

Miss Basco

By Sharon McElhone

She never cared for the damp winter mornings of St. Helena. Not that St. Helena had any sort of winter at all, but the coast nearby and all the rich farmland made for too much moisture in the air, and it irritated Evelyn to do all that work and have her ponytail slip loose before she had even started her day.

In front of her classroom, she pulled out her keys, singled out a thick, polished-brass one, and unlocked the door. At first, she flipped on all the lights then decided it was too bright and turned half of them off before lugging her bags to the desk up front. She liked coming in and seeing her desk first thing in the morning because it was just as she had left it the night before: not a single thing on it. She sat down and pulled open the lap drawer, placing the heavy ring of keys inside then preceded to take out a stapler, a pencil sharpener, and a hole puncher. She set them neatly side-by-side in the right hand corner of her desk.

At the intersection, across the street from the school, Emanuel held onto his mother's hand, his breath suspended in a silver cloud in front of his mouth. Jerry waited across the street in a yellow vest. When the traffic cleared, he blew a single hard whistle then walked into the crosswalk holding up a red stop sign in his hand. Emanuel and his mother crossed the road where the smell of newly sharpened pencils, car exhaust, tuna fish, and peanut butter braided together in the familiar smell lingering in front of schools before 9 a.m. Children, weighted down with brightly colored backpacks and hair still damp from a wet comb, walked along the sidewalk and passed under the entryway, the opening of Los Padres Elementary.

Each time Evelyn heard Jerry's high-pitched whistle come across the playground, she felt irritated. There was no need, in her opinion, for him to blow his whistle that loud. For the most part, though, Evelyn didn't mind Jerry as a person. He seemed to her to be a hard-working janitor who liked children. Still, even though he asked her to dinner from time to time, she declined. She was still waiting for "the one" to come along. The one she'd thought she found as a junior in high school after she lay naked, stiff as a plank, on Jason's bed. Jason was naked too and stood at the edge of the bed looking down on her virginity. Unable to bare that which he was about to take, he told her to turn over on her stomach, which she obeyed, then he got on top—and that was that. Her first time didn't hurt, but it didn't feel like anything magical either. She loved him so much, she made peace with the fact there was no magic or orgasm or the fact he never asked if she like it. Over the four years they were together, they assumed one of two positions: missionary or he flipped her over like a pancake and got on top of her back like a walrus. In that position, she never got to look into his eyes, which made love seem like a figment of her imagination and bothered her. But she had already slid into that shadow at his side and became his future wife. He asked to marry her and promised to take care of her, and he kept that promise until the day she told him she planned to become a professional one

day, a teacher. But he had assumed she would be his wife, stay home, and have babies. He didn't see her ambition coming. She never saw the sword he would thrust into her gut coming either because she had no pre-commanding experience that taught her a man's masculinity would be threatened when a woman resolved to better herself. That he would turn coward and make her do the dirty work of giving him the ultimatum, she didn't see that coming either: He killed her soul off slowly by sleeping with two of her closest friends, one even more submissive girl after the next, until Ms. Basco knew, like a light turning on inside her head, she must chose between her love for a man or becoming a professional of some kind. Suddenly ripped from the moored ideal about true love that existed like a blind covenant to all the people of the world, she found love instead too feeble to withstand the changes that arrived to young lovers like gentle waves at their feet. It did not always leap over mountains or race desperately across oceans or confront like a roaring tiger, but instead went out like water splashed on a tiny flame just because one person out of two wanted something different. On an afternoon it felt excruciatingly hot to be inside a small car, she read to him her congratulatory letter from the university before he broke it to her that he signed on as an apprentice electrician in another town. They sat in his Hyundai and for the longest time neither one of them said anything. The sun came in the window and burned the top of her shoulder red, but she didn't move. Finally he said he had to go. When she responded, still wearing the engagement ring he had given her, she told him calmly that if he drove away that day, it would be over for good. He should not bother coming back. He wouldn't look her in the eyes and that is how she knew to reach for the handle, open the door, and get out. After the door shut, the car started. It backed up and pulled out of the driveway, and she never saw or heard from him again. Since then, she lived in a kind of limbo and ran a tight ship, pouring all her energies into working, keeping busy by keeping things orderly until the right man came along—essentially, a nice man—proposed again then carried her off into the sunset.

