

DAYS OF
PLENTY
DAYS OF
WANT

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The Ruins

It was getting so that almost every day Alma was going to the ruins on the riverbank. Not that her mother knew, of course. She was expressly forbidden to go there. It was a place, her mother Mercedes warned, that winos went on occasion, and young lovers, frequently. One never knew what kind of mischief or carnal knowledge one might come upon or witness. When Señora Romero spoke like this—of the proximity of temptation or occasions of sin—she would finger the large gold medallion of the Sagrado Corazón that she wore around her neck and invoke protection for her oldest daughter from the phalanx of saints with which she was on a first name basis. The image of the Sagrado Corazón was fortified on the reverse side with an engraving of the Virgen de Guadalupe, and Señora Romero wore the medal like the medieval armor of a crusader prepared to do battle with the infidel. It was a pose Alma saw her mother strike with frequency—inspired by the worldliness promoted by newspapers, television, popular music, protestantes and errant in-laws.

(She was not being disrespectful, Alma had convinced herself, when her mother would begin her pious sermons, to imagine Doña Mercedes, a fury on a rearing stallion—lance raised, mail clanking, banners aloft—routing unbelievers and sinners from the cancinas and alleyways of South Tucson, until they knelt trembling and repentant at the vestibule of Santa Cruz Church. Sra. Romero mistook Alma's dreamy unwavering stare for attentiveness, and so these periodic encounters left all parties satisfied. In reality, Sra. Romero never behaved in any manner that

would have called attention to herself: decorum, simplicity and moderation were the measures by which she lived her life and by which she ruled her family.)

It was easy enough for Alma to keep her afternoon sojourns secret from her mother. The excuses were varied and plentiful: extra homework in the library, a dance committee, an after-school game or conference with a teacher. In truth, there was never anything or anyone at school that attracted Alma's attention or detained her there. She was a solitary and thoughtful girl—dutiful in her studies, retiring in her behavior, guarded in her conversation—and so she went unnoticed by her teachers and ignored by the giggling groups of friends that gathered in animated knots in the halls, in the cafeteria and on the school grounds.

(Alma seemed plain to the casual observer. Her dress was modest, almost dowdy, created from cheap fabric by the nimble fingers of her mother on her Singer treadle sewing machine. She wore no makeup or jewelry, in contrast to her peers at school: with their brightly colored clothes and lips, patterned stockings and flashy plastic accessories, they swarmed through the halls like flocks of rainbow-hued wingless birds. But it could be said that Alma had a certain beauty: she was slim and muscular and lithe, with dark, serious eyes and coppery brown curly hair that obeyed no comb or brush or stylistic whim of her mother. Sra. Romero had long ago given up trying to tame Alma's unruly locks with ribbons and barrettes, abandoning these efforts to dedicate herself to other pursuits that were more pliable to her will.)

Alma always made sure that she arrived home from school at a reasonable hour—in time to help with supper chores or to baby-sit her younger siblings if needed. Sra. Romero never questioned her tardiness or investigated, satisfied that the delay of an hour or sometimes two, was taken up with school activities. A growing family, household duties and spiritual obligations kept Sra. Romero busy enough. It contented her that there were no calls from the principal or teachers, and Alma's excellent grades were testament enough to her industriousness and trustworthiness. All was well.

Sra. Romero prided herself on the fact that her household ran so smoothly, and she credited the personal intervention of the Sagrado Corazón de Jesús for her good fortune. She was a dedicated and energetic woman who scrubbed, polished, cooked, washed, ironed, sewed and prayed with great fervor. Her humble home was spotless, her children orderly, her marriage stable if predictable. Her soul was as spotless as her house, and it was the former that preoccupied her the most—but never (and she was scrupulous on this issue) to the neglect of her domestic duties. Nonetheless, during the week there always seemed to be a funeral, bautismo or velorio to attend; a vigil to keep; a manda to complete; a novena or rosary to recite; a visita to deliver; an altar cloth to iron and mend. And she was grateful for Alma's good-natured helpfulness around the house.

