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*What Is Ours*

*Once upon a time there was a little girl lost in the woods. She foraged for berries with which to heal her mother's lungs, until she fell and scraped her knee, old shoes ruined in mud. Just a little blood, a little mud, a voice said. She looked up and saw a wolf with eyes the color of oranges.*

At my grandmother's apartment, Yessica serves us thick buñuelos, cured meats, pâté, European cheeses, blackberry jam, and a spread of cookies and freshens our drinks. It's funny. This is the food of celebration.

My five-year-old cousin says she wants a story. From my lap, she reaches for the bottled Coca-Cola, and her mother, my mother's sister, flicks her hand away and says Ah-ah—that'll ruin your teeth, then winks at me saying, Isn't that so? Reflexively I nod my head, letting concern widen my eyes at little Sofi. The girl retreats back onto my lap and loops her fingers into my rose-gold hoops. After my aunt and I trade a quick collusive smile, I notice my mother and grandmother lighting candles.

Tonight our family gathers to pray—for him, for our Uncle Mauricio, and for the girl too—to commemorate the one-year. A whole year. A Range Rover and a lost puppy—all the trite monstrosity of an *SVU* episode. Me, I don't pray—I believe is a thing we tell ourselves only to see our way out of the dark.

As people pluck food from trays and heap it onto plates, Sofi stacks her hand on mine and I note her dewy skin, the fleshiness, our square nailbeds and brittle half-moons, the dimpled knuckles that will one day give way to joints jagged like mine. Some jaunty music comes on and the room sparkles with Christmas. Yessica wipes crumbs from her apron and, at my grandmother's nod, she retires to her alcove in the kitchen.

*The wolf promised the girl the way to the berries. She quivered, feet bare and sinking into a wet sop of earthworms. First you'll need new shoes, the wolf said,*

*flashing the little girl a milky smile. You won't survive the forest otherwise.*

I should mention that in the fairy tale, I will not be playing the role of the girl. Imagine instead I am the trees and the birds and the ground the girl walks upon. I am the wind that blows and the dew dotting moss between hemlocks. For the time being, please forget I told you this and instead listen to yourself as you narrate the story. It is a real story. Talk to yourself like the rain.

Leili died. No.

Leili was murdered and so Leili died. Is dead. Her parents were too poor to experience a world beyond Bogotá but by the time the police knocked on their door that morning they were well acquainted with its cruelty. Her body all pulped up like a wet map when it was found, ravaged as if by wildlings instead of people. No—one person, the newspapers said. I know him, I said. Am of him, I said.

Him.

But a person like that could never be known and, in this way, Uncle Mauri will never be known. A professor once said that to be fully known is to be fully alive. If this is true, then Uncle Mauricio has never fully existed. Will never. Flesh and blood, sure, he is that—but that is all he is, it turns out.

Little Leili was very real and alive and as expansive as the cosmos, they say, but is no longer. Yet we will never know her.

The twins inch up to the bar in oversized Fortnite and X-Men t-shirts and dare each other to spike their fizzing glasses of Postobón with decanted whiskey. Their snickers draw the attention of their father, who frowns at them from the bottom of his third Manhattan. Their father, who last year bought his mistress an abortion, according to my cousin Lina, Lina the lawyer with the live-in partner whose coming out almost cost her her inheritance, Lina who was smart enough to be out of town for this. Truth is, I tried not to come, citing cramps and winter break projects, but I ultimately caved to the guilt. And I'll be gone in a few days, back into the fold of collegiate life across the ocean that so helps cast a mantle of illusion over this whole sor-

did mess. My stomach moans. Someone hands me a plate of cookies.

*A foothold. The little girl asked the trees for a foothold when she ran into the white-fanged beast. That, or courage. Instead, the pine and balsam firs rattled free their loose leaves: they had seen this all before and relented to the density of their trunks, they swayed but did not break at the branches, did not screech, did not thunder themselves down in sacrifice.*

They were close, my mom and Uncle Mauri. And now they're close again, now that he's decided he is holy. My mom visits him every weekend and, separated by inch-thick glass, together they take to her rosary over sticky black receivers in the visitation room. This, the man whose Bible had once actually served as a doorstop, who once called priests rapists and punked them with off-the-wall confessions, who snuck booze into mass and let me have some when I was twelve. This, the man whose horrors we gather around today.

