

House of God

In the second week of marsh-wet summer God moved into the house next door with scraggly sunflowers that radiated warmth and dripped lemon nectar. We pressed our noses to the windowpane and stared as he trotted to and fro, hefting boxes of who-knows-what out of his truck. Wool scarves, we guessed. Cans of Italian Wedding soup, or a few well-worn asteroid belts. Little Pedro said maybe God keeps his rosaries there, ones of gold beads and pinewood, and plastic ones that break during Hail Mary's at church.

Next morning Mama sent us over with her welcoming pie: a sugar-crumbled tart bubbling dark red with cherries. She had stayed up all night cracking eggs, mixing flour, and praying with a knotted cord in hand. When the stars slid away Mama roused us up and scrubbed our faces so hard we turned pink and translucent. Our collars stuck up straight as pins.

*Make me proud, Mama said. Be polite.* We trooped next door with her kisses sticky on our foreheads, brandishing the dish aloft like a sacrament.

God opened his door—just a sliver—and we chanted our greetings: *Morning, sir. We're the neighbors. Ma sent us over to say hello. Here, take this pie; it's so good and still warm too.*

He glanced at our seven brown faces and lifted the pie. *Give my thanks to your Ma,* he said. We waited for God to smile benevolently. To reveal something holy, something electrifying. But he shut the door and our anticipation melted fast and thick.

The next day was a sunless Sunday. God's telephone rang continuously as prayers rose up from the church spires in wreaths of rose-colored smoke, spiraling into his

chimneys. Paper doves dotted with tiny-lettered notes crisscrossed through. Sometimes they collided with each other, their ampersand bellies jiggling as they crumpled back.

Mama herded us single file to church where Father Sanchez, bald and wheezing, delivered all the sermons. His voice pendulated across the room, swinging into squeaks and dipping into growls. The seed pearls on his rosary clicked against each other.

He spoke of how God loved us so much, yes, that he came down to live amongst us. And he chose *our town*, which had no swimming pool and a serious cockroach infestation. God has come to grant our wishes, he proclaimed. In fact, Father Sanchez had visited God himself with a request. He bent his shiny head to reveal a patch of thin hair sprouting from the peak.

By Monday, there was a string of visitors on God's doorstep, carrying requests of all shapes, stretching into a run-on sentence with no period in sight. Some of the visitors were missing an arm or a job or a lover. Others had too many arms or jobs or lovers. They slept on his lawn, sat cross-legged under the shade of his sneezing pines, and licked the honey from his sunflowers.

We saw Governor Lopez slurping watermelon guts, and spitting out the seeds when he thought nobody was looking. His wife, Angela Lopez, whose brown-velvet belly swelled like a parenthesis, had a cigarette stuck between her lips. At the back of the line was the school janitor, Diego Rivera, his decaying face stippled with sores. Little Pepita was curled asleep on his back, one pudgy hand clenched around his freckled collar.

From the porch, God fiddled with his halo and listened to their requests. Nodded a lot. Spoke a little. Bid everyone a fine day.

In the beginning, we marveled over every miracle. Governor Lopez's spine unhooked itself overnight. His wife Angela stopped smoking, started applying bed red lipstick and pear perfume. And after days of praying, Diego Rivera's blisters aged into scabs that flaked away. He started smiling more. Started idling more. Started pushing Pepita in a stroller because girls loved to pinch the pinks of her cheeks red. Started flirting with women in a voice thicker than lust.

The days lengthened. Many folks came twice, thrice, twenty, thirty times. Father Sanchez returned every Monday with fresher-looking hair. Pageboy cuts. Irrigated braids. Toffee-lightened center parts. Meanwhile, Angela Lopez's speckled collarbones hollowed into a cave. You could see the curves of rib under her breasts. Diego Rivera asked for a saxophone and began playing love songs that made your bones ache. Sweet strains that made the young women nostalgic for memories that were never theirs, that made the old girls long for times they never had.

Even Mama approached God with a few entreaties, although she didn't like to ask for favors. Truth is, Mama wanted her plate back but she's too polite to say so. Always ended up asking for small things. Pedro's socks started folding themselves. Slugs lumped away from Mama's tomato stalks. And the cracks on our cereal bowls squeezed tighter, until they disappeared entirely.

