

TAMARIND

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Caracas, 1966

Sister Margarita climbs on the bed and straddles her patient, a woman lying on her back, the proper position to set the bone.

“Hold still now, Consuelo,” the nun says. “You are strong, now. Believe that you are strong.”

Consuelo exhales then forces out the words, in no more than a whisper.

“Si, Hermana.”

Sister stabilizes the elbow with one hand while she gently extends Consuelo’s wrist out towards her with the other. She asks a question to distract her patient, “What is your favorite flower, Consuelo?” And without waiting for the answer, she yanks once, a swift violent pull.

Consuelo screams as her pupils roll to the top of her head. Sister swings a wooden board underneath Consuelo’s wrist and lays the woman’s palm upon

the flat plane. She lines up the other end at the elbow. Then, she wraps the board to Consuelo's arm, around and around, with one long strip of fabric and ties the ends tightly. Consuelo will have to wear the arm tied to the board and in a sling for weeks. Her oldest child, a shy ten-year-old girl who had greeted Sister at the door with a toddler on her hip, will have to take over most of the household chores. If Consuelo follows Sister's instructions, she may well regain use of the limb. But if she gets frustrated and takes the board off, she will likely end up with a clawed hand and an arm that will atrophy until it becomes nothing more than a hindrance.

A rag floats in a bit of pink water in a cracked porcelain basin on a small wooden table next to the bed that Consuelo shares with her husband, Manuel. The man is absent, and Sister Margarita hopes that he stays away, at least until he is sober. She pauses to thank God that things were not worse. The bloody injuries, scrapes and cuts on Consuelo's arms and knees, had cleaned up easily. No bone had burst through.

The nun stares at the whites of Consuelo's eyes. Then she lightly slaps the woman's cheeks.

"Consuelo... Consuelo," Sister Margarita calls to her patient. When Consuelo's eyes register consciousness again, Sister offers the woman another sip

of the spirits that she carries in her black leather bag. Crushed leaves of belladonna mixed in a little red wine offers potent relief.

A low moan emerges from Consuelo's throat.

"Drink a bit more," Sister says, offering the small glass. Only one more sip, no more, as it is best with the head injury for Consuelo to remain alert.

A single light bulb hangs from a cord in the middle of the four stucco walls, its circular light reflecting in the center of the bright red liquid. Sister Margarita stares at the red and feels a band tighten around her forehead. She momentarily closes her eyes for a short reprieve from the intense color.

Red always shows itself to her, and in most instances, it is impossible for her to avoid. The color tires her. It angers her. It steals her energy. Shimmering just below the delicate precarious layers of skin and always ready to spill forth, red always signals trouble. Her job as a nurse requires her to keep that color in its proper place. Consuelo's injuries should not have happened. The woman's husband, enraged at a delayed dinner, punished his wife by beating her. Now, his dinners would be delayed for weeks as his wife cooks with one hand and his ten-year old tries to help.

Consuelo raises her head and takes the last sip.

"Gracias, Hermana," Consuelo says as color returns to her face.

Physically, the two women are not vastly different. Both were born twenty-seven years ago, in the year of Our Lord, 1939, in the mountain town of El Hidalgo, above the city of Caracas. Both have dark hair and eyes the color of rich farming soil. Sister's nose is slighter larger and wider than Consuelo's. Both women are thin, but Sister has never given birth and eats regularly at the convent, her bones are rounded by a bit of flesh. Consuelo has carried and nursed six children, five of them still alive, so her body is quite lean. Consuelo's dull brown hair reaches her tailbone, and she often wears it in one long braid down her back. The nun's almost black curls spring outward from her head. She smoothes them down and pins the mass to keep it under her wimple, yet wayward strands are forever bouncing out from under the headpiece.

A scar, just above the nun's right eyebrow, captures the moment when she was five and her father swung his arm emptying the table of its contents and causing a heavy ceramic platter to smash against her forehead. Her mother explained that her father hadn't meant to hurt her. He was simply prone to losing his temper from time to time. As she got older, Margarita imagined living without a man.