*The little girl looked around. Home was somewhere but nowhere she could see beyond the trunks. No sounds but birds and the shuttering of leaves and the pulsing of her heart.*

Sofi tugs at my collar and whispers. No, she says. She wants to know what really happened to the little girl that's gone. My brain spins.

Before I can respond my mother's sister says to me, Mauricio prays now, and she pulls at the lean golden cross that hangs on a chain above her collarbone. A mercy, she says. She looks at me expectantly. A silence lingers as I note the purple-gray fatigue ringing her eyes.

Across the room my mother breaks a wooden cocktail fork. She does not notice that it splinters and drops at her feet. My grandmother sits beside her in a tufted armchair and rises. She then lengthens her back and announces to the room, Perhaps this was all a blessing in disguise. It made him closer to God, she says. I peel flakes off my lips. My mom looks at my grandmother and—there is a pause before my mother nods. Behind them, fire laps into the throat of the chimney, rain pelts at the windows, air funnels out of

the room, yet something bordering on joy ripples through the space and I watch each of my dozen or so relatives be swept up by it. Some hold hands. Even the twins seem arrested by this moment. They all look at my grandmother. My mom cries but I'm not sure who the tears are for.

I push against the weight of the air. A dead girl: a blessing in disguise.

We settle into silence, hands in our laps. I drink too much wine.

*The trees stood tall professing their sorrow but that is all they did. Birds towered high and, as the girl took the wolf's outstretched claws, they observed the sun. The girl marked her path with a long red ribbon from her cape, which didn't stand a chance against the wind. And—well, we know how this story ends.*

My eyes settle on the marble table to my right. Its thick cold slab bears photos of Mauricio spanning his forty-odd years, not unlike an altar: the bonnets and the baby rolls and the Batman costume, the pimples and the study abroad, the opulent condos and the parties, and the smile blurs, the skin leathers, the eyes dull as the years wear on. How much more tragedy lurks along my uncle's dark edges, I am left to wonder. I recognize myself with him amid a fit of giggles, a mess of curls in a gum-pink shirt. Me and Mercedes's girl—Clarita, was it?—hang at his sides in a gold-embellished frame. I look about thirteen; she, ten. I sink into the seams of plush leather. His fingers grip just below her breast line. I feel my face flush.

Growing up and until I went to college, I stayed with Uncle Mauri during the summers and played with his live-in maid's kids. All girls except Yolanda's boy. Even then, what single man warrant-ed a live-in was beyond me.

He'd pick me up from El Dorado airport, sleeves rolled up. He'd regale me with stories from his travels while I mawed into a roadside hot dog heaped with pineapple relish. He always had stories, and local lore, and plans for us, for all of us: the mall burgers at El Corral, the tamale brunches in bed, the mani-pedis at the salon, the tickle bombs, the tennis bracelets—me and the maids' girls, seven maids in the last five years alone, some gone before I ever dropped in for the summer. I don't even miss him. Or if I do, not him

him—I miss the version of him I believed in for so long. I miss believing that person exists. Like, one July, during one of my sojourns here, my dog suddenly died back at home and I couldn't get out of bed. Couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. Mauricio began volunteering at a pet shelter and made me come with him, baited me out of bed with crêpes and coffee and a photo of a fluffy mutt named Pibe and I had registered this then as the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me—wrote my goddamn college entrance essay about this.

I would throw it all away if I could, I would, the time with him—or, this him that is really not. Because if it weren't for me, the girls wouldn't have been allowed in the guest room, or the living room, or my bathtub to play ponies. If it weren't for me, some of them would have been spared. I wish knowing that made it any easier to bear. Because it was right there in front of me, of us, ten, fifteen years ago it was there, all those summers at his duplex: attention that bordered on obsessive, his largesse, a fiery smile snuffed out by the quick blaze of his inflexibility. Mercedes, Mariana, Yesenia, all of them: before long they were eyes down, guards up, girls close, each of them.

