

The Unspoken

El Telegrama / The Telegram

The words were never spoken, but everyone in el barrio knew Reymundo was dead. He was three years old. Carmelita and Francisco had waited more years than that for his birth. He died in the island's main hospital, in the capital city, far from el barrio where nothing could be done for leukemia. Reymundo had been a patient in the curing place for weeks. Carmelita and Francisco were permitted to visit on Tuesdays. Carts laden with plaintains and horses slowed by heat always delayed their bus. The time allotted to press their lips on Reymundo's damp curls always ended too soon. Carmelita and Francisco glimpsed him last as stern nuns had ushered them out. Reymundo had grasped the high bars of his crib, one wilting little boy in a row of penned-up children.

“Mami! Mami!”

Francisco had made himself hollow, and his son's cries echoed within him. Carmelita had leaned heavily on his arm. Francisco feared either would crack him, but he had walked straight and strong. He tried to calm Carmelita.

“Tranquila. We'll be back.”

Reymundo died before his parents could return. The news left the capital city in a series of dots and dashes, a telegram not to be delayed along the pockmarked roads that squeezed through the jungle. The child's death arrived in the town of Toa Baya as words, concise and neat on a paper carried to the church sacristy on dusty feet. Padre Tomás sat with the words for a time.

HOSPITAL DE LA CAPITAL SAN JUAN PR 947A AUG5 1939
SR FRANCISCO RUFINO MARRERO TOA BAYA PR
TO INFORM THAT REYMUNDO FRANCISCO MARRERO MALE AGE 3
EXPIRED 718A MON AUG 5 1939 STOP

La Esperanza / The Hope

Years before, Padre Tomás had delivered the word of God to Francisco. Carmelita had implored el padre, fearful that Francisco's pride taunted God. The business Francisco had started with his brother Ramón prospered. The Marrero brothers were fair with the men from whom they bought crops, and honest with those to whom they sold. The brothers earned enough to fulfill their needs and satisfy some wants, but Carmelita and Francisco did not have a child. Carmelita had coveted the regularity with which Ramón's wife produced children, though they were only girls. Carmelita looked as lush and ripe as the garden she kept, but she bore no fruit. She had prayed. The women of their barrio had prayed with her. Some jealous hearts had wished Carmelita childless, doomed to tend her garden as they were doomed to toil without the rewards the Marreros enjoyed. Carmelita had drunk the special teas prepared by the woman who knew about such things. Yet nothing. Months became years and desperation had made Carmelita's tongue sharp, her patience short. She sought counsel from Padre Tomás for weeks without telling Francisco.

"Mañana I will see Padre Tomás," she had announced one evening. "He is going to anoint my stomach and pray for me."

The words had sat at the table where Carmelita and Francisco shared the light of a kerosene lamp. Francisco continued counting the money from that morning's sales. She looked up from her stitching, her hands still.

"El padre says you should come, too."

Francisco stared at the money on the table.

"Ramón and I have business tomorrow."

He resumed counting the money as deliberately as he would follow his plans for the next day.

“I told el padre you would go.”

Francisco looked up and saw that Carmelita sat there, solid and squared, her chin set. She did not blink.

“Mujer, I have business. Padre Tomás wouldn’t know what it’s like to work. I have no time for this.”

“You don’t have time for God?” Carmelita asked, though mention of the Almighty could only lure Francisco’s hostility.

“What time has He for me? If I waited for God, I would still be in my mother’s house, all of us hungry with Papi dead, slaving for a few coins. My time is to rise before the sun, work for this house, to feed us. I don’t have time for God.”

“That is why we have no child! What is your time for, if not for this?”

Carmelita did not cover her face, and Francisco did not look away from her eyes that searched upward and her mouth that moaned desires for which there were no words. Francisco saw her more clearly in that weak light than he ever had in the tropical sun. The next day, Padre Tomás had been surprised to see Francisco enter the church with Carmelita, who was to be anointed with the holy oil.

“God hears all and makes all things possible,” Padre Tomás had reminded him.

Francisco had doubted that God granted more than hurricanes, failed crops, and savage heat, but he could give his wife hope by entertaining el padre’s words.

Francisco had laughed when Padre Tomás asked if they had been exposed to the dark arts.

“Ay Padre, people can be jealous and cast un mal de ojo on you.”

But the three knew Francisco trusted the dark powers as much as his own.

Padre Tomás had said the special prayers to exorcise Carmelita’s womb. Francisco had

no love for God, but he had held his hands over Carmelita's womb and prayed, too.