Later, when she turned fifteen, an event solidified her resolve to remain single. The rape hadn't been violent, but it changed her. And yet, no one would

ever know. She waited for her period. Two days, then three, then four. Five days after it should have arrived, she nearly passed out when the red streak appeared in her underwear. She never spoke of the incident. Who would believe her anyway? She stayed after school and participated in the private study session with her teacher. She might be at fault, but she would never be with a man. Never again. She entered the convent and took her final vows four years later.

Sister Margarita focuses her attention on Consuelo's swollen eye. She traces the almost flat plane from the woman's cheekbone to her forehead and palpates for any sign of permanent damage. The area resembles a tight peach, a ripe durazno, so full of juice that any more pressing will only damage the skin. A true examination will have to wait until the swelling goes down. She places the cool cloth back over the woman's eye.

Sister Margarita lowers herself gently to sit on the bed. She lifts her patient's good hand and clasps it in hers.

"Consuelo, what do you think your children's lives would be like without you? Do you think he won't turn to them next? This has gone on too long. His drinking is well known throughout the village."

“He is a good man, Hermana,” Consuelo says with a slight slur in her voice from the spiked wine. “He didn’t mean for this.” Consuelo takes her good hand from the nun’s to gesture towards her face and now bandaged arm.

Tomorrow, Sister thinks to herself. *Tomorrow, I will return and convince Consuelo to make the day’s journey to the magistrate.*

It was something the nun had done more than once. The walks down the mountain into the bustling city of Caracas empowered her as a woman of faith. She believed that things could change, and the search for justice pulled at her, tugged her down the mountain. The flow of Sister Margarita’s full black robe, the starkness of her black and white head piece, and her strong words often triggered arrests of the men who had broken the flesh and bones of their wives.

“I’m leaving now, Consuelo,” Sister announces, and then to the ten-year-old daughter. “Your mother must rest tonight. You are in charge. I’ll have one of the novices bring some dinner from the convent, but make sure your mother stays in bed. Do you understand?”

Brown eyes look up at the nun, and the little girl nods. It is too much to ask of a child. Four other children for her to watch including the eighteen-month-old means a lot of work. Yet, family life requires this. Somehow things must get done.

Standing over the bed, the desire to be on her way preempts any other thought. *A shower, dinner, and then vespers.*

“Send someone for me if you need me,” Sister Margarita says as she places the strips of fabric and the bottle of spiked wine back in her bag. Exiting the house, she walks the dusty path through the woods, heading down, to the east, towards the convent.

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Sister Margarita removes the hanging brush, suspended by a loop of twine, in the shower that she shares with the sixteen other nuns and begins scrubbing her feet. The sight of her toes pleases her. They are solid and strong and the only part of her body she can see. She places the brush back and reaches down to slide the lather with her fingers, lingering for just a moment on the soft skin between her toes, the only spot on her feet where the nerve endings still give a little jolt, the only place not callused from walking in leather sandals up and down the mountain. She pauses at the positive bodily sensation. Touching herself years ago only brought waves of nausea and the need to confess. She had tried flagellation, but she gave up the practice quickly. The small pleasure of washing her toes turned out to be adequate.

The women of the convent step out of their long wool habits to wash while their thin cotton underclothing, boxy slips, and loose pantaloons with tied waists, remain on. For most of the month, it is sufficient to soap up through the thin fabric. When one of the women has her monthly cycle, she throws a sheet over the cord strung between the walls of the shower stall. Then she strips out of the rags tied between her legs and washes more thoroughly. This is merely a nuisance. From their first days in the convent, the women are taught, and consequently, come to believe, that the body is unimportant, requiring only the most basic care. After years, the body accepts this and refuses to feel much of anything, and the spirit reigns.

Margarita muses about women in relationships like Consuelo's and Manuel's. Inevitably, the women say that the beatings are their own fault. Convincing them otherwise remains a challenge.