Most of our games took place when groceries or other errands rendered us alone with him in the apartment. Me and Socorro's girl, Yanira, who loved to dance salsa, who knew every lyric to Carlos Vives. We'd break out into song, or play supermodel, or this one time he had us play dog, where she was my pet and I walked her around the apartment tethered to a scarf. Or, how I never questioned that an eight-year-old needs help in the shower. Or, how one other summer I remember that I thought I saw a shadow creep past the garret in the kitchen. I told him the next day I'd seen a monster but he promised me it was just a trick of the eyes and that monsters weren't real and that if they were he'd be there to save me from them. And the bite marks I found on Clarita's shoulder—it took me twelve years to realize that no craning of the neck would ever allow her to do that to herself.

And me. Well, I suppose every fishhook needs bait.

If it hadn't been for the doorman they would've probably never found him out. At least not this time, this time with Leili.

Of course there had been others.

You don't just one day decide to steal your sister's car, drive

out to the poorest part of Bogotá and then kidnap, drug, and brutalize a child before stuffing her into the pockets of an outdoor hot tub—wrenching open its side cabinet, gutting plumbing encased by its plastic shell, making room for her, all parts of her, gathering inky hair into a mound, shoving her inside, knocking against bone, before rinsing and bleaching, before scrubbing and closing, before drawing over the cover and zipping it up. Before all that. No, you build up to that. You blur those boundaries, erode their edges bit by bit, let them get soft, get crumbly, get gone—first the drugs, for you; then the want, for them; then the decision to act on the want, for that specific want. Then the realization that maybe, just maybe, you could get away with acting on it.

So you do. And you can. A little thing, you think, until that thing is no longer enough. Until, again, you need more. For your gums to numb and your blood to boil and your shit to be hot and you to feel alive.

Or until the brand-new, not-in-on-it doorman waves you in as you lead a wobbling child into your too-big, too-bare luxury apartment you now visit only on the weekends.

*Back to the wolf and the trees. There's something I forgot in there.*

*In the forest with the magical berries, leather work boots crushed fallen leaves. The Huntsman. He followed the wolf and the little girl a mountain's length until they neared a cabin near a ravine.*

Yessica reenters with a tray of tinto and chamomile. How she, or anyone, still works for this family defies logic. Survival, I suppose, has sharper teeth than that.

Our eyes meet and shift with the friction of reluctant understanding. I thumb the cookie on my plate into crumbs. She used to change my diapers and now I can't even look her in the eye. They lived on the same street, she and Leili's mother, at the time anyway, who knows—Yessica and I don't talk anymore. I can't bring myself to small talk or real talk so instead I scroll my phone or look at the ceiling, feigning interest in the shadows, in the Baroque crown molding, until she leaves the room and I've failed again in a new way. Sometimes I'll look my uncle up and am inevitably met with the photo of Leili's mother clutching at her chest, as if it didn't

already flashbulb into my mind's eye over and over—the candlelight vigils, the posters, the white roses—it's like a goddamn movie. And of course Yessica knows all about it. The case still makes the papers.

*Peering through a window the Huntsman saw the little girl in the cabin, the wolf spooning a mossy soup into her mouth.*

My aunt is talking. Something still about mercy. About rugged paths and darkness, about finding your way to a reckoning with God, about salvation and redemption and how perhaps this was Uncle Mauri's own journey to the holy.

What is ours: hands worn stiff from clutching at a lie; a heavy head and a cut tongue; the shame of loving a monster.

Yessica drops the napkins, and no one helps. Not even me. Because I can't move. Instead my throat tightens, my mouth awash with nausea. There is such a danger here.

A little girl dead: the price of a man's atonement. I think about Leili's family somewhere across the city in their tin-roofed home, clinging to each other, to their memories of their little girl gone, dead, murdered, brutalized, disposed of like a pulped-up map and wedged into the sides of a Jacuzzi tub. No one has said her name tonight. Not once. It is a thing we sit with and refuse to look at, that grows larger the longer we sit, and now there is no room for us to breathe. This is who we are. This is who we choose to be. I look at my mother and see his eyes. I look at my mother and see myself in her face. My heart hammers against my rib cage: I am my blood, I am my blood, I am my blood. I cannot speak. The room careens. I excuse myself but before I can stand I vomit on my skirt.

