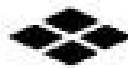


GEOGRAPHIES
OF
HOME

A Novel



Loida Maritza Pérez



PENGUIN BOOKS

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OF
HOME

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Praise for *Geographies of Home*

“Gritty and lyrical.”

—*Boston Herald*

“A powerful debut novel.”

—*Newsweek*

“*Geographies of Home* plunges the reader into the nightmare of migration where the story of the Caribbean family is told in every gut-wrenching detail, and where the odds of surviving in America take a toll on the human heart.”

—Maryse Condé, author of *Segú* and *Crossing the Mangrove*

“Loida Maritza Pérez is a bold and graceful novelist. She uses her magnificent narrative powers to shed light on the darkest and most glorious aspects of family, migration, kinship, passion, death, and the human heart. *Geographies of Home* will leave you feeling both amazingly breathless and wonderfully redeemed.”

—Edwidge Danticat, author of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Farming of Bones*

“An enrapturing tale of family bonds and conflicts.... Pérez has created a cast of characters whose humanity is so vivid and universal that one cannot help but be swept into their torment.”

- *The Hartford Courant*

“This is a brave examination of the intricacies of immigrant experience and the legacy of family violence, and its awareness of demons in both the Old World and New World give it a leaping, fierce beat.”

—*Oregonian*

“Pérez’s strength lies in her poetic language and her use of odd, striking details.”

—*The Village Voice Literary Supplement*

“So aberrant, wretched, and destructive are [some of the characters], the novel nearly defies belief. But Pérez’s intensity blasts all resistance out of her readers’ minds and demands compassion for these battered and battering women.... She presents her deeply moved and thoroughly impressed reader with an insider’s perspective of a ferociously ambiguous, unjust, and mysterious sphere of existence.”

—*Hungry Mind Review*

PENGUIN BOOKS GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME

Loida Maritza Pérez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1963. She lives in New York City.

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A Novel



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To my parents, for everything

To Bruce, of course
*And to Melody, who would have lived
fiercely had she had the chance*

Prologue

Bienvenida's eyes flicked open during the last stanza of the song she had requested be sung to her on her deathbed. Tongue darting out to lick dry lips, she summoned her children nearer: Isidrio, Digna, Benite, Arelis, Eliazer, Obidia, Altagracia, Quintino, Rojelio, and—searching the room—Aurelia. When informed that her youngest daughter was not present, she turned to the chipped saints atop her bedside table. Her face furrowed with concentration. Her lips moved silently. Then, as if exhausted, she fell back against the pillows and closed her eyes.

In the province of Azua, Aurelia bolted upright and pulled the string of a lamp in time to see a large black cat jump from beneath the bedcovers and flee the room. The hairs on her neck bristled. Her heart beat faster.

All black cats in the rural town to which she'd moved were killed at birth.

Not wanting to alarm her husband, she climbed out of bed and went from room to room, searching under the beds of her sleeping children, in closets and on shelves. But the cat was nowhere.

When she returned to her room a bitter scent of freshly cut grass enveloped her. She tasted it on her lips and tongue, familiar as the dirt she had craved since the onset of her pregnancy. With it came an image of her mother turning the soil of the garden behind her childhood home.

"You're too young to speak of dying, Mami," she had said, following her indoors during her last visit. "Besides, I don't believe in spirits." This, in response to her mother's assertion that should any of her children be absent at the moment of her death she would find a way to let them know.

"Everyone dies," Bienvenida had murmured, ignoring her daughter's last remark and squeezing coffee from the cotton sock she used as a filter. "If not now, then later."

A sharp pain contorted Aurelia's body. Though she knew she should relax, she held her breath until the pain subsided.

"Madre mía, ayúdame," she prayed, propelling herself toward the bed.

The cat entered the room and flung itself against walls and chairs in a mad attempt to catch its tail. Aurelia's uterus convulsed—not as if the child inside were moving but as if the uterus itself were shrinking toward its center. Clutching the bedsheets, she tried to wake her husband.

"Papito," she called through clenched teeth. Another contraction doubled her over. "Papito!"

CHAPTER 1

The ghostly trace of “NIGGER” on a message board hanging from Iliana’s door failed to assault her as had the first time she returned to her dorm room to find it. Just a few more hours and she’d be home. Already she breathed easier. She locked the door and mounted her suitcases on a cart her parents had let her keep after escorting her to Port Authority eighteen months earlier. Gripping the cart’s handle, she dragged it along the corridor and bounced it, one step at a time, down the wide staircase. On another day she would have stepped quietly. But on her departure from the dormitory whose high ceilings and pale arches reminded her of a museum, she took pleasure in letting her steps echo loudly through the morning silence.

