

To Mother You

By Roberto Carlos Ortiz

I was fifteen when my mother took me to get a Tarot card reading from a Cuban priestess. Being a closeted teenager, I was afraid the cards would reveal my sinfully impure thoughts and confirm my parents' worst suspicions. At the end, I was so relieved that doña Charo didn't out me, or recommend a special bath or potion to redirect my sexual preferences, that I quickly forgot her revelation that I'd inherited my great-grandmother's ability to contact the dead. And I most likely would've kept forgetting if I didn't feel like asking help from a woman who committed suicide twenty years ago, when my boyfriend, her only son, was only twelve years old.

I cannot even remember her name, although her picture hangs on our living room wall. Brian told me he stole it from his father's home when he ran away at sixteen. He bought a cheap black frame at a dollar store and he has hung it on the wall of every place he's lived. Once, I'd planned to change the picture into a stylish new frame as a birthday surprise. That's when I first noticed the photo was stuck to the glass.

As I take down the frame, I wonder why it took me so long to notice it was so cheap, why Brian has never changed it and why I've never bothered to ask much about the photo. Holding it in my hands, I'm reminded of the family pictures that my relatives and school and college friends have been scanning and posting online. Most of them are in the thirties, some already hit their forties. I guess that building their own families and seeing the first signs of aging reflected on their mirrors must have made them interested in family history.

They must have found old albums and forgotten boxes stored in attics or basements. They must have picked photos that made them look good, feel proud, photos that showed their ancestry in its youthful beauty. They must have had them restored or scanned into their computers, where they could fix any imperfections. They must have expected comments after posting them, such as: “Your father is so handsome,” “Your parents look so beautiful,” “I can see where you got your good looks,” or at least a quickly clicked approval of “like.”

Thus they’ve created a visual lineage of beautiful resemblances online. I suppose they take comfort in the clear redefinition of old family images, in sharing, liking and commenting. But it takes more than photo editing to bring back the dead. And Brian’s mom is stuck to cheap glass. I can’t take her out, scan her and fix her into a more beautiful memory.

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That first time, he knocked me down fast and easy. He just tripped me with his foot, pushed my back and made me fall. I scraped my hands and hit my face as I failed to stop myself from falling. I stood and touched my bleeding lips. When was the last time they bled? Did I fall off a bike? Did someone punch me as a child? Did I bite my lip? That first time I didn’t even get mad. We were too surprised at how easy it had been to slip into violent mode. It took so little. He said I’m sorry. I said don’t worry. We both concurred: it was only an accident. Later on I thought: so this is how it all starts—so easy, simple, true. But you don’t stop loving someone the moment they hit you. You still have to shower, go to bed and wake up early to go to work.

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“I became a bartender,” Brian once told me, “because it’s an easy way to make money, and because I don’t want to end up like my father, seeking shelter in silence. I want to talk, to socialize, to smile... I want to be more like my mother. So, when I announced my plans to move, one of my friends suggested: ‘When you get to San Francisco, get a job at a coffee shop or a bar. You’ll meet people that way.’ Tips are much better at bars, so I’m here.”

Our first encounter was uneventful. My friends had taken me to the karaoke bar where he worked as bartender. He was a solid man with deceitfully easygoing looks. I heard of his reputation for groping young newcomers to the bar. There were also rumored free drinks in exchange for flashing him. But Brian never tried to touch me and I paid for all my drinks.

I soon learned there was a lot of soul inside his solid body. He sang Aretha and Gladys at the karaoke bar and I’ve also seen him sing along teary-eyed to Adele and Amy Winehouse. “We’re the ones who should be crying,” my friend quipped, but his bad singing moved me.

“I’m sorry I ignored you when you first walked into the bar,” he later said, “and I kept doing it when you came back, even though we had friends in common and I could tell you liked me. I don’t know what keeps us away from certain people. It’s not looks, just intuition.”

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“I don’t see any scar.”

“What do you mean you can’t see? I’m telling you... it’s right here.”

“Your skin’s too dark. It’s impossible to see.”

“Stop kidding me that way! Look again. It should be around here, close to my right eye. I can feel it. He slammed the bedroom door at me. But I hit him too. I hit hard, with both hands.”

“I don’t get it. If he hurts you, why you keep going back?”

“I just love him. And he loves me too. He won’t hit me again. He’ll keep his promise. I know.”

* * *

“They bring back memories, don’t they?” Brian teased when he finally took me to his place.

