

Miracle Hunting

The house always felt mysterious to the boy. His grandmother kept canaries in the unfinished basement by the laundry machines and the utility sink and in every room there were altars to different saints with tall, red candles constantly flickering. She rented the house from an older woman she met at church who moved to Canada with her second husband but maintained the top floor for infrequent visits.

His grandmother visited church friends often and since she was responsible for the boy's care in the summers of his elementary years, he would always accompany her. These women fell into two distinct camps - those who kept their nightgowns on and those who would apply make up and wear all the jewelry they owned at once. They lived in tiny houses with tiny lawns in all the more urban areas the boy's family had moved out of. Sometimes these older women also took care of children and the boy would play videogames or draw pictures with them, sharing their best stories from school and exaggerating them greatly. If there were no children to spend time with then there was food prepared or television or simply the voyeuristic pleasure of being unsupervised in a stranger's home.

The boy never complained. Each of these women had at least one paranormal experience and he loved to hear these stories over and over. The women made lunch for their guests and over these hearty feasts, the boy would request to hear the unexplained stories he'd heard countless times. Some of the women had near death experiences and the boy liked to compare the details. There were stories of premonitions and visits in dreams that provided reassurance. They were all told to him in a broken English and the boy would look to his grandmother for the untranslatable and if that wasn't possible, the women would gesture and snap and restate until it was clear they were understood.

The boy and his grandmother took other trips as well. Weekly, they would go to the shopping center and his grandmother would buy him a cheap toy or trinket that he would assemble, along with all his other mismatched figures, on her living room windowsill. They would go to the cemetery to visit her parents' graves. She would clean the site and set fresh flowers while the boy wandered through the unpaved roads and climbed the nearby trees. She would call him over and they would kneel, hold hands and pray. His grandmother would cry and the boy would think about how he never cried from sadness.

One afternoon, after coming home from the cemetery, there were 9 voicemails from various church friends. The boy pretended to play with his toys while his grandmother called each woman back and although she received the same news (that of a recent miracle), she acted surprised each time. The last call she made was to the miracle woman and she made plans to visit her the next day.

The boy had been to the miracle woman's house several times. She was firmly in the nightgown camp. She took care of a girl the boy's age and they would watch TV in the woman's bedroom

while the older women spoke in the kitchen. She wasn't there today but the boy always felt strange lying on the woman's bed with the girl. She didn't remove her shoes and occasionally she rested them on the woman's pillow.

Other women visited as well. They came with large, aluminum trays filled with rice and beans and chicken, plantains and yuca. His grandmother brought prayer cards and rice pudding. The boy ate in the kitchen, alone at the table while the women were in the bedroom. He drank warm soda (these women never seemed to refrigerate it) and listened for the women's voices but he could barely hear the rustle of a pant leg in the silence. The sounds of his chewing and the scraping of cutlery felt intrusive to whatever reverie was occurring in the back of the house.

Half an hour passed and the women were still in the room. The boy took the opportunity to explore the refrigerator, more out of curiosity than hunger. He couldn't possibly eat anymore. Then he moved his chair to the center of the kitchen so he could watch the small TV on the counter. First, he watched with the volume very low but as time continued to pass and the women still did not emerge, he turned the TV louder until he knew it was too loud. His grandmother came out of the room, shut off the TV and led him into the bedroom. The women were huddled around the nightstand. They turned to face him as he walked in, some stoic and others who'd clearly been crying. The scene reminded the boy of funerals he'd been to and he felt as scared and excited to approach the object of the women's attention as he did an open casket.

His grandmother led him closer and on the nightstand was a picture of a baby in a crib and a charcoal smudge that resembled a gingerbread man draped in a sheet in the corner of the photo.

It's an angel, the woman who owned the house said, with some effort, in her accented English. The boy looked at her and all the other women around her. He asked his grandmother if he could go outside and she agreed. The boy amused himself with a rubber kickball, providing himself with a series of achievable challenges until his grandmother called for him and they left together.

The boy's urge to discover something magical had never been greater and never seemed more achievable. He had set the bar too high before. Last year, he thought he could finally join in his family's tradition when he began to see a floater that resembled a scripted letter T or a paramecium budding. The school nurse swiftly soiled the preciousness with her instant explanation. Draw it, she commanded, skeptical of this thing he described as a vision. She looked at the paper.

And it moves around? She asked.

Yes, he answered tepidly

It's a floater, she said and dismissed him with a note for his parents to call an ophthalmologist.

It's exhausting waiting for the divine and after days of trying his best to pray, either in bed staring at the ceiling or sitting still on his grandmother's backyard swingset, staring at the sun

filtering through the poplar tree's leaves and making shortsighted promises to God, the boy demanded a sign.

He demanded it out loud and he felt foolish and selfish but there in the bark he was picking was clearly an outline of the Virgin Mary, clearer anyhow than the angel in the photo that demanded so much attention the other day. He looked towards his grandmother, tending to her garden and not paying him any mind and retreated from the tree.