Evelyn pushed her chair away from the desk and stood up contemplating the day's lessons ahead. The first grade classroom overlooked the playground where cracks in the asphalt splayed out freely, thick shiny ribbons of tar chasing after them.

"Hi, Ms. Basco."

Evelyn looked over her shoulder. It was Rudy, a chubby little boy, whose parents fixed him an egg salad sandwich for lunch twice a week. On warm days, it stunk up the classroom and the kids giggled at him, but Rudy was a good-natured little boy and tried hard to please his teacher.

She smiled at him. "Hello, Rudy. How are you this morning?"

Rudy went straight to the purple cubbies at the rear of the room and in one placed his lunch sack and brought his backpack to his desk.

"OK, I guess.... getting to school was hard. My brother...he wouldn't get out of bed and my mom was mad." Rudy's eyes twitched and blinked behind his glasses, which Evelyn summed up as some sort of nervous disorder passed on to him by his parents. His eyes looked like black marbles suspended in a bowl of milk.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah." Rudy found his seat and plopped down.

Charity came skidding in, followed instantly by three or four of the other children.

"Hello, Charity."

"Hi, Miss Basco!" She came in swinging her arms and went straight to her desk.

She took off her backpack and heaved it up, letting it drop onto the desk with a thud. She unzipped it and took out a binder.

“Miss Basco—um—once—once there was this kid. His mom died, so he couldn’t go to school no more.”

“That’s a very sad story, Charity,” Evelyn said.

“Yeah.” She walked her lunch box to the back of the room where most of the other children were gathered and placed it in a cubby.

Soon, the kids were either at their desks or putting their stuff away, and the bell rang.

“Take your seats, class. Quickly now. Take your seats.”

A last minute crescendo, and then slowly, like musicians signing off one by one, the class quieted.

“Children.” She put her hands together in front of her. “Today we are going to learn about Día de los Muertos.” She said the last three words with a terrible Southern-sounding twang, and it didn’t get any better on the second try. “Can anyone tell me what Día de los Muertos means?”

Almost the entire class raised their hands. The mandate to teach something about the Mexican holiday to the students came in the summer from the principal, making her scramble to re-organize what she had already prepared for the school year. An unexpected change in gear was not Evelyn’s strength, but she recovered, putting together what she thought was a very nice presentation of what she personally considered was a somewhat morbid celebration.

“Jose. Tell me what Día de los Muertos means in English please.”

“Um...it means Day of the Dead,” he answered, pleased with himself.

“Very good, and can anyone tell me what Day of the Dead is about?”

Evelyn’s eyes scanned the classroom, stopping when she saw Emanuel, her newest student. His family had arrived late to California like so many migrant families do, having to postpone crossing the border sometimes for months. His parents were migrant workers from Mexico hired to work in one of the many surrounding vineyards. They were already a month into the school year, and Emanuel had only just started coming to class. Evelyn had not met his father yet—only his mother—and it was plain they did not speak any English. Some days she worried so much about how she would teach all the things she needed to teach her children when there were such barriers for them to overcome, and she sometimes resented the schools for forcing her to assimilate her non-English speaking students in the classroom. She simply couldn’t teach the curriculum efficiently when there were students who couldn’t understand what she was even saying. It wasn’t fair to anyone: the English speaking students, who lost out because the teacher spent more time trying to catch up the non-speaking students, and the non-speaking students who couldn’t keep up with her English speaking students. She spent hours feeling daunted and defeated.

“Emanuel,” she said, “can you tell the class what Day of the Dead is?”

Emanuel looked down at his desk, his glimmering raven-colored hair parted down the center of his head.

“Emanuel? It’s OK. Tell us in Spanish about Día de los Muertos.”

Angelica, who sat next to Emanuel, leaned over and whispered some words in Spanish in his ear. Her face was brown and round with black bangs that cut straight

across her forehead above dark brown eyes.