It was God they all had thanked when Carmelita was finally with child. Padre Tomás had celebrated the long-awaited arrival with them. He had poured the water over the head of that son, Reymundo, king of the world. Francisco had made it possible for his son and el padre to be dressed in exquisitely embroidered clothes. He had purchased fine vessels for the oil and water that were made somewhere far from el barrio.

La Lluvia / The Rain

Francisco would seat his family in the front pew of the church every Sunday. The people of their barrio had watched the baby grow robust. Reymundo was the color of honey, with his father's clear green eyes, and Carmelita held him close against her heart. Francisco made certain the small church was dressed as richly as his son. Francisco had held Reymundo when he was big enough to take his own steps, and the child's feet rarely touched the church floor. Francisco laughed at his toddler's tendency to grab and declare everything "Mio."

"Si, mi angelito," Francisco would confirm. "It is yours. All is yours."

Padre Tomás had watched every week how Reymundo kicked when he was carried and stomped when placed to stand on his own. The priest had noted when Reymundo's fussing was distressed. Carmelita had held her child, but he was not consoled, only whimpered and pulled at the neck of her dress. Carmelita began to look as dimmed as the boy. The homilies and meditative silences proceeded with less interruption from Reymundo for many weeks.

An unexpected downpour drenched el barrio for three days. The people had carried their shoes and the mud had sucked at their feet as they walked to church on the Sunday after the rain. The front pew was empty. Padre Tomás saw Luz, Carmelita and Francisco's niece, after the mass. The little girl had frozen and paled as the priest approached her. She would not look at him

when he spoke to her.

“Reymundo is sick, Padre. He caught a chill during the rain. Please pray for him.”

She had turned and run toward her father, Ramón.

That week, Francisco and his brother Ramón arrived at the church one morning. Padre Tomás had heard the tires on the gravel outside and greeted the brothers. Ramón spoke for his brother, who was muted by worry. Padre Tomás had listened and decided it was best to take a bottle of blessed water and his prayer book to Francisco’s house. Ramón drove and Francisco sat in the middle, still clutching the hat he had removed when greeting the priest. The three men arrived at the house. The blinds were open in all the windows, but there was no breeze. Reymundo was sluggish in Carmelita’s lap, and she tried to feed him a clear broth. They were both sopped with sweat.

“The fever won’t leave him, Padre,” Carmelita had whispered.

“Show Padre Tomás,” said Francisco.

Carmelita raised Reymundo’s shirt. Deep red, blue, and purple blotches bloomed across his torso. He had only enough energy to whimper.

“I applied the balm Doña Piedad made. I apply it every day, just as she told me. Pero nada, Padre. Nothing makes it go away.”

Carmelita began to cry into Reymundo’s hair.

Padre Tomás had stood frozen and impotent. He could not touch either of them. Finally, he spoke.

“Reymundo should go to the hospital. You should take him to the capital.”

Carmelita and Francisco took Reymundo to San Juan and returned to el barrio without him. Padre Tomás had listened to Carmelita sob in the empty church on the days she wandered into town, in between visits to the hospital, unmoored until she next touched her son. She would

kneel in the aisle, and prostrate herself at the foot of the altar. Her tears had pooled on the hard floor until her little niece Luz arrived to guide her back home. On those days, Padre Tomás had sat in the sacristy alone.

Today, el padre sat with the telegram. He once had offered Carmelita and Francisco the hope of the word of God. Now he would bring them the news of Reymundo's death.

The sun was high and vigilant above the plaza when he stepped outside the church. A man was across the way with a truck. El padre looked at the sun without shielding his eyes, then walked blindly toward the man and asked to be taken to find Francisco.

El Jardin / The Garden

Luz was perched in the avocado tree in Carmelita's garden, having reclaimed the space when Reymundo was hospitalized. She recognized the top of her Uncle Francisco's head above the stalks and bush as he approached. He walked stiffly on his long legs, as if afraid to step on the ground. It was an odd hour for him to return to el barrio. Lunch was past, men were in the fields, women tended to chores and children. Francisco should be with Ramón, her father, distributing payments for the plantains and tobacco they'd sold that morning in the main market. Luz saw the top of another head, someone shorter than Francisco. She saw it was Padre Tomás and became afraid. He walked like a blind man, feeling the path cautiously with his feet. El padre only entered el barrio to see the guilty, desperate or dying. In her heart, Luz knew she was guilty.

Luz spent most days with Carmelita. There was no school during the hottest months of the year, and it was only right to keep company with her aunt who was distraught over Reymundo. Luz was six years old, not the oldest or youngest of her sisters, just one of five girls. But she was special in Carmelita's garden. There was freedom to climb trees without taunts of being machua or reminders to act like a señorita.

