one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight steps until his body flattened.

III

Linah worked at home, designing graphics for catalogues and advertisements. When Andrew came from the university, he stood at her threshold until she pushed back her chair and turned toward him. The room was sizable, with a couch and a large table across from the desk where she worked. He rolled out maps. Andrew kept Linah up-to-date on everything, had her read all grant proposals and publications, showed her pictures, guided her along the routes he would travel to the next dig. It was their conjunction, this high French country table that looked like it belonged in a kitchen. She joined him on some of the trips, caught up in the high of his mission. While she packed their duffels, adrenaline started to shoot through her body. The student crews came along and did the actual work, including the cooking and setting up the camp. So for Linah and Andrew, the trips felt like little honeymoons.

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Linah stuck her feet into her already tied sneakers. Her mother was cursing at her mobile as Linah dashed down the front stairs and took off running. The sun had already burned off the overnight chill; the village was quiet. Perfect conditions. Linah circled the town once and then headed down the hillside. The road curved around and went through another fallow farm and then across a terraced hillside that she used to get back up to the main road. On the way, she passed an old tobacco field that had shiny chrome sculptures planted in it like cacti. They were all abstract and had a curve that humped against the sky or opened like a cupped palm. The sun floated in the metal and threw beams around the stony cliff faces.

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When she returned to the house, the air was filled with smoke again. Her mother had two cigarettes burning in different ashtrays: one in the parlor, the other in the kitchen. Lentils were boiling on the stove, onions had already been fried and rice was washed and sitting on the side. Her mother came in from the lower level. "Where have you been?"

"Running." Linah ran the water and stuck her hand under it to catch a handful. She slurped it down.

"Can't you use a cup?"

"Ma, I saw this place—I don't know, a sculpture garden? It's all these great metal pieces."

Her mother poured her cold water from the pitcher. "Ah, Yousef's project. Ridiculous. They don't look like anything. He could have put in flowers or something."

"I think it's cool. How long has it been there?"

"About two years. What did he say? It's supposed to remind us of surviving a war. That the village has survived many wars. As if that is news. Every generation has had to evacuate this place for someone or someone else."

Linah noticed her mother's hand on the counter, the raised blue veins, the nails unpolished had a yellow tinge to them. "Why did you tell me you quit smoking anyway?"

Her mother walked out of the kitchen. "Because I quit every day." She knocked herself on her temple with a finger. "Up here."

At first, Linah thought she'd try the traditional afternoon nap, but she didn't want to close the window and the sky was bright and the temperature was perfect. Wandering around the house with tea that had cooled hours before, she tried to remember living there. Family photographs had been taken off the walls, some of the smaller more beautiful tables and cabinets were missing. Doors had lost their knobs, particularly the brass ones with the glass insets. The occupying soldiers swept most of the houses clean. Their bigger pieces were too heavy to cart away so they were luckier than most. Although Linah was at school in France, her mother packed her room; it was surprising how well her mother selected for her, and in fact, Linah couldn't remember the things that were lost.

When they were able to return to the house, to the ghosts of others tramping on their tiles and marble floors, opening their shutters, sitting on their toilet, their bodies curdled a little. All the

women came up from town with gloves and cleaners and foreign workers and scrubbed their houses until they themselves were bleached. The outlines of missing paintings were eradicated, the graffiti were covered up with new colors, toothbrushes dipped in cleanser redefined the tile work. It was quick and it was final because these same women took their bubble baths and applied their makeup and sat back in their chairs with a good cup of coffee as if ten years hadn't passed.

Linah walked down the backstairs to the ground floor where it was cooler and muddier. When she was young, this was the main kitchen and the cooks kept something going all the time. Some straw covered the floor from when they had a donkey, although that was at least twenty-five years ago. She went from one room to another. The stove was covered with scraps of wood, the pantry's shelves were broken and fallen in. She opened the door to the mud room—it was empty except for a shiny object in the corner illuminated by the light. Linah reached for it—a jar, an old canning jar. The front had masking tape across it and her mother's print: "September 19." This could have been one of the jellies she made, or Janette, or anyone. She carried it to the shed. Here she found the old garden tools. Buckets lined with earth, a broken rake, a shovel with half its handle cut off and a spade. She placed the jar on the shelf and picked up the one intact tool and walked out to the garden.

Linah was filled with her father's impulse to try to bring the garden back. She pushed on the spade and started to dig. The ground was hard, rocky, and full of weeds. Throwing the spade to one side, she threw off some stones to the side of the garden. Then, with her bare hands, she yanked up weeds, bundle after bundle, piling them at the end of the plot. The sun kept up its generosity, warming her to a throbbing sweat. But Linah kept going, felt the push inside of her, wanted everything the garden had to offer: labor, smell, food, possibility. The whole afternoon passed with Linah focused on one spot then another, clearing and cleaning; feeling the thorny punctures in her hands.