“Thank you, Angelica. But let’s give Emanuel a chance to answer.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Miss Basco...Oh! I know.” Rudy sat straight backed on the edge of his seat with his hand as high as he could get it. He bounced as if the chair was on fire.

“Oh! I know. Miss Basco, I know this one.”

After a moment, Evelyn broke away from the top of Emanuel’s head to look at Rudy and a smile came across her face.

“Rudy, why don’t you come up here and, like a teacher, tell us what Day of the Dead is all about?”

Rudy slid out of his seat and stomped his way to the front of the classroom. He stopped in front of Evelyn and looked up.

“Día de los Muer—”

“Rudy, like a teacher.” She put her hands on his shoulders and gently turned him so he was facing all the other first graders.

“Día de los Muertos is the celebration of our dead relatives. We bring them food...their favorite candies—” Rudy looked up at the ceiling before continuing on, “Water ‘cause they get thirsty. We put pictures of them on the altar to remember them. And...and light a million candles.” He paused, and then hit his forehead with the flat of his open hand. “Oh— and put lots and lots AND LOTS of *cempasuchitl* flowers that are bright yellow all over the place ‘cause the dead people need to see how to get back to life and the flowers are like flashlights—and they light the tunnel that’s all dark when they are dead, and then they can find us and um—”

“That’s very good, Rudy. You can go and sit down now.”

Rudy shuffled back to his seat.

For the rest of the morning, apart from break, the class decorated sugar skulls with stickers and glued beans on them.

At ten fifteen, the kids exploded from their classrooms like pockets of butterflies. They swarmed into the playground. Soon it was covered with children hanging from bars, hopscotching, running in circles, jumping rope, and skipping across the marred pavement. Jerry, now on yard duty, walked back and forth across the playground with big long strides, using his whistle to get the attention of a girl throwing tanbark.

Every once in a while, Jerry would let the other yard duties take over and then walk over to visit Evelyn in her classroom. Unlike Evelyn who had many friends and colleagues, Jerry didn’t seem to have many friends at all, on the account, she surmised, he had a deformed ear that was impossible to ignore. There was a small fold of skin at the site where the left ear should have been, like someone had sown on just the lobe and forgot the rest. It made any child who didn’t know him stop mid-sentence or mid-step and stare with a wide-open mouth—every time. Even the teachers who knew him very well even had a hard time not looking at it in conversation sometimes. But despite this gross abnormality, he had a confidence that Evelyn respected and Jerry appreciated that, and came around to talk to her whenever he had the chance.

“Hello, Evelyn.” Jerry liked everything about Evelyn. It was obvious by the way he smiled at her and how he laughed between sentences.

Evelyn picked up newspaper and tubes of glue strewn all over the tables. Nineteen decorated sugar skulls arranged in neat little rows lined two wide shelves behind her. Jerry’s shirtsleeves, folded to his elbows, caught her attention first. When she looked up

to his face, she saw an ear jutting out normally on the one side of this head and a mostly flat side on the other. That day, he looked utterly lopsided. She looked down and continued stacking the newspaper.

“What are you doing?” Jerry leaned up against the doorframe keeping an eye on the playground while he talked.

“Stacking newspaper,” she replied without the regular vexation in her voice.

After an awkward moment of silence, Jerry tried again. “What are those?” He motioned to the drying skulls sitting on the shelf.

She stopped and looked over to where he was pointing. “Sugar skulls,” she said then looked down again. “The children made them for Day of the Dead, and now we’re including it in our teaching here.”

“For the Mexican kids?”

“The principal told us to find more ways to bridge the gap between the permanent students and the immigrant students. But I don’t know how I can teach the ones who only come for the grape season and then leave.” She held a stack of newspapers in her arms and went over to the recycling bin by the window. “These are different times and we all—” As she deposited the papers, she caught a glimpse of Emanuel standing at the edge of the playground where the oleander was too thick for anyone to cross.

“What were you saying?”

“What?” Evelyn asked, irritated by the interruption.

“You said ‘these are different times’...”