In addition to her weekly obligations, on Sunday mornings Sra. Romero arose faithfully at 5:00 a. m. to go to the Santa Cruz parish hall to help make menudo with the Guadalupanas to sell after all the masses. It was recompense enough for her, that, thanks in part to her pious efforts and sacrifices, the ancient pastor and his ancient barrio church were solvent. She always made sure, however, that she was home by nine o'clock to marshal her immaculate family to church in time to sit in the front pew at the ten o'clock mass. Her energy in matters spiritual seemed boundless, and she was admired, and at times envied, by the other matrons of the southside parish for the sanctity and punctuality demonstrated by her family.

Alma's father, Sr. José Romero, was a patient and thoughtful man who complied with his wife's spiritual and devotional exigencies without complaining. He had a strong faith, in a manner of speaking, although it had developed more out of philosophical musings and awe of the universe than out of any adherence to theological doctrines. Nonetheless, he faithfully attended church when it was required or politic to do so, and he willingly helped out with repairs at the crumbling church and rectory whenever he could find the time.

Sr. Romero was a good provider whose dependability as a mason for the Estes Homes Construction Company kept his

family modestly housed, clothed, and fed. He moonlighted at a Whiting Brothers Gas Station for the extras—music lessons, the yearly trip to California, gifts for special occasions. He himself had few material wants, and, having no interest in money matters, he handed over his paycheck to his thrifty and capable wife who wrought miracles, not only with saints, but with his weekly stipend.

Sr. Romero did, however, always manage to set aside a few dollars for himself from his overtime earnings which he lavished on his one passion—books. Whenever he could, he would browse among the stacks in the Carnegie Public Library by the park, and he would often check out as many as a dozen books at a time. But Sr. Romero loved most of all wandering among the dusty aisles of the dimly lit used bookstore in the old section of downtown. He would spend hours, when possible, leafing through the musty yellowed volumes, studying the tables of contents and illustrations, fingering the cracked leather bindings embossed with gold lettering. The proprietor, a laconic, prematurely gray-haired man confined to a wheelchair due to a childhood illness, didn't seem to mind. They never spoke, except in greeting, yet in an indefinable way they were the most intimate of companions. Whenever Sr. Romero had accumulated enough savings, he would buy an antique volume or two, and his book collection had grown to the point that it occupied every available shelf and tabletop in their small home. He had taken to caching his books in cardboard boxes under the beds—as long as he kept them neatly stored his orderly wife did not complain.

Sr. Romero read voraciously—in Spanish as well as in English. He seemed to have no literary preferences—poetry, philosophy, history, the natural sciences, fiction, biography—all he consumed with equal fervor. Night after night, he would read in his easy chair after the house had turned quiet—the younger children tucked in bed with prayer, his saintly wife occupied with her evening devotions. Alma would study her father through the doorway while doing her homework at the kitchen table. At times he would pause in his reading and close his book, a finger keeping his place. He would shut his eyes in meditation, his head

in a halo of light and smoke, his patrician face composed. Alma alone knew about the tiny flame that burned in the hidden hearth of his soul, and she understood that the flame would flicker with meaningless chatter. He, in turn, sensed in his favorite daughter the very same embers glowing unattended. There was an unspoken pact between them, and thus they kept their silence.

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Alma cut west across the football field, as had become her custom. Her backpack dangled loosely on her shoulders—she had left her books behind in her locker, having finished her homework during the lunch hour. Across the field she could see jostling groups of students heading east—crossing the light on South Twelfth Avenue to play video games in the shopping mall or to hang out with Cokes and cigarettes at the Circle K. The less fortunate who had to ride the school buses were crowding and shoving in lines as they embarked. The bus driver, an angular man with a long-suffering face, whose request for a transfer was still sitting on the principal's desk, hunched over the steering wheel in resignation. Alma could see arms flailing out the window in greeting, or directing paper missiles, and she could hear the muffled shouts and catcalls of the students who were good-naturedly elbowing one another for seats.

There was a cut in the chainlink fence by the bleachers at the far end of the field. It had been repaired many times, but it never stayed mended, this section of the fence being the most accessible and least detected place for those students wanting free entry to the football games. Alma stepped through the break in the fence and headed north, parallel with the dry riverbed that cut a wide swath between the highway and the school grounds. There was a faint path, but since it was seldom used, except by her, it was overgrown, and the ankle-high weeds and seeds scratched her legs and imbedded themselves in her socks.