Margarita lifts one foot and then the other into the stream of water to rinse. Then she moves her whole body under, decadently this time, enjoying the coolness of the water through the thin fabric. She then pushes the excess off her limbs and wrings and squeezes the edges of her undergarments.

Sister Margarita steps out of the water and towels off. She puts her heavier black and white habit on top of her moist undergarments, fastens her dusty

sandals on her feet, and places her wimple back on her damp brown hair. Later, in her room, she will remove her habit and put on her nightshirt and any remaining dampness will evaporate.

Two of the other nuns, the ones assigned to physical work, have just finished showering. They stand near the shower in the hallway, a simple sign of solidarity, waiting for Margarita to finish.

Without a word, the three women walk down the hallway to the refectory. Twelve women stand in front of their plates. As Margarita and the two freshly bathed nuns move into their places, the entire group folds their hands and bow their heads. Mother Superior, a tiny elderly woman with perfect posture, leads them in a prayer of thanksgiving.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” she says making the sign of the cross in slow careful movements. The women copy the gesture in unison.

“We thank you for your kindness, almighty God, for your mercy, and for the bountiful abundance you provide through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

They eat in silence—roast chicken, rice, and beans. They don’t use their voices again until they are in the sanctuary chanting evening vespers.

Only freshly cut flowers routinely decorate the rustic altar in the sparse chapel. Tonight, three small sunflowers drink from a cobalt glass bottle. The melodic tones of the women's voices combine and bounce off the square walls to vibrate soothingly within Margarita's chest. She exits, more than ready for sleep, and processes back to her tiny cell. As a novitiate, the single chest of drawers with the small crucifix above the white cotton twin bed seemed stark and harsh, reflecting the strict discipline and material lack of the place. She waited to take her final vows. It wasn't that she didn't feel the presence of the Lord calling her to this life, and she knew that she was not meant to live with a man. Yet, how would she bear the sameness, the bleakness, the loss of joy? She decided the sacrifice was worth never having to answer to a man. A life of service was far easier than being a wife and mother.

Now, nine years later, she finds her own joy. She picks single flowers, yellow or pink, never red, and tucks the blossom behind the head of the Lord hanging on the cross above her bed. When the thing dries to brown, she plucks another.

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In the morning, after breakfast, Sister Margarita receives a summons and follows the messenger to the office. A large silver crucifix hangs on the white-

washed wall above the head of Mother Superior. The small woman remains seated, but she holds her shoulders in a way that makes them appear formidable. The room contains space for her desk and chair, another chair in front of the desk, and a long thin table on which rests a stack of books and a large worn leather-bound Bible. Narrow wooden boards, stained nearly black and polished to a shine, line the floor. A small woven terra-cotta colored rug at the entrance guards the room from the inevitable dust clinging to the entrants' feet. The rest of the floors of the convent function as simply packed earth or wide rough planks. Margarita tries to enter quietly, but she is frustrated at the impossibility of it. Her sandals, once again, make little slapping sounds on the polished wood as she makes her way to the chair.

“Sister Margarita,” the woman behind the desk begins, bright blue eyes staring. “I must tell you that I am quite concerned about you. The news has reached my ears that Consuelo’s husband, Manuel, has beaten her again. I am wondering if you will be convincing her to walk with you down the mountain to have her testify in front of the magistrate. I believe, in this case, your strategy might make things worse. He is altogether a different sort of man. Those

other men that were confronted were embarrassed and...well, eventually...they were able to find reconciliation for their sins. But, with Manuel..." Mother Superior sighs, "You might be creating more of a problem."

"He is not a bad man," the woman continues. "I knew him as a boy. He was an altar server for the bishop for years. Quite pious. His problem now comes from his drinking," the leader pauses. Sister Margarita says nothing.

Mother Superior tips her head, "Perhaps, Sister, you should counsel Consuelo to soften his temper, to placate him. She may wish to take our Lord's passion as inspiration for her suffering, but I am not at all convinced that reporting him to the law is the safest thing to do."