Luz had prayed dutifully with everyone for Carmelita and Francisco, and the prayers were exceeded by the arrival of a son. She and her sisters had regarded Reymundo from a reverent distance, and his feet rarely touched the ground. The girls would remember him most with arms extended in entitled expectation. Everything within Reymundo's gaze was his by birthright: Carmelita's attention, Francisco's broad smile, and the garden. Luz's visits to her aunt and uncle's home had become obligations to help with Reymundo, like a good girl. He had introduced criticism into Carmelita's vocabulary with Luz.

"Niña, don't be so careless."

"Clumsy girl. Be careful with the baby."

Luz had not wanted Reymundo. She had pinched him. Many times. Always out of sight, often in the garden, where he followed her on his toddler legs. It had been satisfying to twist a fleshy fold on his baby back. Luz had been careful to pinch as when pulling a bloom near surrender, but Reymundo had marks. Even in places where no one had touched him. He became tired and fussed more.

Luz had left Reymundo in the garden the day of the sudden rainstorm. He had been grabbing flowers and the petals poked from his fists. Luz had known he should be taken inside, but she was tired of him. She had walked away from the garden as the first drops fell and quickly multiplied into a downpour that flooded el barrio for three days. Luz never heard Carmelita call out from the house, telling her to bring in Reymundo. Luz had known he would be drenched when her aunt fetched him, crying and refusing to release the petals he clutched. Reymundo had caught the chill that day and grew weaker.

Though not a prayer, Luz's hate had been a wish. Padre Tomás had said once that wishes were like prayers and God heard them, too. Luz feared that God knew the truth of her heart. Luz knew la leukemia was her doing. Prayers had delivered Reymundo into the world, and prayers

could spirit him away.

El Fuego / The Fire

Her Uncle Francisco and Padre Tomás approached the house, unaware she was watching. Luz was consumed by the beating of her heart. She feared she would soil herself.

“Carmelita, estoy con Padre Tomás,” Francisco called as he neared the door.

Luz heard Carmelita’s surprise. The men entered the house before she reached the door. There were murmurs. Padre Tomás spoke. Francisco began talking but Carmelita insisted.

“No.”

The men sounded anxious.

She grew louder.

“No. No. No.”

Carmelita’s words grew desperate, frantic as trapped birds. Her scream split the sky and knocked Luz from the tree limb. The girl ran, unable to call out to her mother. Her lips stuck to her teeth and she could not move her tongue. She managed only strangled moans from her dry mouth. Luz ran through the people who rushed toward Carmelita’s screams.

“Niña, que paso?” asked Luz’s mother.

Luz finally screamed.

“Ay mama! Es Carmelita, mama. Ay mama! Dios, perdoname. Forgive me, I’m so sorry.”

Her mother ran toward the screams and arrived with other neighbors to Carmelita and Francisco’s house. Padre Tomás stood silent at the doorway, holding the paper in one hand and his prayer book in the other. The women rushed forward to restrain Carmelita. Her limbs thrashed as though on fire. Her screams gored everyone around her. Her beautiful face was even

more terrible. Carmelita could not close her eyes to what she saw within the flames of loss.

Francisco cried out to her, called her by name, but she was lost.

“Dios mio!” she pleaded. “My God, my God!”

Carmelita freed an arm and held it out, but she could not hold back the horror. It was indifferent as it torched her and left her to live.

Luz heard it all from where she stood in front of her own house. She squeezed her head between her palms, but could not keep the screams out any more than she could keep in her secret. Her prayers had set loose a power beyond her control. Luz feared it would kill them all.

La Lucha / The Struggle

Carmelita and Francisco did not emerge for days after Reymundo was buried. Francisco inched out the door first. He blinked in the sunlight. He was hunched and bent, frail on his long grasshopper legs. He scuttled like the bugs in Carmelita’s garden, fearful of exposed expanses.

Inside the house, Carmelita touched a split in the wood by the door, low to the ground. The thin dark line stuck to her fingertips. It was a vine inching into the house, below detection. Carmelita grabbed her broom and beat at the wall. The spindly growth detached and she opened the door to sweep it outside. From the doorway, she surveyed her garden where Reymundo had grown sweet under her gaze.

Carmelita’s roses clamored everywhere, burst and crisped at their curled edges. Their colors dazzled and hid the thorny stems she needed to cut. Distended fruit dotted the thick grass under the trees. She looked upon the disorder with rage as infernal as the fire that had molten her. Carmelita swept the vine out the door. She continued to sweep, breaking through tangles, beating back the growth, undertaking the first battle in a life-long war.