She hurried now, because the late November days were getting shorter, and her mother told time by the proximity of the

sun to the horizon. It was not cold, but the weakening sun looked hazy and gave an illusion of winter. A gust of wind portending a change in the weather blew unexpectedly out of the south. Alma shivered and wrapped her ill-fitting cardigan more tightly around herself. The path narrowed gradually as she continued north, angling now slightly west toward the slope where she would descend into the riverbed in order to cross to the opposite bank. A few hundred yards farther and she could see across the river to the old mission orchard on the other side—a tangle of denuded trees—peach, apricot, pomegranate, fig and lemon, leafless now and overgrown with wild grape and the vines of the morning glory and the buffalo gourd. On the periphery of the abandoned orchard, the silhouettes of two dead cottonwoods thrust their giant trunks into the sky as if in failed supplication for water. By now Alma could see the decaying walls of the ancient adobe convento, and she could discern the elusive wisp of smoke that arose from somewhere amid the ruins. Far to the southeast, in the direction of the Santa Rita Mountains, she could now see dark clouds dragging their heavy burden over the mountain peaks. If the wind quickened, the storm would be here before dusk.

Alma walked faster now, scrambling down one side of the dry river's eroded bank and up the other, artfully sidestepping the litter of flash flood debris, the broken glass and shiny aluminum of beer busts, discarded construction material and abandoned furniture and car parts. When she had reached the other side of the bank, she brushed her way through a stand of scraggly carrizo and walked over a plank suspended over a narrow ragged cut where the river had meandered decades ago. At last she reached the neglected and overgrown orchard that had become her musing, and lately, her observation place. The trees were gnarled with age and barren now, but even in the spring they boasted few leaves, having to depend on the sparse and unpredictable desert rains for their irrigation. It was nothing short of a wonder that they were still alive: each season seemed to be their last, but now the native shrubs and vines had so intertwined themselves with their sorrowful hosts that they seemed perennially, unnaturally, green.

It was here within view of the ruins that Alma had chosen her secret hiding place: here she would sit day after day on a discarded car seat with broken springs that she had laboriously hauled up from the riverbed. It was from this vantage point that she would observe the comings and goings of the strange old woman who had taken up residence in the crumbling site. They had never spoken, but Alma was sure that the old woman was aware of her presence, and at times she thrilled with the sure knowledge that she, also, was being watched at a distance. It was just a matter of time before their eyes would meet and they would speak. She was sure of it, and her daily watchful ritual was enacted because of the possibility, nay the inevitability, of that encounter.

. . .

Doña Luz had squatted at the old ruin since the death of her mother three years before. Although the matriarch of the Martínez family was 97 years old at the time of her death, she had been of robust health and keen of mind and spirit until shortly before her death. When her ancestral family adobe had been bulldozed with the blessing of a progressive city council to make way for a multi-level parking garage in the inner city, she had died—some said of a broken heart—within a month of relocation to public housing on the city's far south side. (The urban renewal project had continued on schedule in spite of the fact that Doña Luz—always a spirited and independent woman—had, in a last desperate show of defiance, thrown herself down in front of the wrecking ball. This had resulted in a rash of negative publicity and a spate of sympathetic letters that had proved embarrassing to the city fathers. The furor died down within a few weeks, however, as the populace's short-lived attention span turned to more pressing matters like the World Series.)

Within a week of her mother's death, Doña Luz moved out of their one-bedroom apartment at La Reforma. The family heirlooms had been sold over the years to get through the hard times and to supplement Doña Luz's meager earnings as a folder and stacker at Haskell Linen Supply. Doña Luz's remaining tat-

tered possessions—clothing, bedding, an antique trunk, a wood-burning stove, and a few pieces of weather-beaten furniture—had somehow mysteriously and miraculously reappeared in the one section of the abandoned convento ruins that still had a portion of its roof intact. The city fathers, who had annexed the site, chose to look the other way. It was considered an eyesore, used by some as a dump and did not have potential for development in the foreseeable future. They preferred to concentrate their energies and attentions on other more potentially lucrative and respectable areas of the city.