Her eyebrows hunkered down over the bridge of her nose, and for a moment, she looked confused. Then she went on almost sweetly, not bothering to look at Jerry. “There was a time when I got up for work and looked forward to teaching. I could read books to them in circle time and most of them understood what I was reading to them. It’s not that way anymore...a teacher can’t teach properly when nearly half the children come into the class not knowing the basics of the English language. We can’t even guarantee that our children will know how to read and write by the time they leave.”

Jerry commiserated. “Those immigrant children are so poor. Some of their families don’t even have enough money for milk and lunches.”

Evelyn wandered back with her arms crossed under her chest to the skulls sitting on the shelves. “I have prep work to do, Jerry, do you mind?” She said straightening out a few of the skulls and dusting off her hands.

Jerry began to leave, but then stalled, and turned back around. He came over to where she was standing. “Evelyn? Would you like to go out to dinner this weekend?”

Even though Evelyn had gone on dozens of dates since college, she had not had sex in five years. There were goodnight kisses, a handful of gropes, and one date fingered her in the covered camper of his truck; but all the dates ended with a whimper because she couldn’t get herself to feel anything for any single one of them no matter how much she had hoped to. During those years she imagined a nice man approaching her a million times and how she would know he was a nice man. Sometimes that man was dark skinned and was born in some exotic place like Chile or India, sometimes he was fair skinned instead, a strong silent type with ties to family living in a Scandinavian country—some days he was filthy rich, a businessman, and then some days dirt poor and living the life of an artist. But he always held her in his arms and made her feel strong and capable. She also imagined herself on many occasions turning down all the wrong

men to their faces, bravely and courteously, instead of taking the wimpy approach by ignoring them or not returning their calls, ending the relationship with silence like flipping off the radio. She played the heroine both ways—being saved by the adoration of the nice man, then being brave and prideful to those she would never to consider. But that is all she ever did: imagine courage. So when the dreaded moment arrived, she was caught off guard and out of practice. She glanced at the side where his ear should have been, but instead there was only the flap of skin.

“I’m flattered, Jerry...really I am. But I have plans this weekend.”

Without understanding what prompted her to put it there in the first place—or even realizing that she had—Evelyn saw her hand gently resting on top of Jerry’s shoulder. The sight of it there, and the sudden realization that she had just lied straight to his face, plus the exposure to warmth escaping through the thin cotton, sent her hand whirling to her skirt pocket.

“Oh,” he said disappointed. “Ok, well, I better get back then.” He turned and walked out the door. Only, a few seconds later, just as Evelyn was approaching her desk, Jerry popped his head back in the doorway.

“I’m not leaving until you say you’ll go out with me tonight, Evelyn.”

“What, Jerry?” she replied.

“I mean it.”

To this matter of fact statement, she did not respond, but stood there staring back at him. His boldness tied her tongue. She could not muster a thought of how to courteously decline his offer. She could think of only one thing—that there was really no reason to continually disappoint her friend—the man with the deformed ear and shrugged her shoulders in surrender.

“How about I pick you up at five?”

Evelyn sat down at her desk and smiled at the hilarity of having the one man you don’t want to ask you out to ask you to dinner. This was going to be her Cinderella story.

“Ok. Five is fine.”

“Great! Give me your address.”

She wrote it down for him with a sharp pencil on a sticky yellow note and gave it to him.

“Oh, but what about your plans?” He asked, slipping the paper in his pant pocket.

“I can rearrange some stuff. It’s ok.”

“Ok then. I’ll see you in a few hours.” He tucked the whistle back between his lips and left.

At the end of the day, in the chaos of preparing to leave, each child held his or her skull in the palms of both hands as though the skulls were little glass puppies and went home.

