

The Knot

Marisela fingered the leather knot in her purse strap like a rosary bead. She'd worn it shiny with worry these last few weeks. Her eyes followed the movements of the young nurse whose name tag read *Patricia, LVN*. A pretty name in Spanish, Marisela thought, but in English it sounded like a flushing toilet. The nurse kept swirling cotton swabs and little wooden paddles in a glass jar, as if trying to stir up the right words. Marisela waited and watched while *Patricia, LVN* scooted slightly back and forth on her small rolling stool, adjusted the stethoscope around her neck, and with everything settled into position, finally spoke.

“*Señora*, do you know what you'll do if the test is positive? *¿Qué va a hacer?*”

“*Positiva?*” It felt like a trick question to Marisela, like when she tried to vote, but no could mean yes.

“If you're pregnant,” the nurse replied. She double-checked the chart. *Para 1, gravida 1*, One pregnancy, one live birth, no miscarriages or abortions.

“What will I do?” Marisela repeated. These young nurses and the way they talked about life and death, like they were asking with or without cheese on top. The purse strap twisted in Marisela's lap as she observed the nurse busy herself with a small tub of Vaseline, opening it, dipping in the end of a cotton swab, and then applying it to her own mouth, spreading it back and forth across the bottom lip. It seemed to Marisela an odd thing to do in front of a patient. Unprofessional, really, but maybe it was just a nervous habit. Marisela's face grew hot when she realized the nurse's eyes had alighted and fixed on the knotted strap twined through her fingers, on her hands trying to wring out an answer.

“Okay, my dear,” the nurse said, with a soft sigh. “We’ll talk after I run the test. I’ll be back in about five minutes.”

“My dear?” Marisela echoed to the closing door.

In this tiny town where Patricia lived and worked, less than an hour from the border, most women came to *La Clínica Familiar* to confirm their pregnancies. She knew it had to be official for the government to give them vitamins and checkups. And she knew none of them could afford to first find out privately at home with the do-it-yourself kits—the only pharmacy in town charged triple for what they cost in the city, and the gossipy shopkeeper would be talking. At least in the clinic waiting room, they were all there for the same reason. Nobody was going to talk without the risk of revealing their own business. Patti, herself, had once come here years ago when she got pregnant for the first time at fifteen. Still, it was hard for her to take how naïve and cowed some of these grown women seemed. It wasn’t like she exactly had her life together, but at least she’d known what to do on her own. She hadn’t told her mother, though she could have. Her mother had actually been a great mom, except for one thing—she couldn’t keep her teenaged daughter from getting knocked up. When it happened again a year later, Patti did tell her mom, and had the first of her two daughters. She begged the doctors to tie her tubes, but they said they wouldn’t even consider it until she hit twenty-one.

In the cluttered nursing station, Patti unplugged the coffee machine before turning on the centrifuge. Fuses had already blown once this morning. Everything second-hand, donated, and jerry-rigged to form a makeshift clinic by a well-meaning but slightly senile and patronizing American doctor.

“This is what they’re comfortable with,” he’d say. “They don’t trust the fancy stuff.”

Patti knew that wasn’t true, but didn’t argue with the boss.

“It’s better than no care, which is what most would have,” he would add.

Patti didn’t argue that one either. She checked the clock and set the timer. The smell of *carne asada* from the *Dos Lupes* café across the street filtered into the clinic through the iron-grating near her workstation.

“Hey, Claudia . . .” she shouted out to the medical assistant stocking plastic speculums (cheap ones, with the rough seams). “Can we switch our lunches today? I feel one of my headaches coming on.”

“*Tú tambien*, Patti? Was Dr. Hensel getting on your case, too? Man, he got so mad at me just because I wrote “open-head surgery,” on a lady’s history,” she rattled on quickly. “Okay, I get it’s not proper medical terminology and all that, but I was just translating what the patient said, *verdad?* *Pués*, no disrespect, but he really doesn’t understand these ladies, you know? Anyways, sure, I’ll take late lunch.”