Depositing her keys in the Resident Assistant’s mail slot, she stepped out into the cold and under the grey and low-slung sky. That sky’s color was one of the reasons she was leaving. Its relentlessness put her on edge. She had chosen the university because of its location five hours from New York City—a distance too great for her parents to visit her as often as they had her brother in Albany. The campus was also reputedly one of the prettiest. From glossy photographs of the surrounding lakes and gorges, she had concluded that the university would be the ideal place to escape her parents’ watchful eyes. She had not anticipated that, when not collapsing with rain or snow, the sky would nevertheless remain the same threatening shade.

She was also leaving because a voice had been waking her with news of what was taking place at home. The accounts had started several months earlier and, depending on the news, had lasted until dawn. It had gotten so that she rarely slept. As soon as her head touched her pillow the disembodied voice crept close. On hearing it for the first time, her eyes had flashed open, her heart had slammed against her ribs. Hadn’t her father warned her?

“Mi’ja,” he’d said, drawing her attention as she prepared to board the Greyhound bus and continuing in Spanish, the only language he and Aurelia spoke. “Find a church. There must be one around there. Don’t let what happened to your sister Nereida happen to you too.”

“I’ll keep in touch,” was all her mother had said.

Hugging both, Iliana had assured them that she would remain faithful.

“Seven spirits,” Papito had added urgently. “Seven evil spirits at your side if you should stray from God. Remember!”

In the single room she had considered herself lucky to obtain, Iliana had remembered. Not only had she neglected waking early to catch the bus to the Seventh-Day Adventist church in town, she had also gone to the local bar and, for the first time ever, to the cinema, where Satan preyed on souls.

“Get thee behind me, Satan,” she had commanded the voice, relying, without conviction, on the exhortation she had been taught repelled evil spirits.

“Stop that foolishness, Iliana María!”

The voice was her mother’s—authoritative but hinting mischief as when she had taught her to dance merengue on a Sabbath morning while the rest of the family attended church.

Hands trembling, Iliana stumbled out of bed to dial her parents’ number.

“Iliana María?” Aurelia asked, instantly identifying her daughter’s silence.

Iliana slammed down the receiver.

“Don’t be afraid, mi’ja,” the voice said, defying the distance Iliana had deliberately placed between herself and her mother. “The devil exists, but it’s not me.”

Shivers unraveled along Iliana’s spine. She willed the voice to go away, but it persisted, hounding her as her mother’s had at home. It spoke of her brother Emanuel’s visit from Seattle; of the two eldest, Mauricio and Chaco, who, with their families, had moved back to the Dominican Republic; of the dream that had inspired Nereida to be rebaptized after an absence of years from church; of the flowers in their Brooklyn yard; of the vegetables growing so well that the corn reached past Papito’s head.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?” Iliana recited, her voice scraping against her suddenly dry throat so that it sounded barely above a whisper. “The Lord is the strength of my life.” Her dilated eyes searched the darkened room. “Of whom shall I be afraid?”

Faintly, so that she strained to hear it, the voice returned.

“Forgive, mi’ja. I didn’t think you’d be afraid. You know we can’t speak much on the phone. It’s too expensive. Your father would be angry.”

Cowering beside her bed, Iliana recalled her mother’s ears. Those ears, with holes pierced during her past Aurelia rarely spoke of, had both frightened and intrigued her. Raised in a religion which condemned as pagan the piercing of body parts, she had imagined that, were her mother’s clogged holes pried open, she would transform into a sorceress dancing, not secretly on a Sabbath when she stayed home by feigning illness, but freely, unleashing impulses Papito’s religion had suppressed. This image had sharpened whenever Aurelia had undone the braids wound tightly around her head. At such moments, before Iliana’s intruding eyes caused her to braid the cascading locks into submission, she had smiled at her own reflection shifting from an aging matriarch’s to that of a young girl’s with hoops dangling from her ears.

This memory evoked others to which Iliana had previously attached no significance: Aurelia waking restlessly before dawn to scrub clean floors; Aurelia wringing sheets dry with a strength that defied exhaustion; and Aurelia slicing onions, a sharpened knife blurring dangerously toward her thumb at a speed which would have resulted in the loss of a finger had anyone else attempted it. This incessant activity, even at moments when she might have opted to relax, now suggested an effort to contain forces struggling to escape.

Initially the visitations had occurred sporadically. But as the racial slurs began appearing outside Iliana’s door, they increased in frequency. Though unable to explain the phenomenon, she became convinced that the voice was in fact her mother’s. When she called home, Aurelia began conversations where the voice had left off the previous night. If asked about events never discussed on the phone, she responded without hesitation.