Evelyn got home as quick as she could to take a shower and get ready to go out with Jerry. As she readied—her hair a wet nest on top of her head from trying to dry it with a towel—she surveyed her face. A deep wrinkle channeled downward from the corner of her right eye until it finally splayed into three smaller inlets, each reaching the very top of her cheekbone. The rosacea on her left cheek looked like splattered red paint, so she pulled out some foundation and plastered her whole face with it before getting dressed. She picked up her bra, pulled the straps up her arms and over her shoulders, set the pads on her breasts as if putting on a piece of armor, then reached around the sides to

do the hooks. As she secured the bra, she caught a glimpse in the mirror of the back fat rolling out from just under the elastic. She reached around and pinched the fat between her fingers, staring at the fold of skin then let her gaze drift down until she could see her entire torso including a potbelly she hated and had had since she was a young girl. She didn't think much of her body. It always looked like a flower that was ready to bloom any minute but then, in the end, came to naught. A flower that appealed only because of its promise to bloom rather than seeing the actual beauty of the flower itself. *It's too late to bloom now anyway*, she thought to herself. *Too old*. She let go of the fat and finished dressing herself, only going back to the mirror once more to comb her hair straight, put it in a ponytail, and brush her teeth.

Fifteen minutes after five the doorbell rang to Evelyn's condominium. When Evelyn opened the door, Jerry stood there holding a six-pack of beer. He handed her the *Negro Modelos* and stepped inside.

"You have a great place here. I love the high ceilings and that accent barn red color on your kitchen wall. Is that Old World texture?"

"Thanks," she said politely. But having Jerry take notice of her home's interior right off the bat left her slightly unsatisfied with the start of the evening. It was queer for a man to comment on such things she thought. Jerry seemed unsettlingly womanish suddenly; a real man's man would never notice high ceilings or the texture of the walls, she thought, much less the color of them.

Jerry pulled out a couple of limes from his jacket pocket and placed them in her free hand.

"So, shall we have a beer before we head out?" He said, clapping his hands together in one loud clap.

Evelyn said ok, turned, and went to the kitchen with Jerry following behind her.

They drank a beer sitting at the bar stools at the kitchen counter and talked about where to go for the evening. Jerry hadn't made any plans, which was disappointing but Evelyn shrugged it off and resolved to make the best of the evening. Plus after she had one beer, Jerry's suggestion to go to a tavern with pool tables that sold dollar beers for happy hour seemed like something refreshing and fun. So they went.

The tavern was dark and stank like wet mold. She and Jerry walked their beers over to a high round by the pool tables and set them down. They talked some more and drank their light watery beers, listening to the breaks and to balls hitting the bumpers. By the time she finished the third beer of the night, Evelyn felt a nice buzz which shed the tension she felt earlier during the day. She started to laugh with Jerry, who she noticed was trying hard to be charming. The drunker she got, the more she laughed and the more she leaned into the side of his face—his lop ear turning into an oversized warped entity between. Still Evelyn laughed at his jokes and touched his hand from time to time on impulse even though she was not attracted to Jerry and hoped he wouldn't try to kiss her. If he did try, though, she knew she would kiss him back and feel nothing; so she hoped he wouldn't even try to save both of them from disappointment. He bought them another round of dollar beers and when they arrived, he put his big hand around the thick glass and said, "Evelyn, I'm going to marry you."

She looked at him, hesitated then looked down because she knew the statement to be untrue. Marriage to Jerry was not in the plans. Jerry, on the other hand, sounded absolutely certain he was going to marry her. And they both sat there in silence with their

different intentions.

“If I had a dollar,” she began, “for every man who said that since I’ve been sixteen, I’d be able to buy a nice steak dinner.” She added, looking down again smiling, “Kobe Beef.”

“What? You don’t believe me?”

She met his rheumy eyes again. “I’m a smart gal,” Evelyn remarked, stretching out her hand, “and over the years I’ve figured out one thing about all of you,” and pressing the front of his nose with the tip of her finger as if calling up an elevator, she said, “I can make you run in an instant.... All I have to do is want to have a job.”

“Wow,” Jerry responded putting his elbows back up on the table and shaking his head. “I’m not sure how to respond to that.” He frowned, hurt by the insult thrown out to all men.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve been a bride in the minds of a hundred different men. Depending on my weight at the time....if I’m in shape, it seems the good looking ones come around; if I’ve put on a few pounds, the more plain chubby ones do. Men fantasize about marriage just as much as we women do. The way they make up love stories in their heads is no different. We are home taking care of the babies while they are out working, then playing poker and drinking beer with the guys on weekends. You’re not the first man to say you’re going to marry me, Jerry. I don’t mean to be an ass, but you’re not.”