Patti nodded in appreciation, counting as she dripped serum from a pipette. They had a stockpile of old tests that were only 99.8% accurate that some hospital had chucked in favor of the new 99.999% ones. These were going to expire in the next year, so the wise Dr. H. had scored. They’d use them up easy in a year down here.

Five drops serum, three drops reagent, add sterile wash to the fill line and wait two minutes. This was the easy part. Giving the result was something else. Even with the training, Patti still hated when women her mother’s age actually wanted *her* to tell *them* what to do. How

could a nineteen-year-old mother of two from El Centro give anyone advice? She watched the blue control dot rise onto the surface of the white membrane and waited to see if the second dot would appear.

“I think this lady’s gonna be a weeper, Claudia” she said. “I don’t know if she’s really undecided or just afraid to say what she really wants. Honestly, I’m worried I may not get to eat lunch at all, the way she’s clinging to her purse on the exam table like it’s a lifejacket or something.”

“*La chaparita* in the blue and white dress?” Claudia replied. “The receptionists are already complaining about her kids tearing up the waiting room. Why do they complain to me, anyway? *Muy tramposos*, those kids. And four of them? No wonder she wants to cry, eh?”

“Ay, *Claudia*. You’re terrible! I don’t even think they’re all hers.” Patti laughed. “Yeah, I know we’re supposed to keep our feelings about the patients to ourselves, but this one... I don’t know for some reason she’s kind of getting to me. But just do the job, right? Be a medical professional, like Dr. H. says.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Claudia answered. “But I’m just saying, go check out those kids in reception. I’m pretty sure they’re all calling her *Mami*. Maybe her choice won’t be so hard as you think.”

The timer went off, Patti tipped the small cylinder to view the result, and raised her eyebrows. “Maybe I’ll get lunch on time after all,” she said, holding the test cylinder out for Claudia to see. The single dot had not doubled. No pregnancy, no decision to make. She hurried down the hall skimming her fingers along the cool adobe walls of the hallway, reflexively tapping the bronze Guadalupe hung for good luck. “*Gracias*,” she whispered. She didn’t really

believe in the magical powers of the *Virgen*, but old habits had a way of exerting themselves, and besides, it never hurt to be grateful.

Sitting on the exam table in her paper gown, Marisela searched the room's walls, looking for a clue, any suggestion about how she could break the news to her husband, Eduardo. The frayed poster taped above the desk offered photos of healthy foods. Over the sink, a diagram revealed the insides of a headless female torso, like a colorful map with mysterious lakes and islands. No help there either. And that baby-faced nurse, Patricia? She certainly wouldn't have any useful advice. It wasn't like Eduardo would beat her, like Xochitl's husband had when she came up pregnant the last time. Of course, it was only rumors, but she'd hear Xochitl's baby was born too soon, too small, out of pure fright, and with a port wine stain on his face in the shape of her husband's fist. Her Eduardo was neither a drunk nor a bully, and he certainly wouldn't desert her for some other woman. He depended on her for so much. She had, after all, taken on his three children after his wife's sudden illness and passing; taken them as her own and treated them with all the love and care she felt for him and their own child, the youngest of the four.

What Marisela feared more than any of those other things, was the weight of his vein-popping silence—the swollen purple spider that pumped its legs on the side of his forehead. Only ten years older than her, but his body so much more worn by years of long, hard work and stress. The doctor had already warned that his poor circulation and nerves were bad enough to cause a stroke. He needed to avoid extra pressure whenever possible. No, she wouldn't tell him ahead of time. She'd hide the pregnancy as best she could, and by the time he figured it out,

there'd be little time left to worry. But what strength she would need not to tell. After so many years together, he could read her face like a blind man's fingers.