Everything Iliana had been brought up to believe denounced the voice as evil. Yet her instincts persuaded her it wasn’t so. On nights when the radiator in her room gave off little warmth, the voice transported her to a Dominican Republic where summer days were eternal, clouds evaporated in the scorching heat, and palm trees arched along beaches of fiery sand. It spoke of her birth immediately following her grandmother’s death; of how she should have been a boy since her sex had been predicted from the shape of Aurelia’s pointy stomach and all her siblings had been born to form alternate pairs of the same sex, a sequence only Iliana had disrupted; of how, although Mauricio and Chaco, Rebecca and Zoraida, Caleb and Emanuel, Nereida and Azucena, Vicente and Gabriel, Marín

and Beatriz had each been born two years apart, she herself had refused to come until three years after Beatriz and three before Tico, the youngest child.

There, in the attic room of the university whose hilltop location contrived to make her forget the rest of the world and whose courses disclaimed life as she had known it, making her feel invisible, the voice reassured Iliana of her own existence and kept her rooted. She learned that during her absence both her parents had been diagnosed as having alarmingly high blood pressure and that Papito, afraid of dying, had resorted to taking his and his wife's prescribed pills while she refused her own; that Rebecca's accounts of Pasi3n's abuses had caused Aurelia's heart attack; that Marina, wishing to have her future told, had visited an astrologer to later claim that he had raped her; that Beatriz had left home and not been heard of since; that Vicente had dropped out of graduate school and his wife had packed her things and left him; that Tico rarely left his room; that Laurie had supposedly refused to sleep with Gabriel throughout their first two years of marriage and Gabriel, during one of his frequent short-lived spurts of religious fervor, had confessed to the pastor and then to Caleb of his adulterous affair with Linda, Caleb's common-law wife; that Caleb had turned his gun in to his parents' custody for fear of killing his own brother; and that Marina had suffered a nervous breakdown.

It was these events, more than her disappointment with the university, which had convinced Iliana to leave school.

She avoided the icy path leading from her dormitory and cut across the lawn. Brittle grass crunched beneath her feet as she headed toward a cluster of buildings on North Campus. Except for a few other students, the campus was desolate. It was at such moments that she enjoyed it most. She was able to walk, unashamed of the stride that had caused her grief since childhood and that she had tried her damndest to change since then. But, no matter what, her hips thrust forward and swayed as if unhinged. Her friend Ed had described the stride as regal, her sisters as whorish. And it was the latter whom Iliana tended to believe. Wanting to appear confident, she had taken to walking with her head held high and her eyes staring straight ahead. This, combined with shyness, had gotten her labeled an arrogant bitch. Whenever she had attended parties, even those sponsored by minority organizations, she had never been asked to dance. And when she had attended with Ed, rumors had spread that she dated only white men.

If the rumors hadn't hurt so much, Iliana would have laughed. Not only had no one—black, white, yellow or red—ever asked her out, Ed was Mexican and preferred to sleep with men.

She climbed the steps to his dormitory and called him from the courtesy phone. It seemed to ring interminably before his room-mate answered.

"Paul, is Ed there?"

"Holy shit! What time is it?"

"It's almost seven-thirty. We're supposed to catch the bus at eight."

Paul dropped the phone on the other end. "Ed, get up. Iliana's on the phone. Ed, I'm not telling you again!"

Minutes elapsed before he returned to the phone. "I'll let you in on my way out," he said, clicking off before Iliana could respond.

She stamped her feet in an attempt to keep them warm. Just as she was about to redial, Paul flew past her, barely letting her catch the door.

"I can't talk. I have an exam at eight and fell asleep at my desk."

“Well, goodbye to you too,” Iliana said.

He whirled around and hurried back to her. Smiling sheepishly, he gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry. I forgot. You’re not coming back, are you?” He released her and ran off, slipping on a patch of ice. “Maybe you’ll change your mind,” he yelled. “Home is never fun.”

Iliana watched him: his limbs flailing awkwardly; his green hair blowing like a tuft of grass. Not long ago, he had asked her to bleach his hair and dye it blue. The peroxide he had insisted she leave on longer than the required time had left his scalp lined with welts and his dark hair a yellow that had turned green with the bright-blue dye.

She would miss him, crazy though he was.

Iliana pulled the cart into the dormitory and stepped into the waiting elevator. From the lounge on the third floor, she saw Ed’s door ajar and his body still in bed.

“Shit, Ed. Can’t you ever get up on time?”

He peered at her through slitted eyes. “What time is it?”

“There’s a clock right beside you.”