June mildewed into damp green August so quickly we couldn't even recall July, and Diego Rivera left town with Angela Lopez. They had looked so bright, so gorgeous, walking through soft dusk like that. Streetlight streamed around their linked arms,

filtering through the gaps. Her lipstick prints glimmered across the planes of his cheeks; his music jangled on her jean hips like loose change. We didn't even recognize them at first. We didn't even think of little Pepita, her hands outstretched towards Diego, as if trying to grasp his collar and tug him back.

This summer we couldn't forget the heat, how it rubbed its face against our calves and purred whenever we scratched behind its ears. Or the shape of Pepita's watery-pink eyes as she watched Diego shrink into the infinite distance. How Governor Lopez's spine crooked back into a question mark, after he came home to the revelation of absence. How grief caught between his eyelids, stinging.

And we couldn't forget Diego Rivera and Angela Lopez, clutching each other's hands in the back of God's truck. They were caught a week after their elopement, in a no-tell motel three towns over. We saw their wide-eyed expressions as God drove by. Their kneecaps still kissing and pressed squarely together, whispering over and over like a naked melody: *Love you. Love you. Love you.*

*The Lord took them to Hell*, Mama whispered when we asked her where they were going. *Because they did something very bad, niños.*

Later, we imagined flames embroidered into their skin, puncturing, squeezing out clots of blood. Blistering roses blooming in a sea of golden fire. Diego and Angela forever intertwined, burning and helical and too in love to untangle.

Afterwards, God's doors remained sealed like a prayer. People stopped coming over, anyways. The fog joggers and dog walkers began to skirt around his house in ever-widening circles. He has become an otherness that jutted out amongst the line of picketed

fences and color-coded lawns. We sat outside with lollipops dissolving in our mouths and our spit souring neon. Watched the air choke on silence until its face turned red, then blue, then bruised. The quiet lingered, disquieting.

Some folks whispered that God's gifts were tainted miracles. Mama, who usually scoffed at such talk, stopped using cereal bowls and started pouring the breakfast milk into her fancy glass goblets instead.

After Sunday worship we tottered out of the church, clutching paper cups of grape juice. Sister Francesca, who is always sucking tequila candy, shouted at us to get off the nice church grass. We hurried off quickly. Pedro tripped over his tight dress shoes and fell back onto the grass. His cup spilled everywhere, soaking the chlorophyll purple.

*Nasty brats*, Sister Francesca shrieked. Bad temper shimmered off like a mirage. *Go burn in hell*. Star-rust smoke streamed from her mouth, the acrid tang smacking the air. We stepped back, Pedro nervously scrambling up, and she snarled, revealing four rows of yellowed snaggleteeth.

Turning around, we fled. Peeled our shoes off and ran in our socks. Left behind fourteen scraps of cracked leather, bunched like beads on a rosary. *Go burn in hell*. Her condemnation fractured in our ears, and we bolted into our house and locked it thrice. Our sides stitched themselves in protest. We imagined periwinkle fire. Tendons unfurling like flowers. We thought of Mama sitting alone, surrounded by seven goblets of milk.

Then came a tap from outside. We made Pedro unlock the door and he did so, fingers shaking. He gasped and we peeked above our couch slowly, slowly. God stood at outside holding Mama's polished pie plate, looking confused.

*Please don't take me to hell,* Pedro blurted.

*What?* God asked. And so we told him—in gasps and stutters —what Sister Francesca had said.

*You're not going to Hell,* God said tiredly. Then, like an afterthought: *Sister Francesca doesn't decide who goes and who doesn't.*

We felt better instantly, and our stitches untangled themselves so we could breathe. Then we remembered our manners and offered him a seat. Offered him wake-up coffee and Mama's peanut cookies, but there's no coffee left so we poured him a glass of milk instead. We crowded around him like crows hankering around a hunk of bread. Pedro started to fan the smoke away from God's jacket.

God chewed slowly, his jawbone sliding back and forth. The sunflowers bordering his house swiveled around and began illuminating our walls.

*Do you like being God?* Someone asked as God licked the peanut butter off his fingers. He paused and thought for a while.

*I don't,* he answered firmly, then resumed licking.