Margarita keeps her face as neutral as she can, but her blood feels warm. It is wrong to show even the slightest bit of disagreement with what her spiritual and occupational leader has just said. Yet, she isn't about to tell Consuelo to try to "placate" her husband. Mother Superior offers a nod, the signal that now Margarita may speak.

"I must disagree, Mother." Margarita says evenly, attempting to keep her voice steady. "If Consuelo doesn't do something, this will only continue to escalate. She may never have full use of the arm again, and there may be damage

to her vision. I can't be sure yet. It is impossible to examine the eye with such swelling.”

Mother Superior squeezes her own eyes shut, presses her lips together, and inhales deeply through her nose. She slowly makes the sign of the cross then drops her hands to her lap. After a brief time, she opens her eyes and narrows her gaze once again on Margarita. It is the look all the nuns know well, defying anyone to disagree. The consensus is that this is precisely what helped the woman rise to her position. Margarita braces for the impending command and prays Mother won't forbid her to speak to Consuelo. She will, if she must, for the first time, break her vow of obedience if Mother gives her such an order.

“I will pray for Consuelo, my daughter. And for Manuel. You might consider doing the same. Please...be wise.” the older woman says, and her shoulders sag a bit towards the floor. Margarita wonders if the lines on Mother's forehead are new or if she just hadn't been paying attention to the fact that the woman is aging.

“Yes, Mother,” Margarita says bowing her head to receive the blessing that indicates the end of their conversation. Margarita will not be praying for Manuel. It is the right thing to do, but she will not do it. At the very least, she doesn’t have time. She needs to leave soon to see all her patients.

Sweat gathers under her arms, on her forehead, and above her upper lip on this hot humid morning. Sister thanks God for the tropical trees that shade the path from the convent to the walkways that lead to the poor shanty towns perched on the side of the mountain. She moves with purpose. A half a kilometer from the convent stands a majestic tamarind, the tree with miraculous medicinal properties. She can heat the bark and combine the ash with salt in an earthen vessel to cure a baby’s colic; make a poultice with fresh leaves to reduce swelling; cook leaves to protect and heal burns; and prepare the pulp of the ripe fruit for treating sore throats, indigestion, vomiting, and constipation. Crushing the seeds and preparing a drink can bring down a fever.

Margarita arrives at the large, spreading canopy with its lacy leaves and delicate yellow flowers with tiny red streaks and hundreds of pods covered with thin brown shells that protect a fleshy pulp that is both slightly sugary and tart, making the mouth pucker. Her grandmother, who had taught her so

much about natural remedies, had always said of the tamarind, "God puts the beautiful and the ugly on the same tree, and He teaches us to use all of it."

Margarita pulls one of the lower branches down and picks a handful of leaves and plucks four pods. She will make a poultice for Consuelo's swollen eye from the leaves then show her how to strip the pulp from the pods and mash it into a paste which would be good for her nervous stomach. Consuelo hasn't complained of this, but Margarita knows that this symptom often accompanies domestic strain.

Margarita first stops to check on the woman who is about to deliver.

"It will be very soon now, perhaps even today," Sister Margarita says to the young woman. This will be her first baby, and thankfully, the young woman's mother lives with her. "Send for me when the pains are close together," she announces to both women.

She says her goodbyes and then makes her way up the winding path to Consuelo's abode which consists of corrugated metal panels attached to a wooden frame. Usually, children play in the yard, but today the only sign of life is an emaciated mangy dog that meanders over to sniff a rag doll left near a pile of rocks and then continues on his way.

"Consuelo! It's Sister Margarita." She steps towards the door.

“*No, Hermana. No!*” Consuelo peeks from behind it.

Instantly, Margarita ascertains the situation. Manuel.

“Don’t worry,” Margarita calls. “I only want to check on your arm and your eye.”

“*No, no. Todo bien.*”

“Yes, Sister,” Manuel says, walking out the front door and closing it behind him. “We don’t need your help.” His worn brittle voice tells the nun that he has been drinking again. His dark hair shines, tucked on one side behind his ears.

“I need to check on your wife’s bandage, Manuel.”