For days, he went to the tree in hopes that the picture was less clear than he remembered or it had been disfigured naturally because he didn't dare to vandalize it but it was like a fossil, unchanging. The urge to tell someone grew everyday until finally he told his father in the car one afternoon. They were at a red light, on their way home from his grandmother's, and his father asked what it looked like. Like the statue in front of the church, he replied.

When the light turned green his father pulled into a nearby stripmall to make a U-Turn. Are you going back? The boy asked.
I want to see it.

They pulled into the driveway and his father walked straight to the tree. The boy followed just behind him, nervous and silent. His father traced the outline with his finger and the boy gasped audibly. You touched it, he said.

Sorry, his father said and he quickly removed his finger and laughed. We have to show your grandmother.

Are you sure? The boy was scared of the attention, unconvinced of the legitimacy of the figure. What are you scared of?

Nothing the boy replied instinctively but his legs felt weak and his distrust was palpable in his gut. His father went inside and came out with his grandmother. When she saw the image she cried and made one sustained and sobbing sound. She hugged and kissed her grandson.

The boy usually woke up every summer morning with youthful energy and would talk incessantly about whatever interested him that week while his mother listened deftly and navigated the morning traffic but today he was quiet. The night before, he heard his mother on the phone with her sister in the kitchen. Her sister asked if she saw the image when she visited their mother and what she thought of it. She reminded her sister that the boy was a good artist.

His mother helped him with the bag he brought daily to his grandmother's, a rotating inventory of distractions inside. Is there anything you want to tell me before I see this? She asked and the boy shook his head.

His grandmother had already set up a makeshift altar, a small side table with a lacy white tablecloth, a bouquet of flowers and a palm tied into a cross on top of it. So, this just happened the boy's mother asked and the boy nodded again. I shouldn't have doubted you, she said. In

the shade of the tree's canopy with a candlelight flickering below and his mother's approval, it did seem like a miracle.

His mother walked him inside. There was a savory smell of garlic and vinegar in the kitchen. His grandmother was over the stove, looking over her shoulder to watch the small TV. The ladies are coming over later? His mother asked.

They'll be here this afternoon.

This is a very ordinary miracle.

No such thing.

I have to go to work. She kissed her mother on the cheek and forced her son to kiss her.

The ladies all arrived within a few minutes of each other, carrying aluminum trays of food. The boy helped his grandmother arrange the feast on the kitchen table. The ladies helped to serve the boy and then they went outside before eating. They huddled in front of the tree, their hands resting on each other's backs like an exhausted sports team. The boy watched from the window above the kitchen sink but he lost interest after a half hour and went to watch TV, getting up during commercial breaks to see them still standing there.

They returned a lighthearted group, smiling and wiping away tears. They sat in the kitchen, eating and laughing. The boy stayed in the kitchen, listening and answering questions occasionally that the women would ask him about school or his parents. They made espresso and put away the leftovers. When they left shortly after, his grandmother went to her room to take a nap.

Having affirmed his miracle, he felt even further from it. The boy understood the concept of faith but often wondered what the proper ratio between conviction and skepticism should be or if skepticism was even allowed. He looked into his grandmother's room. She was asleep. The room was dark and the TV softly played the introduction music to one of the many telenovellas she watched. He went outside and walked to the tree. He traced the outline of the image and then lightly with his thumbnail, he began to draw the folds in her veil and cape and outlined the silhouette of her face, careful not to add too much detail.

He went back inside to grab a pencil and began to lightly draw shadow lines. He stepped back and admired the work. He drew a subtle nose, lines for downcast eyes, clearer outstretched hands. He went back into the kitchen to grab a knife. He pulled the drawers out slowly so the cutlery wouldn't rattle. The only knife sharp enough was a boxcutter. He put it in the pocket of his jeans and walked outside. In front of the tree, he didn't know where to start and pushed the blade up and down several times, nervous to make the first inerasable incision.

The screen door opened and shut. He threw the boxcutter and stared anxiously at the image. The marks from his thumbnail and pencil were slight. His grandmother called him inside. Did you do something? She asked and without hesitation, he denied it. She stared at him like she

was giving him a chance to tell the truth and the boy was nervous that she would ask again but she said OK and told him his father would be here soon and he should be ready for him.

When he did arrive, his grandmother walked to the porch and asked him to take the altar downstairs. She told the boy to help him and went inside. His father asked him to take the candles and tablecloth and he was happy to have a task. He folded the tablecloth neatly and followed his father into the basement.

In the car, the smell of mouthwash and sweat and the loud salsa music was the same but he still felt nervous like he would be exposed any minute. His father asked about his day and he talked about the women and what they brought. Almost home, he turned to his father and asked - what is a miracle? His father answered, whatever you want it to be. Whatever seems important. Discouraged by the simple answer, the same vague but contented response he'd heard about every indeterminate aspect of life: love, success, faith, he rested his head on the window and noticed in the reflection the boxcutter was in the car's cup holder.