(Doña Luz had been well known to officials before her celebrated encounter with the wrecking ball. She had been, in her more youthful and vigorous days, a thorn in the side of several generations of bureaucrats and attorneys, having laid claim, with faded documents and dog-eared deeds, to several acres of land where the multi-story government complexes now stood in the heart of the city. Needless to say, the Martínez claims proved fruitless in spite of years of wrangling in the courts, their case weakened by the passing of time, the mists of history, a dearth of witnesses and a maze of legal and bureaucratic entanglements.)

Thus the weary city fathers were only too happy to ignore Doña Luz's latest display of obstreperousness, satisfied that age, infirmity and time had taken their toll on her senses. They were wrong, of course, having no way of knowing that Doña Luz's senses were intact, she having abandoned the fleeting awards of politics and protest for what she considered to be more sublime and spiritual matters. Nevertheless, her ghostly comings and goings at the ruins disturbed no one, threatened nothing, and they had received no complaints.

Mi casa es su casa.

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Alma hunkered down into the torn plastic of the car seat, closing her eyes and concentrating her thoughts, trying to stay warm. For the air had turned suddenly colder now, and the clouds, gathering speed, had slammed over the weakening sun

like a curtain being drawn. Like a room with its candles snuffed out, the orchard and the ruins lay suddenly in shadows. The clouds, blackened and tinged with purple, scudded across the blank sky like so many tall ships in a tempestuous sea.

When Alma at last opened her eyes, she was startled to see Doña Luz standing before her, extending a veined hand to help her rise. Doña Luz had made her way across the bramble-and-branch-strewn field soundlessly, like a ghostly dark cat on padded feet. The old woman's hair was completely white—long and wispy like spun sugar candy. It blew about her face like smoke that threatened to disappear with the quickening wind. She was dressed completely in black: her long dress of coarse homespun cloth hung down to her ankles. The style of the skirt and bodice was reminiscent of those Alma had seen worn by the stern-faced women in the treasured antique photographs of her mother. On her feet Doña Luz wore a pair of old-fashioned hightops with no laces. She wore on her shoulders a threadbare fringed and embroidered shawl of the finest woven silk—the only surviving heirloom of her family's more exalted and prosperous days. Her face was brown, fine-boned and high-cheeked, wrinkled with age and weathered with adversity. Her eyes, set deeply and far apart, were small and bright, and so dark that they seemed to have no pupils. In the sudden obscurity that had come unnaturally with the storm, Doña Luz's luminous eyes were the only beacons in the darkened fields.

"Ven, mi hija. Ya es la hora." Doña Luz addressed Alma in Spanish in an urgent, musical voice. In the many weeks of her vigil, Alma had prepared herself for this moment, and she was not frightened by the sudden apparition of Doña Luz. She grasped Doña Luz's bony arm to steady herself as she arose from her seat; she was surprised at its strength in spite of its weightless fragility. She walked with her silently across the fallow autumn fields to her dwelling place in the convento. The wind was roaring now, whipping the delicate and brittle branches of the fruit trees. The branches, threatening to snap, made a rasping protesting sound that rivaled the din of the wind itself. Before they were halfway across the field, the promised moisture came,

not in the usual rain, but in unexpected, silent flakes of snow that fell so thickly that everything in the orchard was blurred as though seen through a cataract-veiled lens. By the time they reached the adobe shelter of Doña Luz, Alma was shivering with the wind and the blowing snow. Doña Luz pushed open the heavy hewn door of her shelter, and in the smoldering half-light of ancient kerosene lamps Alma saw what she thought were hundreds of giant tattered white moths pinned to the ceiling and the rafters and the walls, covering the sparse furniture, or fallen, ankle deep, flightless and abject, on the floor.

"Tú estás encargada de todo esto," Doña Luz whispered to Alma with a dramatic sweep of her hand.

Outside, the snow gathered at the curtainless windows like gauze. . . .

When Alma's eyes had focused and become accustomed to the smoky room, she distinguished through the haze, not moths, but shreds of paper on which notes had been carefully and laboriously written in a spidery scrawl.