“I might have to take it back then—the proposal.”

“Of course. You know, I was fun and full of life back then...much less jaded, and I suppose those bachelors saw a life with me.”

“Don’t you want a family?” He cranked up his arm and pumped his bicep. “You know...kids...and a strapping man to take care of you. You’re a teacher. I thought you loved kids.”

“Yes, of course. But at night I go home and there is no weird confusion about who is going to make dinner for the family or change the diapers. No big fights. I don’t have to feel guilty for going to work....I don’t know...it seems women hold up the greater society and take care of the men really.”

He pulled his arm back down. “You make me feel useless, Ms. Basco.”

“Sorry, but you are the one who asked me my thoughts and now that I tell you what I really think, you don’t like those thoughts. A woman can’t win either.”

“Ok, ok. So why didn’t you ever marry one of your hundred suitors?”

“None of them ever cared what I wanted. They wanted to turn me into what satisfied their fantasy of a family. They wanted to create me in their own image.”

Jerry looked peeved now.

“What? It’s true.”

“You should lie more,” he said sounding suddenly sinister, like a snake slipped inside him without her noticing and spit venom out. He stared at her angrily.

“Stop looking at me like that.” Evelyn gaily took his hand. “Let’s play pool.”

By nine o’clock, after three games and many beers, they stumbled out of the tavern together intent on finding a taqueria, which they did, and wolfed down soft tacos loaded with cilantro and onions in the bright light of the place before deciding to walk to his place.

Jerry lived with roommates, but he had a private entrance to his room through the

side gate of the house, which made Evelyn relieved because she couldn't bear the idea of meeting roommates at her age. It would feel like college all over again. He opened the side gate and she slipped under his arm and the ivy overhanging and walked until he told her to stop at a side door. He unlocked it and let them into the room that was black as night.

"What would you like to listen to?" he asked with his hands on her shoulders as they stood in the dark. But before she could answer him, he made it to the stereo and said, "Sir Elton John?" The stereo lit up with a soft green glow. Evelyn heard the CD tray open and close before Elton John came out singing through the speakers somewhere in the room.

When her eyes adjusted, she could see the outline of a mattress on the floor, a long dresser against the wall, and the shelf with the stereo on top.

Jerry plopped down on the bed and pulled Evelyn down on top of him. They kissed.

After a while, she no longer felt drunk and stopped kissing him and sat up.

He sat up next to her. "What's wrong?"

"How did your ear get like that?" she asked.

She could see him shrug in the dark. "I was born with it...not enough blood went to my ear in utero. It's ugly, I know."

She didn't counter what he said.

"I can't get a good job with this ear. I can tell right away they aren't going to hire me, but they don't want to get sued. Some companies are better at the cover up than others, but in the end no one wants someone walking around the office without both ears. It's scary."

"They hired you at the elementary."

"Yeah...but a janitor who also doubles as the crossing guard and does yard duty isn't what I first thought of when I went out for a career." Jerry took off his shirt. "Enough of this talk about my lop ear." Then he pulled off hers. He lay down on top of her again and kissed her.

"Should I get a party hat?" he wanted to know suddenly.

"What?"

"The goalie, a rubber, the jimmy. You know, a condom."

"Oh, no," she replied swiftly and softly.

He got off of her and walked over to the dresser and opened a drawer. He fished around and took something out then closed the dresser drawer. She heard a package tear open and then smelled the scent of rubber in the air.

"You wouldn't be here, Evelyn, if you didn't want sex."