“Oojale, what’s gotten into you this morning?”

“What’s gotten into me? You! It’s seven-thirty and you’re in bed!”

“Will you relax? It’ll only take me a few minutes to get ready.”

“Whose idea was it to take the early bus? Who insisted I make it here on time?”

“Ay mujer! Ya!”

The authoritativeness of Ed’s voice jarred Iliana into silence. Maybe he was right. Maybe she was overreacting. So what if she had spent most of the night packing and had woken early at his insistence? What was the use of clinging to anger because he had accidentally overslept?

She watched him clamber out of bed. As he strolled past her toward the communal baths, he beamed at her an impish grin. Its patronizing curve affected her like burrs prickling her skin. It dawned on her then that, should he have been the one to be kept waiting, he would have had a fit. Yet with his “Ay mujer!” he had effectively dismissed her anger. Worse, he knew how she hated those two words, how they reminded her of her father’s “Mira, muchacha!”

As clearly as if it had occurred the previous day, she recalled one of the few times she had stood up to Papito. He had just purchased a box of soaps for her mother and had proudly held one out for her to inspect.

“Ummm,” she’d said, flattered that he was showing her the gift before presenting it to Aurelia. “It smells like cinnamon.”

“Mira, muchacha! Don’t you see the strawberries on the wrapper?”

Iliana took the soap from his hand and moved it closer to her nose. “I know, Papi, but it smells like cinnamon.”

Papito snatched the soap from her hand and raised it to his own nose. “Strawberries,” he insisted. “Strawberries.”

“Strawberries aren’t spicy.”

“What are you saying, that I waste my money buying garbage?”

“Maybe someone mislabeled them,” Iliana said. “How were you supposed to know? And the cinnamon isn’t bad.”

Papito jerked her head closer to the soap. “Strawberries! This is a strawberry-scented soap!”

Iliana again sniffed the soap pressed suffocatingly to her nose. “But to me it smells like cinnamon.”

Before she knew what was happening, her father’s calloused hand had slapped her face.

“Muchacha de la porra! Admit it! It smells like strawberries!”

“Cinnamon,” Iliana mumbled.

“What does it smell like?”

Iliana defiantly braced herself for another blow. “Cinnamon!”

The back of Papito’s hand again flew toward her face. Determined not to cry or cringe, Iliana held her ground.

“It smells like cinnamon! Why ask if you don’t want to know?”

Her father unhooked his belt and drew it from the loops around his pants. “Sinvergüenza! I’ll teach you to disrespect me!”

“Cinnamon—” Iliana had shouted, blocking out the sound of the belt whizzing toward her and glaring at her father with all the contempt that she could muster. “Cinnamon, cinnamon—” she had chanted, her legs stinging and welts rising as the leather strap landed repeatedly on her thighs. “It smells like cinnamon, not strawberries!”

Iliana removed her coat and plopped down onto David’s bed. Here it was a year and a half since she’d left home and still certain words triggered self-doubt and left her mute, still she feared the consequences of asserting herself. Her eyes strayed to her suitcases waiting by the door. When packing, she had reluctantly given away the items she dared not take home with her: skirts which though just above her knees, would have been judged indecent; flat shoes, all except for the boots on her feet, for which she would have been called matronly by sisters who already considered her an old maid; clip-on earrings she had secretly begun to wear; and all her books, including those required for her courses and others she had read voraciously without fear of her father’s throwing them away.

Only now did she realize the implications of her decision to go home. Throughout all her planning she had mostly thought of taking her family by surprise. She had not stopped to consider that by returning she would be relinquishing her independence. Not only would she have to live according to her father’s dictates he would also have to join him in Bible study, attend church on Saturdays, and listen to his sermons if her face but revealed an expression interpreted as defiant. Should she neglect any of these matters, her name would be brought up for prayer before the congregation.

Even now, remembering the first time its prayers were solicited in her behalf, Iliana’s conscience pricked with guilt. She had been only seven and had decided that she did not want to go to school. Knowing that if she postponed being sick until morning her mother would suspect she was faking, she had moaned and tossed in bed during the night. One of her sisters notified their mother. Alarmed when Iliana unwittingly pointed to the location of her appendix as the area where it hurt, Aurelia woke Papito. The two of them knelt beside Iliana and, with hands joined at her side, prayed that God would might place His hand on her to heal her.

The following morning Aurelia insisted on taking her youngest daughter to see a doctor. Terrified that her lie would be discovered and already imagining the sting of her father’s belt, Iliana developed

a fever. By the time they arrived at the clinic she appeared to be in so much pain and was perspiring so heavily that the doctor, after a cursory examination, decided that she indeed had appendicitis. Fearing that her appendix would burst before an ambulance arrived, he drove mother and daughter to hospital himself.