*The Huntsman rolled up his sleeves and drew an arrow from his quiver. He inhaled sharply.*

I change into my aunt's yoga pants and Yessica has already cleaned up my mess. My little cousin tinkers around the wet spot at my feet and climbs back onto my lap. She'll be Leili's age next year. Bogotá has a boogeyman, they said to me at her age. These are not the stories I want to tell Sofi. He meanders through streets looking for

loitering children. I had been warned about leaving the courtyard within our complex or risking being scooped up into a satchel and eaten alive by this monster. The inevitability of this always struck me, effecting its intended terror, festering in my child's mind. The monster, they told me, was elsewhere.

*At the sight of the man, the wolf bolted closed the wooden door. The Huntsman smiled.*

The phone rings and Yessica answers. She passes the phone to my grandmother, who, phone to ear, is silent and performs listening for us, eyes darting from side to side—a prerecorded message, it seems, at the end of which she says, Sí, acepto.

It's him.

*The wolf ran to the window and slid shut the curtains. He ordered the girl to hide under the cot as the Huntsman fumbled with the doorknob.*

My grandmother sets down the receiver and puts him on speakerphone. Clutching at her rosary and her Kleenex with trembling hands, she pleads to her God for the redemption of Uncle Mauri's soul. One by one each relative takes turns shouting pleasantries and God-talk into the mouthpiece, each exaltation like a drum in a dirge.

¡La gloria del Señor!

¡Dios me lo bendiga, mijito!

¡Él sabe como hace sus cosas!

There's a lot of thanking the glory of God. This all then, I presume, is such glory manifest. I wonder which among us would have the gall to say that in front of Leili's family.

“¿Está Sofi por ahí?” Mauricio says. Put Sofi on the line. I imagine his hairy knuckles clutching at the receiver, the thick scar along his index finger from that boating accident in Cartagena.

“Saludalo,” her mother mouths at her. Say hi. She arches her brows for emphasis, to convey that she really means it, young lady.

My hands pulse, soften with sweat. I want to hold her. I want to whisper, You don't have to talk to him if you don't want to—but

everyone is looking. I swish my wine instead.

Sofi wiggles off my lap and contorts her lips. As her mother waves her forward, she patters bare feet closer to the phone. The girl looks out from the corner of her eyes and breaks with timidity through a soft hello.

The room *awws*.

*The Huntsman kicked open the door to the wolf's cabin. The little girl cried from beneath the cot as the wolf ran into the depths of the forest leaving the Huntsman and the girl alone.*

*The Huntsman pulled knotted fingers against the bowstring, piercing the little girl's thigh. She shrieked then grew heavy with sleep. The Huntsman scooped up her limp body and laid it out on the kitchen table. He shut the door.*

It's my turn to speak. My mouth is bone-dry, my hands rattle. Something blurs out of me and before I realize I am suddenly ensnared by a dozen gaping faces. I am no longer sitting, I am rising. Am no longer watching, I am snatching my purse. I step outside into the bleary Bogotá night and as I fish for my phone a car splashes water onto my coat. Umbrella-shadowed faces dash past and alongside me on the sidewalk, foregrounding my aunt's Range Rover parked dead on flattened tires. The last car Lili ever got into. A car I rode in. The car the police didn't have any use for anymore and the world itself didn't know what to do with.

A man bumps against me. "¿Qué le pasa?" he says in a cigarillo voice. What's my problem? he wants to know. I rebound, curl my hand like a claw, but we disband—his left, my left—and as I shuffle closer toward traffic, I stumble against brick edging around a thick eucalyptus. My hands blush from the concrete and I push up to sit, the lip of my moss-green coat sullied in a puddle. I look back at the gilded iron door of the building. Then I see the Range Rover still heavy against the asphalt. The rain stings my eyes. I dig into the mulch. I draw my chin up like an arrow in the sky. I run, brick in hand. Against my face the glass bursts, a constellation of rage, its shards glittering at my feet.