“No! You do not!” Manuel announces emphasizing the words. Then his voice slurs, “You need to leave.” His eyes squeeze together, and he steps towards her.

“Okay. Okay. I will leave. Send someone if you need me.”

“We don’t need you,” Manuel says, struggling to bring himself up to his full height. He accomplishes this even with a sway or two, “I told you! I can manage my family without a *nurse* dropping in.” He turns back and stumbles to the door. He mutters something about Satan’s work, and she clenches her

fists at her side and takes a deep breath. She can do nothing now but leave and pray.

Lord, where are you? What do you want me to do? I refuse to believe that you can't intervene here.

There is no answer, and Margarita's head begins to pound. Mother Superior had told her many times that God understands her anger, but Margarita thought the old nun had missed the point. No matter how many theologians she read, Margarita could never rectify a loving God with the presence of men beating the women who cooked for them and gave them children. Yes, all people had free will and everyone was called to accept their own cross just as Christ accepted his. Still, was a woman supposed to lie down and take it? Surely, God didn't expect that.

She had worked out her own theology. The Bible said that women were destined to suffer in childbirth, but Sister Margarita knew that God had given them multiple ways to prevent quite a bit of trauma. With the help of herbs, women could move through the process with relative ease. Then there was the verse that said women must be subservient to their husbands. Yet, for all she could see, women, if allowed, were solid leaders of their families. The men in

the village who were decent, loving, and spent their wages on food and clothing for their wives and children were also the same men who treated their wives as helpmates. Sister often quoted the verse that referred to a man and a woman as being partners. It was a theology of power. The power to control one's own destiny, the power to stand up for others who needed help, the power to make change.

The perfect opportunity came early in her career in the matter of babies. Margarita learned from her grandmother the precise amount of a certain yam to prevent a pregnancy and which herbs would end one and which were to be avoided as they could harm a developing fetus. After she finished her nursing studies and took her vows, she shared the information with her women patients. Soon after, someone complained to the diocese. There was talk. People said that Sister Margarita was interfering with God's plan, that she was doing Satan's work. The following week, the bishop, with his entourage of five, traveled up the mountain by foot to the convent. Preceded by the diocesan flag and his own coat of arms, a banner of red, gold, and black, the bishop wore a long black robe and a round scarlet cap covering the top of his skull. He eschewed his miter—the tall, pointed hat—but he carried his crozier—the long-curved staff—a more potent sign of his authority. Upon his chest, he wore a

large pectoral cross made of gold, lifted slightly from its chain to create loops, affixed near the man's heart.

He went straight to Mother Superior's office. The door closed. His assistant stood outside at attention. An hour later, the bishop and his men left, just as abruptly as they had arrived. A nun summoned Sister Margarita to the office just as she had been this morning.

"Sister, you must know what this visit was about," Mother said.

"Please, Mother. Say what you must." Margarita knew.

"The bishop claims you are preventing pregnancies."

"I have only given advice about eating to help the women."

As was her way, Mother Superior nodded her head slowly, closed her eyes, and folded her hands. Sister remained quiet. Minutes passed, and then the old woman opened her eyes. They shone in the diffuse light of the room.

"This type of help cannot be wrong," Mother Superior said. "God created plants for our use. If one can help women space their pregnancies so they can be healthier and better able to care for the children they already have, who are we to deprive them of this? The Holy Spirit moves in strange and unexpected ways, and I am not in a position to ignore knowledge. Nor am I able to

forbid you to share this information simply because the bishop wants me to. I have authority here. In *this* place.”

Mother Superior paused and stared at Sister Margarita’s eyes.

“However, I did agree to speak to you,” She tipped her head impishly and raised her eyebrows, “and now I have.” She flashed a tiny smile. “Sister Margarita, I only ask that you be discreet. Please impress upon the women that it is not a sin to hold back some things from their husbands. There is nothing wrong with this. A man cannot possibly understand the burdens of living in a woman’s body.”