As they drove across the Williamsburg Bridge, the sight of Manhattan—a city Papito had often compared to Sodom and Gomorrah—increased Iliana’s fear. Although she had not fully understood what he’d meant when he’d said men on that island slept with other men and women with women (hadn’t she herself slept with her sisters?), she had concluded that Manhattan too would be destroyed. So real to her was the possibility of being caught in that hell and burning with other sinners that she began to cry.

The doctor, lips stretching into a line more a grimace than a smile, turned to face her from the front seat. “You need to be brave,” he said. “You’re a big girl now.” Then, switching from broken Spanish to English as if confiding a secret he preferred Aurelia not to understand, he added, “It’ll be just like vacation. You won’t have to go to school. You’ll even get to watch as much TV as you want and eat in bed. That’s not so bad, is it?”

His intimate tone convinced Iliana that he knew she had lied and was only taunting her. She mistrusted his eyes, icy blue and dull like metal, which, lacking depth, made him appear to have no soul. Looking at him, his hair shimmering golden in the sunlight slanting through the car window, she believed he was Satan’s angel sent to take her off to hell.

“Don’t let him take me, Mami,” she sobbed. “Please don’t let him take me. I’m feeling better. It honestly doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Sssh. Don’t cry. Everything’s going to be okay,” Aurelia said, gently squeezing the hand she had held since dragging Iliana, kicking and screaming, into the back seat.

Iliana was hospitalized for four days, throughout which family and church members prayed for her recovery. After the fourth day, the doctors, finding no symptoms of appendicitis, released her to her parents. Convinced that God had performed a miracle in her behalf, Papito donated flowers to the church every Saturday until the one-year anniversary of her recovery. Worse, the pastor forevermore portrayed her as a living example of God’s care toward those who believed in Him in a modern, wicked age.

Remembering, Iliana wondered that her lie had never been detected. Either she was a magnificent actress or her parents had been determined to teach her a lesson she would not forget. She tended to believe the former. But if the second were the truth, the lesson learned had not been the one intended. More than realizing the disastrous consequences of lying, she had discovered that authorities, personified by her parents, the doctors and the pastor, were not as knowledgeable as she’d believed. Furthermore, because throughout the years her father had silenced any questions that challenged him as he perceived it, she had learned to agree with everything he said while secretly composing answers of her own. Only by leaving home had she, on occasion, acquired the confidence to express her opinions, and she feared that by returning she would fall silent once again.

“That didn’t take too long, did it?”

Iliana barely turned toward Ed.

“Listen, I have an idea,” he said. “Why don’t you stay with me before going to your parents’ house. They’re not expecting you, and I’ve got Susan’s apartment to myself for the entire month.”

Iliana shook her head.

“Why not? It’ll give you a chance to adjust to being back.”

“Ed, I can’t. I might run into one of my brothers or sisters on the street.”

“I thought you said they all lived in Brooklyn.”

“Most of them do, but several work in Manhattan and they’d be quick to jump to conclusions if they caught me out with you.”

“Oh, come on. It’d be so much fun. We could go to museums and galleries, then hit the clubs one night. It’s a big city. What are the chances of running into them?”

The resentment Iliana had been harboring toward Ed surfaced as she left him to stand before the window. He behaved as if each moment were his to enjoy without guilt or fear of consequence. In contrast, she snatched what little pleasure she could from an ever-watchful God. Each time she allowed music to sway her body, went to the cinema or even had a sip of coffee, she was hounded by the idea that she risked her eternal soul. It didn’t matter that she had long since stopped believing in God, or at least in the God her father claimed. The possibility of that God’s judgments nevertheless preyed on her fears. Each night, before drifting into sleep, she reluctantly knelt beside her bed to plead for her soul should He in fact exist.

“You don’t understand, Ed. I’d be so paranoid that I wouldn’t have any fun. Besides, I’m already nervous enough about going back without setting myself up for trouble.”

“You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

Iliana stared glumly out of the window. She trailed a finger along the dusty sill, then rubbed the dirt onto the glass.

“You okay?”

“I just have a premonition, that’s all.”

“About what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just think I’m fooling myself. I mean—I’ve come to hate this place so much that I’ve convinced myself I should take a year off and help with all the shit going on at home. I’ve even flattered myself by thinking I’ll be welcomed with open arms. But that’s pretty funny considering we were never one big, happy family to begin with.”

“Don’t go, then,” Ed said matter-of-factly.

Iliana whirled around to face him. “Hell is breaking loose at home! How the fuck am I supposed to stay and pretend everything’s okay?”