Marisela sighed as she smoothed out a crease in the paper that lined the stirruted table. She tried to flatten down the textured dots of her paper gown between her fingers, noting how they matched the goosebumps on her bare legs. This place. Why did they even have to undress just to get pee test results? The doctor apparently didn't want to waste any time; if the test came back positive, they'd be all ready for the pelvic exam. She sat up straight at the soft knock on the door before it opened. The nurse looked as pleased as if she were offering Marisela a full platter of turkey *mole*.

“*Señora, fué negative,*” she said, and reached over to give Marisela her clothes. “You can go ahead and get dressed.”

“You mean,” Marisela blurted, “no baby?” Her cheek twitched. Two tears ran down, then a few more. She dabbed at them with her purse strap.

The nurse nodded yes, and handed her a tissue. Marisela used it to blot the wetness from the soggy leather.

The nurse was waving a tissue toward Marisela's face. “For your nose,” she said.

Marisela took it, blew loudly and then started crying in full. “*Lo siento,*” she choked out between sobs, “It's just, I was expecting . . .”

Nurse Patricia rubbed a small circle near her own left temple. “It's okay,” she said. “it's a normal reaction to cry when we've been worried.”

“*We’ve* been worried?” Marisela repeated.

“Oh, I mean ‘we,’ like people in general, ‘we humans’ . . . it’s a natural response.” Patti’s voice fell off as she registered Marisela’s reddening face. This time it did not appear to be the flush of shame or embarrassment.

Marisela’s voice grew louder, sounding firm and steady now. “No, *I* understand perfectly. I think it is *you* are the one who doesn’t understand.”

Patti set down her stethoscope on the counter and blinked hard as the sharp edge of the migraine now knifed its way behind her right eye, trying to pare the eyeball from its socket.

“Forgive me, *señora*.” She tried to say it calmly, but it came out a little like a whimper. “What do you mean?”

“I wanted this baby,” Marisela continued in a fierce whisper. “Just because I am worried, just because I am nervous, just because I don’t know how to tell my husband, doesn’t mean I didn’t want a baby. How long have you worked here? And you still make this kind of mistake? To assume you know what anyone wants? *Qué piensas?*”

Patti swallowed back a raw, swollen lump. The patient was right. One hundred percent.

“*Tiene razón*,” she said. “I apologize. It’s no excuse, I know, but it’s just this headache. I’ve been fighting this headache all morning. I . . . I wasn’t thinking straight.” She blinked some more. “I am very sorry, she repeated, appealing to Marisela’s unmoving face. “How can I make it up to you?” She reached for Marisela’s purse. She knew how lame it sounded even as she said it, but what else could she possibly do wrong? “May I fix your strap? I’m good at getting out knots.”

What in *Dios*' name? Now the nurse was crying. And using some kind of curved tongs and tweezer-looking instrument to try to loosen the knot. This place! Why hadn't she just gone to the drugstore, despite the gossip it would've provoked? Worst of all, she knew this little nurse was actually right to think she wouldn't want another baby. Marisela knew she had no business with another baby. It's just they grew up so fast and then before you knew it, they didn't need you so much for everything, they stopped listening, they ran wild. She didn't want to admit it, but even Eduardo had said it: she loved being needed more than she loved being loved. What did they say? Be careful what you wish for? And what she wished for, now right in front of her was this needy, baby nurse. *Ay, yi, yi.*

Marisela cleared her throat. "Please, no thank you," she answered.

"But, I'm happy to get this knot out for you, if you just give me one more minute," the nurse said, focusing on the strap. The poster of the headless torso on the wall behind her seemed to be supervising, even without eyes.

"*Por favor. Dámelo.*" Marisela held out her hand.

Patricia stopped what she was doing and looked up. "But why *señora*? Why not let me take it out? It's nice purse, otherwise."

Marisela stifled a deep sigh. Why did she have to explain, and how could she even if she wanted? She attempted a joke.

"No, it's old and ugly, but it's a comfort . . . like my husband."

The joke didn't help. Nurse Patricia was rubbing her forehead again.