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Now, Margarita walks back to the convent wondering what God wants her to do about Manuel. Consuelo’s husband made it clear that she should stay away, and the mutterings demonstrated what he thought of her. Suddenly, the thought occurs to her that he must have been one of the men who accused her of working for Satan, who reported her to the diocese. Of course! Manuel complained to the bishop. He knew the man well. Mother Superior said so herself.

Midway through her daily allotment of beans and rice, Sister Margarita’s stomach rebels. She pushes the plate aside, half eaten. She steps softly to her small room and, just as she does every day, removes her sandals. Placing them

next to the door, she glances up at the crucified Lord with a yellow mum behind his head. She lies on the bed, being careful not to disturb the white coverlet, and closes her eyes. Within minutes, a young novice knocks softly.

“Sister Margarita. Maria Alejandra has sent for you. Her daughter’s water broke, and the pains are steady.”

Margarita sits up and fastens her sandals, glad for the chance to assist new life into the world after the morning’s failure.

The delivery progresses in the normal fashion. Just as the sun sets behind the mountain, a tiny baby boy finally emerges from the cramped dark insides of his mother’s womb. Margarita places his wet pink body upon his mother’s soft belly and ties a tight string around the cord that connected the two. Once she cuts it, she steps aside to wash her hands. The young woman’s mother cleans up her daughter. The new mother whispers words of love to the infant. Margarita smooths strands of hair off the woman’s forehead with her hand and smiles.

“Send for me if you need me.”

“*Gracias, Hermana.* God bless you.”

“And you,” Sister says as she places her palm on the baby’s forehead and then again lightly upon the mother’s.

The nun walks outside and nods to the new father.

“Go inside and greet your new son.”

She glances up at the stars as she hikes back down the mountain for the long walk. She feels good to be heading home with a success to review. She will think of the new baby rather than Consuelo. Dinner will be on top of the coal stove, and she can attend vespers if she wishes. Yet, she can go straight to her room too if she would rather. When a baby is born, Sister Margarita’s schedule is more flexible.

The cool breeze chills her skin. She gives her arms a quick hug and increases her pace. Within a half of a kilometer from the convent, she sees him. Manuel stands in front of her on the path, black strands of greasy hair hanging in his red-rimmed eyes. He crouches, swaying slightly, with his long arms outstretched, blocking the entire path on either side. The scent of alcohol exudes from him, even from this distance, but he has the alertness of a wild animal. She takes one step backward as another man, shorter, emerges from behind a large thorny bush to her side. His lips curl into a sneer, and the glint of a silver blade juts from his right hand.

Margarita tries to scream, but it lodges in her throat, sharp and foreign, like a shard of glass. She should run, fight even. Yet, she knows, instinctively,

that would be futile. There are two of them, and no one would hear any noise she might make. By now, all the nuns were in the sanctuary on the other side of the enclave for evening vespers. Their chants would drown out what was coming.

What a fool she had been walking back alone. Mother Superior asked her to be wise, but neither of them had imagined Manuel would be so bold. Margarita wills her feet to move on the path, but her toes are cement, hardened on the earth. She forces out a sound, but it is only a gag, the sound of the precursor to vomiting. *I will not give in to fear*, she tells herself. *I will not give them that.*

Manuel, still crouching, leans towards her. Margarita swings to her left, finally making a move to run. The man with the knife reaches out and snatches her arm, jerking her body back. He holds the knife up in front of her eyes. Manuel, instantly upon her, spits, "Satan's helper!" He flicks his own knife open and throws her to the ground.

The man clamps a dry calloused hand tight over her mouth while he holds both her arms over her head with his other. Manuel attacks her clothing, slicing from her hem to her collar in one motion. The blade lacerates her chin as his momentum swings upward. Warm blood trickles down her neck and onto

the dry dirt. Margarita's eyelids pull back tightly, and she searches the scene in front of her for options.

None.

Manuel severs her undergarments exposing her white flesh while grunts emanate from the other man. He slashes his blade making several gashes on her breasts across her nipples. Blood gushes. This time her scream erupts, loud even through the man's clamped hand, and her body heaves in an involuntary arch.