Surprise elongated Ed’s already narrow face. “I’m sorry. I only thought—”

His apologetic tone deflated Iliana’s anger. Shoulders hunched, she slid under the window and let fall the tears that, years earlier and in defiance of her father’s beatings, she had vowed to suppress whatever cost.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with me?” Ed asked, attempting to draw her near only to have her raise a hand to stop him. “At least for a couple of days?”

Iliana wiped the tears she hadn’t wanted him to see. “Waiting isn’t going to make it any easier.”

Ed watched her, not knowing what else to do or say.

“I’m okay,” Iliana mumbled. “You know I always am.”

CHAPTER 2

The sound was so faint that Marina thought she had imagined it. But no—if there was one thing she could trust, it was her senses. She had trained herself to use them well. Slipping naked from her bed, she exited her basement room and followed the sound through darkness up the stairs. She then swung open the kitchen door and stepped inside. Again, she heard what sounded like scurrying feet, and so clearly that she wondered why her parents, asleep in an adjoining room, hadn't heard it. That thought hadn't convinced her of what she had long suspected: their vigilance was growing weak.

“Be sober, be vigilant: because your adversary the devil walketh about seeking whom he may devour,” she reminded herself, reaching for the light switch.

What she saw as her eyes adjusted to the sudden glare chased a shiver up her spine. She seized a towel off a chair and beat the wall near a door leading to the backyard and another to her parents' bedroom. Several of the large, black spiders fell, but more teemed in from under the backyard door to continue weaving a web that already extended toward the ceiling. With an agility surprising for her massive body, she darted to the sink under which her father stored cans of lighter fluid. Careful not to spill none on herself, she doused and flung a lit match at the wall. The flames caught the dark wood paneling as if it were kindling and traveled swiftly toward the ceiling.

“Dios mio! The house is burning,” her mother screamed.

Marina dashed to the door her father had salvaged from a demolished building. Securing the latch he had installed so that his wife could shut it from the kitchen to prevent cooking smells from seeping into their bedroom, she trapped them in their room.

Aurelia struggled with the door. “Wake up, Papito!”

“It's okay. I've got it under control,” Marina reassured, seeing her mother's panicked face distorted by the light of flames and peering through a small window on the door.

“Open the door, Marina Elena!” Papito commanded. “Marina Elena!”

Marina instead fanned the flames to make them spread. “I think I've killed most of them!” she announced, excitement rippling her voice.

Her father's fist smashed through the window. His bloody fingers groped for the latch. When the door flew open, Marina hurled herself against him and knocked him to the floor. She straddled him between her thighs and simultaneously reached out for Aurelia. Papito yanked his daughter down on top of him. His wife rushed past them to the sink. Filling pots with water, she flung them at the flames.

“Are you crazy?” Marina shrieked, attempting to free herself from her father's grip. “Don't you see them? Have you gone blind?”

Smoke swirled through the room as Aurelia splashed water on walls, the ceiling, the furniture, even her husband and daughter struggling on the floor. Gabriel and Laurie rushed into the room. Gabriel, believing that his sister had attacked their father, hauled her off Papito. Laurie, embarrassed by her sister-in-law's abundant breasts, raised a hand to her lips and laughed.

“What the hell's so funny?” Marina yelled.

Aurelia refilled another pot with water and continued to douse the room. Papito got up clumsily

from the floor and encircled her in his arms. “Ya, Aurelia. You put the fire out.”

She drew away from him and collapsed into a chair. Her body jerked with the adrenaline coursing through her veins. “Maybe the doctors were right,” she gasped. “We can’t—we can’t keep an eye on her all the time.”

“Marina set the fire?” Gabriel asked, incredulous.

Laurie sidled up to him. “Look at her. She’s not crazy. She’s faking it for attention.”

“You could’ve killed us! Do you realize that?” Gabriel shouted.

His sister’s eyes flamed like the fire she had set. “All of you are going to burn in hell! Burn! Next time evil comes into this house, it can carry you all off for all I care! Especially you!” she shrieked at Gabriel. “You’re the worst of them! Fucking your brother’s wife and pretending to be devout!”

“That’s enough, Marina Elena!” her father warned.

“You think I don’t know the shit all of you have done? I can recount your sins one by one and tell them to your face!”

Gabriel’s left eye, smaller than his right since being hit by a stray baseball, narrowed to a slit. “What she needs is a belting. She’d learn some sense real quick.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” chimed in Laurie. “She knows exactly what she’s saying.”

“You’re damn right I know what I’m saying! Unlike the crazy members of the family you married, Gabriel to escape from because nobody else would have you!”