“Please,” Marisela signaled for the purse once more with her hand. “It’s fine. I need to go. My children are waiting out there.” She scooped herself off the stirruped table and pulled the privacy curtain around to put on her clothes.

“Okay, Señora, I’ll leave tú *bolsa* here on the chair, *Qué le vaya bien*. I wish you the best.” she heard the Patricia say, before the door opened and closed.

Once dressed, Marisela looked one more time around the room, to say goodbye. She bid *adiós* to the tongs, the jars of liquids, and the oversized cotton swabs, farewell to the posters on the walls offering healthy foods. She reached for the pamphlet display she’d been eyeing while waiting for the results, pulled the one for sterilization, and folded it quickly into a small rectangle and slid it into her waiting purse. She positioned the strap over her shoulder just right the way she always did, so the knot fit perfectly in the notch by her collarbone, and walked out of the exam room. Her children swarmed her the moment she set foot in the lobby, begging for the *dulces* and *chicharrones* she’d promised them afterward if they were good.

“*Mil gracias*,” she said, nodding toward the receptionists as she led the kids out.

“*De nada*, it’s nothing, the receptionists answered, even though everyone in the waiting room knew that it wasn’t nothing. Those wild kids, had in fact, been a giant pain for all involved, but everyone also knew the staff’s politeness worked to smooth and soothe frayed nerves. For most of those here in the waiting room, for the reasons that had brought them there in the first place, “*de nada*,” were possibly the two kindest words they would hear all day.

Patti returned sniffling and red-eyed to the nurses' work station, hung up her lab coat and grabbed her lunch from the fridge.

"Man, she really did get to you," Claudia said, tsk-tsking. "I hate when the patient doesn't even know what they want. Like it's our fault they can't make up their minds. But you can't take it personal, you know. She's just a witch with a capital B."

"Grow up, Claudia!" Patti snapped. "And stop making things up when you don't know what to say. I made a mistake. I should feel bad. That lady is better than both of us put together. And by the way, there is no such thing as open-head surgery, and if you can't even figure out why that's so wrong, maybe you should have your own head looked at. Maybe you're in the wrong profession. It is a profession you know, like be professional?"

"Dang, Patti." Claudia's eyelashes fluttered angrily. "Nice way to talk to me when I give up my lunch for you. I'm just going to pretend you didn't say any of that, and chalk it up to your headache. You better go eat something. Now."

"Okay, Claudia, you're right. I'm really sorry," Patti answered, even though she wasn't. She took her lunch out to the patio, and bit into her sandwich. In the distance, she could see Marisela crossing the parking lot with the four kids jumping around and pulling all over her. Even though she was shaking them off, it was obvious how much they loved each other. In the shade of the patio, in the fresh air, Patti ate her lunch and silently wished the family well. She added a little prayer of contrition out of habit, though she wasn't religious, and while she was at it, tacked on another little one for the headache to go away, because she did believe in the power of positive thinking and even if it didn't work, it wouldn't make things any worse.

Marisela again fingered the knot in her purse strap like a rosary bead as she walked across the gravel parking lot, the children tugging at her arms, her knees, her waist. She focused on the hard leather stone between her thumb and forefinger and uttered a prayer under her breath. Not that she believed pain could be wished away so easily, but certainly a prayer couldn't do any harm. At first, she wasn't even sure exactly whose pain she prayed for, there was so much of it around. But as the prayer passed through her whispering lips, she chose Nurse Patricia, whose misguided but pure intentions, had caused a shift in the knot and rendered it even more powerful. Marisela was quite convinced of that, as she felt a small opening, a loosening between her heart and lungs, that made room for more air and lightness to fill the spaces between her ribs. And in turn, she could swear that she felt—or maybe simply enjoyed imagining—that behind the walls of *La Clinica*, a slight adjustment was similarly taking place in Nurse Patricia's head. She imagined the blade pulling back, the sharp edge softening, the ache retreating, and leaving in its place a small scar, a spot of insight.