"Let her breathe. I don't want her to pass out. We're just teaching her a lesson," Manuel says.

He moves his face close to hers and yanks his trousers down to his ankles. Margarita kicks violently, then the knife slashes deeply, twice, across both of her thighs. A burning heat follows this time by a bloody flood. More pressure from the man's hands stifles her screams, and then he stuffs a grimy rag into her mouth. The thing is foul, slick with automobile oil, animal waste, and dirt. She gags and retches, as her body tries to eject the vile fabric. Delicate skin tears, hot, as the man shoves himself inside of her. Was it the knife?

Her legs twitch, a sign of shock. Within seconds, she knows, there will be a new calm, a light-headed distance.

Her life will end tonight. She will now pray for it to go quickly, for the grace to hurry towards the Lord. She closes her eyes and tries to remember breakfast after devotions. She ate toast and drank coffee with the other nuns. She tries to focus on the words of the “Our Father,” but instead she imagines which one of her sisters will find her here. Clouds sliver across the moon, extinguishing some light, as the man groans, removes himself, and moves aside for Manuel.

The wind shifts and tonal harmonies, muted voices of the nuns at evening vespers, float into the space from the distance. Even through the fabric gag, Sister’s vocal chords strain to sing the same notes that she has sung every night. She closes her eyes and hums the ancient prayer. The sound comes from deep within Sister’s chest and mingles with the voices of the other women.

The man screams at Manuel to do something, and then, he steps backwards. Manuel falls to his knees and drops his head to his hands. The man spins around. He runs.

Suddenly, easily, Margarita detaches and floats above, hovering in the lower branches of a young tree. Now, only a metallic sound buzzes in her ears, but she feels no pain. From this vantage point, she is surprised to see her own naked body. The plump, brown seed pods and the mostly green leaves of the

tamarind, gathered earlier for Consuelo, lie scattered next to her. Dark blood flows in a still growing pool in the dust, her eyes stare blankly back up at her. Strangely, the sight of her body means nothing to her.

She watches as Manuel hoists the thing into his arms. Carrying the heavy burden, he stumbles in the direction of the chapel. Sister Margarita follows, just above the man and her body.

Manuel slows, drops his load, and heaves into the bushes at the side of the path. He wipes his mouth with his sleeve and lifts her once again. He shuffles and stumbles, but he arrives. When the three, Manuel, the body, and Sister Margarita above them, enter the chapel, a solid block of silence fills the room. No one moves. Then two women leave their seats, rush at Manuel, pull her from him, and cradle her to the floor. Manuel collapses, his arms wrapped around his head, his forehead and knees touching the ground.

“*Lo siento!*” I’m sorry, he cries.

Compassion fills Margarita, buoying her higher past the roof out into the inky night. A commotion, a masculine wail, sounds at the side with Manuel and Mother, and she returns to the scene in an instant. She glances at her old shape, now covered by a black blanket except for her head. Two nuns kneel next to it with hands folded and eyes closed. One stops to swipe her fingertips

over the lids of Margarita's staring eyes. Then the nun pulls the blanket over the face.

Such freedom here, like this, Margarita says to herself. She tests this new motion. She dives from the rafters, buzzes the praying nuns, still kneeling on the floor. Margarita thrills as their wimples flutter, and their shoulders shake. She swoops back up, makes a circle around the ceiling of the chapel, and follows Manuel out the door.

She will spend the rest of his days appearing to him, whispering to him, convincing him of her good work and the value of women. And Manuel will help her.

ANN MALLEN's fiction was read on *NPR Florida Arts View* and has appeared in *The Cortland Review*, *CALYX*, *The Evening Street Review*, and other literary journals. Her essays have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Reed Magazine*, *Midway Journal*, and elsewhere. Mallen is a cancer survivor living with lupus and a rare hemolytic anemia. She graduated magna cum laude from UConn and earned a M.A.T. cum laude from Quinnipiac University. She is also the founder and director of The Cream Literary Alliance, a 501c3 nonprofit that provides craft classes taught by accomplished writers and organizes curated public literary readings.