Laurie’s green eyes widened. Her face turned a quick red. Unable to think of a response, she glanced at Gabriel, then at his parents, as if expecting them to come to her defense. When no one did, she jerked her head and, whipping her husband with her hair, stormed out of the room.

“Then you wonder why she wants nothing to do with this family,” Gabriel exclaimed. “What do you expect if whenever she comes down here someone in this house insults her?”

Aurelia rose from her chair and unfurled to her full height: several inches shorter than any of her children; tall enough to intimidate even the oldest. In a tone that made it clear she expected to be obeyed, she commanded Marina to go downstairs.

“I’ll go,” Marina said, her eyes brimming malice. “But don’t waste your breath praying for me before you go to sleep. Save it for your damned self and your other children.”

After Marina left, Aurelia turned to face her son. “How old are you?” she asked.

“Twenty-six,” he replied, as if his age were reason enough for her not to address him as a child.

“And how many of those years have you known your sister?”

“Twenty-four.”

“And Laurie?”

“What?”

“How long have you known her?” Aurelia repeated.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You’ve known her for five, maybe six years, isn’t that right? Yet you have the nerve to stand here in my house and let some stranger—I don’t care if she is your wife—tell you who and what your sister is. Do you think Marina would shamelessly expose herself or act the fool if she were in her right

mind? Do you think she would purposefully try to hurt us or herself?"

"She should be locked up, then. Look what she just did."

Aurelia watched Gabriel for a long and steady while. Then, as if gathering strength to keep from doing wrong, she ushered him to the door. "When you have children I'll consider taking your advice. Till then I suggest you go upstairs and work on your marriage. It has problems of its own."

Marina immediately made him out: a tall, lean figure absorbing the room's darkness so that he appeared only as a blacker silhouette standing still beside her bed. Her instinct was to run. Yet she could barely breathe, much less move. And she knew that if she screamed her parents would claim that she was crazy, that no one else was there. Eyes adjusting to the dark, she cursed them for not heeding her warnings. They had betrayed her. Having doubted evil, they had welcomed it into their home. Now there it stood: the embodiment of her worst fears. She had known it would arrive. But not so soon, not for her, not as the man who'd raped her. She recognized the shape of his body and its stench—an odor of rotting greens she had been incapable of forgetting.

Paralyzed by fear, she watched him raise his arms. As he reached forward, her will dissolved and her body collapsed onto the floor. A hand clamped onto her mouth. Another held her down.

"You want to know your fate?" he had asked the first time. "Here it is!"

The cold steel of his zipper cut into Marina's hips. His penis found an entry. Shutting her eyes against the searing pain, she attempted to hurl him off.

"Look at me!" he yelled, tightening his mount and jamming into her so that it felt as if he would exit through her mouth. "Look at me, you fucking bitch!"

Marina felt herself fragmenting and her limbs recoiling from her desecrated flesh. She gathered what remained of her strength and sunk her teeth into his palm. Oblivious to the blood seeping from his hand, he continued to pound into her. Her pain was so intense that she expected her body would release its soul. Yet the reserve of energy which had surfaced each time she had slit her wrists or overdosed on pills refused to let her die.

The man grew unexpectedly still inside her. When she dared imagine he had finished, he gripped her hips and thrust himself deeper into her womb. Her stomach convulsed with nausea. Her thoughts scattered. Unable to see his face, she detailed it from memory so as to draw courage from her hate.

No flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger would claim her soul. No savage with beads dangling from his neck. She would survive all this. There was nothing else to lose. Nothing else to fear.

Marina's thoughts bypassed the blame she had heaped on herself for visiting an astrologer and for remaining despite encountering, not a woman with a turban wrapped around her head, but a man with dreads coiled tight as if to strike: a black man who had divined her loneliness and had predicted the coming of a dark stranger like himself; a seer who became enraged when she said no—surely a white man or at least a light-skinned Hispanic like herself would come into her life.

Her destiny could still be changed. She had realized the dangers of courting evil and of not trusting God to provide answers to her questions. She would beg His forgiveness and survive with her faith intact. She would live to be His instrument and to point out evil wherever it appeared. Her body might be snatched, but not her soul. And her body was merely dust. It did not consist of who she was.

Marina opened her eyes and searched the room. Detecting only darkness, she pushed herself off the

floor. She was careful not to let her thighs meet or her arms touch her torso as she went into the bathroom. Behind its closed door and beneath the glare of a fluorescent light, she inspected herself before a full-length mirror. Blood congealed on her lower lip. Bruises swelled throughout her body. Yet she knew that if she informed her parents of what had taken place they would insist that she had dreamed it all, that in the throes of a nightmare she had sunk her teeth into her lips and fallen off the bed. But proof of the events was in her aching body, in its tenacious, rotting smell. Each time she inhaled, nostrils flaring to detect its source, the odor wafted toward her from all directions—her hair, her skin, the roof of her mouth when she raised her tongue to scratch it—confirming that something putrid had been implanted deep inside her and emitted its stench through all her pores.