He bent down and pulled off her pants, then her underwear. Next, he undid his jeans and pulled them down. Jerry seemed to have a point, though what he said did not match what she felt. She came to his place knowing they would be alone. The world would never believe that she just wanted to talk and kiss a little and feel loved. Everyone would call her a prick tease. She heard him roll on the condom and then felt him get back down on top of her, pushing his way inside. She said no again softly, but lay under him anyway quietly now, not saying a word again. His girth made it uncomfortable, and Jerry went at it like a jackhammer breaking up concrete. *He doesn't hear me*, she thought. *No man does*. Thankfully, Elton John's voice became clearly audible again. The song

reaching into the far corners of the black room, each word slipping into her open ears and climbing into the desolate space in her head until her head sat full—full of Elton’s words and nothing else. She rode with the rocket man: *Rocket man, burning out a fuse up here alone...and all this science I don’t understand. It’s just my job five days a week....*

“Aw, fuck! It broke,” he announced, rolling off of her roughly and startling her back to reality.

Evelyn, felt stone cold sober now, and looked up into the dark under a great cloud of disappointment. Jerry fell quickly asleep, so she got up slowly, gathered her clothes from the floor, and snuck out the door naked. She dressed in the backyard in the misty, cold, chilly air before opening the gate and letting herself into the front. She walked three miles home in the dark alone, numb enough not to be afraid, but at the same time hyper-aware of the sounds and movements around her. She listened carefully for noise, for heavy breathing, for the sound of footsteps that would startle her and make her run the rest of the way home.

A couple of days later, Evelyn pulled into her parking spot and got out of the car with her canvas bag, purse, and mug. As soon as she shut the door, she checked in the window at her hair to make sure no stray hairs were out of place. That morning her hands shook slightly and she carried a dead sickening weight in the pit of her stomach. The same one she had woken up with the morning after sex with Jerry. The feeling was worse, though, having had two days to mushroom while she worried about being pregnant. The telephone number for Planned Parenthood floated around on a piece of paper inside her purse and she planned to call their office at lunch on her cell to make an appointment. The thought of being examined made her utterly anxious.

In her classroom, she sat down at her desk, put her bags away.

“Hello, Miss Basco.”

Evelyn looked up.

“Hello Rudy. How are you this morning?”

“OK.” He put his lunch sack in the cubby tower and went to his seat. Once in his chair, he lowered his head and put his chin in the hole of a fist and closed his eyes.

The rest of the kids appeared slowly in groups of two or three, and eventually found their seats. The mood was somber that morning.

“It must be these wet mornings,” she said to herself. “They make you cold all the way through to your bones.” The bell rang shortly thereafter and class began.

Emanuel sat in his seat, gazing intently on the top of Evelyn’s head. This made her uncomfortable. Her hand came up to check her hair. Looking heavyhearted, Emanuel dropped his gaze back down to his desk.

“This morning we are painting a picture for our mothers.” As soon as she said it, chatter broke out. “Sshh...I want you to each go to the bin and get a t-shirt. Then find a seat at the art table. Angelica can you help Emanuel get a t-shirt?”

Angelica nodded, took Emanuel by the hand and walked him over to where the rest of the kids swarmed the bin. The children waddled to their seats in their paint splattered t-shirts that came down to their knees.

“Joel! Stop that please and Jennifer please go sit over there next to Caesar.” She pulled a t-shirt over one student’s head and motioned where she wanted Jennifer to take a seat. “OK class, you can start painting.”

“We can paint anything we want?”

“Yes, Leticia, any picture. But remember we want to do something pretty for our mothers.”

Little arms dove into the middle of the table all at once where the candy-colored paintbrushes stood bristle end up in red plastic cups. Angelica leaned over, whispered into Emanuel’s ear, then he too reached for a brush and got busy, the tip of his tongue poking out from the side of his mouth. The kids settled easily into painting and soon the chatter died away.

After a while, Evelyn stopped and leaned over Emanuel’s shoulder. She saw that he was painting a single figure. The figure’s legs were brown ovals, as was the torso, and the head. The figure was without a doubt a woman. Her hair—six thick strips jutting out like black sun-rays to three edges of the page.

“That’s very good. Is that your mother?”

He looked up with big, brown cow eyes and said nothing, then went back to painting.

At fifteen past ten, Evelyn noticed Jerry standing outside the doorway, his hair slicked back and his mustache trimmed so she could see his mouth. When he caught her eye, he smiled and waved. But her gaze fell away and she pretended not to see him. She continued walking around the tables.