By the time Janette drove up with her mother, Linah was burning a pile of the dried foliage in a metal ashcan. The women came out of the car and stared at Linah behind the fire.

"Linah," her mother stood just behind her. "Are you crazy? What are you doing here? I told you this garden was useless. Leave it alone."

Linah turned from the flames and waved her hands. "Look at how beautiful it is without all this mess."

Janette held baby Lisette. "This is dangerous, isn't it?"

"No, it's contained and there's no wind," she lifted her finger.

Her mother stomped out her cigarette. "Do something useful if you're bored. Leave this mess alone."

IV

Linah would leave tomorrow and needed one more tour of the village. Her morning run was along the same route she had been taking for five days. Her shoes pounded on the trail and her internal automatic guidance system kept her on the loop she had been traveling. At the southeast corner of the garden, she stumbled over something, righted herself, and stopped. When she turned, she saw the spade lying across the road. She picked it up and held it like a staff and surveyed the garden. Some rocks were still embedded in the soil; maybe she'd do one last clearing before she left; maybe someone would be inspired to plant.

At first the spade didn't penetrate the ground—the stones were compacted in the soil. Linah bent down, yanked back a big one, and then flung lighter ones to the side of the garden. With the weeds already gone, the topsoil presented possibilities if she could get down to it. This part of the mountains seemed to be bedrock, and if she hadn't seen a lifetime of vegetables live in this plot, she would not believe it was possible. She sat on her haunches and pulled with all her might, rocks rolled away, some willingly, some required kicking and driving the spade in all the way around. She was satisfied that this could be done before tomorrow.

She used the spade to comb through the first level of deposits, alternating between sweeping and pounding the ground. Some smaller rocks and broken glass started to accumulate in the face of the spade. Linah picked through them to separate out the dangerous pieces. Soda bottles and pickle jars must have been smashed against the road—shards of them littered the entire area. Tossing the glass to the right for recycling, and the rocks to the left, to later line the path, Linah was diligent and fast.

She dug her hands a little deeper into the earth and pulled out a cigarette-length rock. Or it could have been petrified wood. The curve was wavy—structural rather than weathered. She rolled

it in her hand and then held it up next to her fingers. This was a finger bone. Just like the ones that reached from the skeleton that had lain in Andrew's lab. The twiggy surface was smooth and mildly perforated. Phalanges? Right? How old? This was not an ancient specimen, she guessed.

Returning to the plot, she continued her search, and the yield was quick. More fingers, an arm, rib bones coming up, one by one, unmistakable from their curve. Mandible, clavicle—easy to recognize. Linah put this body together like a puzzle. Laid the pieces on the road with delicacy, like she had discovered the tomb of a pharaoh. The bones seemed to be concentrated in one corner of the plot—was it one person? Many? Were they the soldiers who occupied the village? Or someone they killed?

She was surprised at how many of the bones she recognized: sacrum, sternum, scapula. The longer ones like the femur and the humerus were confusing—she couldn't tell one from the other. Andrew's drawings, the body maps, the human parts that were scattered around with tags on them created a library in Linah's head which she was able to access in this dig. The bones were in good condition, having been under the larger rocks. She shook out the dirt. They had no fractures or chips. Young and healthy, maybe?

Linah worked quickly, hurried before her mother came back and her goodbye party would be in full swing. The workers were moving around inside the house without paying any attention to Linah's diligence. Pubis, patella, ilium, coccyx. She wouldn't find all two hundred or so, but she wanted to complete this body, this witness to the changes in the village, the memorial to survival.

Her lab table was the back driveway that connected their house to their aunt's. One side from the neck to the feet, except for an arm bone, was complete. She surveyed the connections, shifted a few pieces. Stopped momentarily: once they had flesh, throbbing organs, veins flowing with blood, belly, bladder, heart. Creepy and fascinating at the same time. Death and life.

When Linah ran out of skeletal parts, the body was eighty percent completed. She didn't have the skills to make any assumptions about the specimen or who had inhabited it. But she guessed there would be a skull. Somewhere. Grabbing the spade, she jabbed it into the earth here and there, cracked the surface, felt a vibration in her palms. Rocks responded, roots gave way; dirt shifted. Nothing.

It was nearly four and her mother and others would be there at five to orchestrate the party. Lots of people would be coming in from town. Linah kicked the dirt around. She backed up onto the road and took a long view — she remembered again the layout, the rows of beans and squash, peppers and eggplant. Her memory created an overlay of every inch — the vines, the sitting rock at the end . . . that rock was not there. They took turns sitting and drinking water till their father bullied them back to work. Where was it? It was shaped like a cube and had a smooth flat surface.