The longer she watched herself the more repulsed she became. Before, she had been able to manipulate her reflection so as to see only her pale skin shades lighter than any of her sisters' and only slightly darker than Gabriel's wife. That skin color had blinded her to her kinky, dirt-red hair, her sprawling nose, her wide, long lips. Now those features appeared magnified, conveying to her eyes that she was not who she'd believed.

Filled with self-loathing, Marina turned on the hot water in the shower. When its steam obliterated her image in the mirror, she collected a razor, a can of Lysol, several Brillo pads from under the sink and stepped into the stall. Even in the shower the stench pervaded—sharp—as of vegetables which had remained in a dark, damp place too long. Determined to rid herself of the odor and to reclaim her defiled body, she reached soapy fingers into the folds between her legs. Wincing, she worked the lather into her inner walls, then shaved her pubic hairs as well as those under her arms. The wiry hairs clung to her thighs and breasts, resisting the scalding water's flow and prickling her skin. She picked them off one by one. When her body was hairless as a baby's, she adjusted the showerhead so that the water burst forth in pelting streams. She meticulously scoured herself with Brillo, lingering behind her knees, under her arms, in the inside of her elbows. When her skin blistered and she could stand the pain no more, she stepped from the stall and sprayed herself with Lysol.

CHAPTER 3

Aurelia hushed the birds pecking insistently on the kitchen window. Opening it just wide enough to feel the cold air on her hand, she threw fistfuls of leftover rice onto the snow. Despite the cold, her hand lingered on the ledge, outstretched fingers feeling the wind as if to divine from its texture what the day would bring. She had woken later than usual. Already the sun was up, casting a dim, grey light over her backyard. She was able to make out the pigeons scrambling for rice beneath the window and, further back, the now withered leaves of the corn her husband had planted the previous spring. She had been furious when he'd ripped out the sunflowers growing wild, leaving only the roses she had tended carefully and the grapevines they'd twined about the wire fence. But she had since come to understand. When Papito had turned the soil of the garden with bare hands, had watched his seeds take root, had pulled weeds from around their base, he had been able to forget the problems which, despite his care, had cropped up to choke his own life and his children's. It had not mattered that the garden was small and visible from the windows of neighboring houses or that his children thought him insane for planting vegetables in a Brooklyn yard. The garden had served the same purpose for him as feeding pigeons did for her.

She scraped remains from the bottom of a pot and offered a last handful to the pigeons. As if to show their annoyance at being fed so late, not one hopped onto the ledge to eat from her palm. She let the rice trickle through her fingers and closed the window. Several of the pigeons glared at her with beady eyes before gathering the grains.

Ungrateful, cocky birds. They behaved as if feeding them were her duty. She had often worried that they were becoming too dependent and would be unable to feed themselves once she died. But the fact that they were resourceful enough to wake her up each morning convinced her otherwise. They were perfectly capable of caring for themselves.

Nostrils assailed by the lingering smell of smoke, Aurelia turned from the window to inspect the damage to the kitchen. Several panels were scorched and smoke-stained. At their base, single linoleum tiles curled like parchment. She lifted a foot and brought it down on the linoleum edge. When they crumbled, she ground the ashes into the mud-green floor. Just looking at the damage made her want to return to bed and pretend that the previous night's events had never taken place. Yet she did not allow herself the luxury. She had too many chores to do and pretending that life had dished out all the bad it could and was about to let her rest was not one of them.

Five years ago when her husband had purchased the dilapidated, condemned building with the three hundred dollars he had hidden in a woman's purse under their bed, Aurelia had not imagined that one of their children would try to burn it down. Not when it had kept them from the streets. Not when it was the only house in their adopted country which they had been able to call their own. Instead, she had expected each family member to feel secure in the knowledge that never again would they be cramped into a three-room apartment like their first or be evicted as they had from their last. But what Marina had conveyed by setting fire to the kitchen was that the house, like the life she had previously attempted to destroy and which her parents had tried to ensure was better than their own, meant little.

So often Aurelia and Papito had considered returning to the Dominican Republic but had remained in the United States to be near their married children and because their youngest, remembering little of their birthland, considered it a backward, poverty-ridden place. Now she wondered if by emigrating they had unwittingly caused their children to yearn for a wealth generally portrayed as easy.

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