“Children, it’s break time. Take off your shirts, clean your brushes in the sink and wash your hands...then line up at the door.”

Some of the kids squirmed out of their seats right away, wiping their hands on their t-shirts, merely dropping their brushes into the sink. Others, added a few more finishing strokes before getting up and wandering over. The antsy kids tossed their shirts toward the bin, barely getting their hands wet before running to get in line. Jerry waited outside the door patiently with his whistle in his hand. When the bell rang, he said hello to Evelyn and asked her why she had left. Evelyn looked at the children who stood waiting for her to answer Jerry. Then she turned and glared at him—the glare of one person telling another person to shut up. The expression dissolved. She put a smile back on her face and asked him nicely if he would go watch the students on the playground.

When everyone was gone, Evelyn picked up the rest of the brushes and took them to the sink. She gathered up the shirts on the floor and set them in the bin. With things in order, she began hanging the paintings one by one on the clothesline at the back of the room so they could dry. After she attached all the pictures with clothespins, the line looked like a Tibetan prayer flag. She walked the line of pictures, stopping and studying Emanuel’s picture, a plump brown naked figure.

“No clothes for your mother, Emanuel?” she asked out loud. “And your father? Where is your father? I guess he’s in the vineyard harvesting grapes, right?”

Once the pictures were hung, she went to her desk and pulled out a *Cooking Light* magazine and a cream cheese sandwich. After a couple of minutes though, she closed the magazine, put down her sandwich, and went to the window. Children ran and played with one another, but there was Emanuel, at the edge of the asphalt, cautiously looking over one shoulder then the other. He looked over his shoulder two more times for good measure before slipping under the fence.

“Where’s Jerry? He’s supposed to be watching them.” Evelyn scanned the playground from her window but could not see a single yard duty. She became instantly alarmed. “Who is watching these kids?!” She went out the door and hurried across the

play yard.

“What can Emanuel be doing back there?”

Her breath became shorter. Her arms swung like pendulums as she made her way toward the fence. She searched along the chain link fence until she found where it had come loose from the metal post—where she had seen Emanuel slip through. Hesitating and then overcome by the need to find him, she hunched down and squeezed between the post and the fence, tearing her skirt on the way. She looked back and saw it still stuck on the fence. It wasn't a clean cut, the blue jean edges frayed on both sides a good six inches. The skirt was beyond repair; she would have to throw it away, she knew.

“Shit!” she said looking back, and a piece of hair came loose, bouncing over her eye. She tried to tuck it back in, but it dangled stubbornly in front of her face. “What is this kid trying to do to me?”

Evelyn stood sandwiched between the fence and the oleander, the sun exposing a soft glow of perspiration on her forehead. The brush was overgrown and thick, but she could see a faint break ahead. She stood on the balls of her feet and slipped sideways through the bush.

“I'm going to find you.” She persisted.

As she pushed her way through, a branch caught her nylons, ripping it from her knee to the inside of her thigh. She found herself standing in a vineyard on the other side breathing hard; her white sneakers caked with dust. She searched the land until she finally spotted a blue sneaker poking out from a row of grapevines.

“I got you.” She quickened the pace, but when she began to close in on the shoe, she saw another shoe next to it: a woman's sandal. The foot in it was creamy brown on top and much paler underneath. She stopped in her tracks. From where she was, she could only see the two feet jutting out from behind a vine. *What are you two doing over there?* Evelyn continued on, but then she began to soften her steps, and when she was within a few feet, she sprang around to the other side of the vine demanding, “What are you doing here?”

Evelyn felt her legs soften. “That is wrong,” she muttered. Taking two steps forward her knees locking as she screamed at them both, “I don't care if none of you are from here! It's wrong!!”

Emanuel was cradled in his mother's arms, his head resting just below an exposed breast, a single drop of milk hanging on a shiny nipple like a small cultured pearl. They lifted their eyes to see her, but Emanuel and his mother sat blinded by a—giant sun—blocking out the figure swooping down on them.