She walked back to the corner where she had found the bones. Deep in the corner, the rock sat, sinking into the ground. Linah approached it, squatted and pushed as hard as she could. Then she sat on the ground and put both feet on it, pulled her knees back a little, and pressed forward. The rock edged away. The soil below was cooler and finer than the rest of the garden. She dipped her hand in and immediately felt the solidness of the skull. Wrenched in every direction, pulling and jiggling, she freed it. A human head. Someone's face. A brain. Eyes. Senses and sense.

Holding it high, she went to the back driveway and placed it at the top of her incomplete body, then aligned the other bones as neatly as she could. She needed to take a picture of it since she couldn't take it with her, but the whole process excited her. Who would she tell? Andrew? She turned toward the house and found her mother standing behind her, quiet, solid.

"Mom, look what I found." Linah pointed to her display.

"No, Linah." Her mother's voice was low and frightened, her body stiff.

"What? What's wrong?"

"No," her mother screamed. She doubled over mumbling and crying.

"Mother, do you know who this is?" She grabbed her mother's arm.

Her mother broke free, ran up the stairs, into the house, passing the women who were arranging the salon, and into the back. She slammed her bedroom door.

V

"It was his fault, Linah. I was so angry." Her mother held Linah's hands as her daughter stooped in front of her, trying to see her lowered face.

“Who?”

“I was so angry.”

Linah swung her body up, sat beside her on the bed. “Mom, slow down. Tell me.”

Her mother cried without breathing, a suffocating, hopeless cry. Linah stroked her arm.

“I didn’t want Pipi to go. Simón humiliated him until he did and had him meet with General Salim. He was there one day.” She lifted a finger. “One day and then he was dead.”

Linah held her lips together tightly.

“I’m telling you. I was angry. Your father came into the house, he sat with me, he told me Pipi was dead. Just like that. Nothing. Your baby, your littlest child is dead. He wasn’t a very good soldier. He blamed my poor boy.

“He left me to my crying and went out to work on that damned garden. I watched him from up here walk around poking the ground. He was crying too, but I didn’t care. My heart was on fire; my head was pounding.

“I walked down the stairs and went to him. I didn’t know if I wanted to talk or cry or beat on him. The spade was lying on the ground, at my feet. I picked it up and held it with both hands. Your father turned and came toward me, saying something kind, but I was so angry.

“I did it, Linah. I hit him. I hit him as hard as I could and he fell backwards and his face was smashed. I didn’t know what to do. His head collapsed, his eyes open and shocked, and his legs rigid. There was his body. I didn’t know what to do.”

Linah shook her head, too confused to get the whole picture. “How did he get in the garden?”

“The war, you know, confused things. We were told to leave the next day. People were worried. I told everyone my husband had fallen down the steps, and I had to take care of him. They should go ahead, higher into the mountains, I would join them in one day.”

“No one tried to see him?”

“The soldiers were very near and we have one road in and out of here, so they had to go. You remember old Uncle Said?”

Linah nodded. He was no one’s uncle, a character in the village who did odd jobs and ate with different families.

“He helped me. We buried him and covered his body in

rocks.” She stopped and shivered.

Linah didn’t know what to make of it. She hugged her mom, and hated something just then, something like memory, something like love. It was confusing.

Someone knocked on the door. “Mom, what are you doing? People need you.” Janette called.

Her mother turned to Linah. “She doesn’t know. No one knows. What do I do?”

Linah patted her mother’s hair, smoothed her shoulders. “Nothing. Nothing has happened. I will take care of him.”

VI

The car would come in two hours. Linah opened her already packed suitcase; then pulled a box out from under the bed. She had collected the bones before the party and hidden them. All night, her mother gazed wearily across the room until someone snapped her to attention. Linah grazed her arm now and then, gave her water; she put out her cigarette and her mother didn’t protest.

Linah lifted the bones from the box one by one and wrapped them with pieces of her clothing. She knew how to be careful with them, having watched Andrew and his students prepare artifacts for transport. The little ones were zipped in baggies; the skull was wrapped in her running jacket. She laid a quilt over everything and pushed down to secure the padding.

When the driver came, she rolled her suitcase toward him. Her mother watched it disappear through the door. Her sister waited with them

“Mother, now you should come to visit me. It’s a good time. Especially after I get a new place.”

“Linah, you’ll be moving? That’s so smart!” Janette said.

“I think I want a cottage, maybe a garden.”

“You can be away from the ghosts of your marriage.” Her sister laughed.

Linah kissed them both three times. “I don’t mind ghosts,” she said. “I guess because I don’t believe they are really dead.”

* * *

“Mom, it’s time to come and visit, and we’ll go to France too, to see Amir. Will you, mom?” Her mother grabbed her hard one last time. Her eyes swam in sorrow. It wasn’t because she’ll be missing me, Linah thought. It will be the first time she will be separated from him.

“Yes,” her mother finally said. “I’ll visit you soon.”



Teresa Valero, photograph