“Sure,” I said, as I looked at the four glass-enclosed tall candles lined on the fireplace mantel. They had glued-on paper images of Saint Jude, Saint Barbara, Saint Martha and the Seven African Powers. “My mother lit candles and prayed daily to Saint Judas, the Saint of Impossible Causes, but you’re supposed to leave them lighted for wishes to come true.”

“Oh, I don’t believe any of that voodoo hocus pocus. I just prefer them to the scented candles that most gay guys buy. I like the cool way their light illuminates the room, especially my mother’s picture. That’s her on the wall. It was taken on her wedding day. You can barely notice, but I’m in the picture, too. Can you see the small bump there?”

He was right. It was hard to see. Even now, wiping the glass clean, I don’t think I’d notice if Brian hadn’t pointed it out to me months ago. She’s wearing a simple dress with a lace shawl and small veil. She looks more like a bridesmaid. Having grown up with a different notion of female beauty, her white Southern good looks escape my appreciation. She’s rather plain. What I find beautiful is having Brian hidden under that dress, inside her belly.

The groom stands behind her, wearing one of those ruffled front tuxedos popular in the late 1970s. Father and son share the same name, body type and personality. I can see what would drive her insane about his quiet mode of masculinity. But Brian doesn't agree with those who attribute his mother's eccentricities to mental illness. He sees her differently. She was special, misunderstood. I've heard those justifications many times before, given my tendency to attract men with crazy mothers. But crazy or not, Brian assures me his mother knew best how to make him happy. She always had faith in him and found the humor in everything, which irritated his father. But she made her son feel that life was better than it seemed. That's why, as Brian rests all hurt and mad, I want to contact her.

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Brian has kept his promise. He doesn't hit me with his hands or his body. It's all words now. He's screamed so many times at me that I don't know what to think or believe anymore. The anger in his voice shocked me at first, and I often wondered why I let such a delusional man abuse me. Funny how quickly shock wears off. You get used to hearing and then scream back.

We're both caught in a suffering match. It doesn't matter who hurts most. We cut each other up, claim each had the worst childhood. Such unhappy kids, we've learned to hurt so well.

We knock down, hold up and fall again. We wipe tears. We fuck. We keep our love together.

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The story goes that my grandmother drove all spirits away with her rosary. My great-grandmother had discovered her gift to mediate spirits after casually meeting a spiritualist preacher at the public market. But my grandmother, a very committed Catholic, refused to accept

her newfound ability. Therefore, when people started coming for consultations, my grandmother sat outside her house and prayed, until she drove all of the spirits away.

Or that's what she claimed.

Despite my grandmother's opposition, my great-aunts and uncles secretly passed on her beliefs to their nephews and nieces, including my mother, who took me to see the Cuban priestess that revealed I'd inherited my great-grandmother's gift to contact the dead.

I know I'm going to need more than my inherited ability to contact Brian's mother, but I don't have anyone around to ask. I don't have time to look for a botánica, either. That's why I opened my laptop and searched online, feeling somewhat silly, like I was trying to be Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*. The number of web pages overwhelmed me. I clicked and skimmed until I decided to keep it simple. I'd set an altar, pray and hope it worked.

I covered a folding table with white plastic tablecloth (leftover from a party), filled cups with water and lit one of Brian's glass-enclosed candles before taking down his mother's picture, wiping the glass clean and putting it on the table.

But now I'm done and I don't know what to say.

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Brian has an angel tattooed on the side of his left shoulder. I've told him it looks like a fairy, but he swears it's an angel. More than once we've argued about the difference, killing time during nights with not much to say. It's better to talk about angels and fairies than politics or celebrities. I've spent many nights playing with that fairy disguised as angel.

After running my index finger over it, I wrap my arms around Brian and will myself into a dream. At a kitchen (which looks like an old sitcom set), my great-grandmother (looking like I've seen her in pictures) has just finished brewing a cup of coffee for Brian's mother (still wearing that simple wedding dress) and serves it with French bread and fresh butter.

"You can dunk," she tells her. They both dunk. Then they smile.

"You can help," my great-grandmother says, "right?"

After finishing her bread and coffee, Brian's mother comes to me in her ragged gown. And while I keep on sleeping, with my arms wrapped around her only child, she whispers softly:

"Listen carefully. I'm going to tell you a secret. This is how you comfort my son. This is how you make him happy."