Doña Luz continued to explain in a whisper: "This is the history of our people which I have gathered—the land grants and the homesteads and the property transfers; the place names of the mountains and the rivers and the valleys and the pueblos; the families and their names and their issue; the deeds, honorable and dishonorable; the baptisms, the weddings, the funerals; the prayers and the processions and the santos to whom they are directed; the fiestas, religious and secular; the milagros and the superstitions. She droned on in a cadence, and as she spoke, Alma, still grasping her bony hand and surveying with wonder the testament of Doña Luz, felt the warmth of that hand flow into her being like water being poured. "The recipes, the herbs and the cures; the music and the songs and the dances; the prose and the poems, the sorrows, the joys; the gain and the loss. This is my legacy. But I am old and failing. I entrust it to you lest it be lost and forgotten."

The wind continued to howl and the snow veiled the windows in white lace. . . .

Alma stopped to pick up several pieces of the tattered scraps

that lay at her feet, each veined with the faint tracings of Dona Luz's careful script. Squinting in the opaque half-light she read "On February 10, 1897, Don Jesús María Figueroa perfected the title of his three sections of land under the Homestead Act. He and his family settled in the fertile canyon of the Madrona Draw of the mountain range we call Los Rincones. He named it Rancho de Los Alizos because of the great trees that grew there. He built his home, corrales and a chapel. There three generations of Figueroas prospered, cultivating grain, vegetables and fruit and raising livestock. In 1939 the United States Department of the Interior, claiming eminent domain, expropriated the land. Before he left for town, the grandson of Don Jesús María Figueroa burned the buildings and the two thousand dollars he received in payment.

Alma read a second note, her eyes straining in the ever-darkening room: "The feast day of San Isidro, the patron saint of farmers, is May 15th. A little statue of the saint is carried through the fields, the farmers and their families singing alabanzas, offering their humble crops and praying that this year's planting might be successful. This is his prayer:

Señor San Isidro
De Dios tan querido
Pues en la labor
Tu seas mi padrino
Fuiste a la labor
Comenzaste a arriar
Junto con los hombres
Que iban a sembrar
Porque sois de Dios amado
Y adornado de esplendor
Bendecir nuestro sembrado
San Isidro Labrador

And the thickening snow smothered the windows and the ruins like a shroud.

Alma continued to read with a mounting sense of urgency now: "Here is written the corrido of the ill-fated race when Don Antonio Valenzuela lost all he possessed when his superior and beautiful horse 'El Merino' lost to 'El Pochi' at Los Reales in 1888.

¿Qué hubo, Merino mentado?
¿Qué siente tu corazón?
¿Por qué estás apachangado
Cuando eres tú en el Tucsón
El caballo acreditado
Dueño de la situación . . . ?"

The unfinished song flew from Alma's hands when suddenly, and without warning, a tornadolike gust blew open the unlocked door of Doña Luz's hovel. The airborne flakes blasted in with a ferociousness, and then Alma saw, helpless and aghast, that the shreds of precious paper, in an avalanche of blinding whiteness, had metamorphosed into giant white moths again. They quickened with life and took to the air in a dizzying funnel of flight. Blowing snow mingled with blowing paper and rose and fell and then eddied into a blizzard of memories. And then the memories and the spirit of Doña Luz fluttered out the open door in a thousand swirling fragments in the direction of the south wind somewhere west of Aztlán.

The Legend of the Bellringer of San Agustín

There was never a morning that the old man did not ring the bell. Before the sun came up, he roused himself from his humble bed in the little house that lay in the shadow of the great white church. He made a cup of strong coffee for himself and drank it with a piece of sweet bread. He rubbed his sleep-filled eyes, still heavy with dreams, and fell on his knees to say his morning prayers. Then the old man shuffled slowly across the plaza in the darkness. The little pueblo slumbered, still cloaked in night. The proud roosters slept on the rooftops. Cats and dogs yawned before the hearths. Birds twittered sleepily in the trees. Chickens stirred in the courtyards. And children dreamed. All the pueblo lay quiet with the expectation of the new and coming day.

When the old man reached the cathedral, he opened the massive carved doors with only the light of a candle to guide him. With the small flame he led himself up the winding stairs to the bell tower. There, in silent splendor, hung the magnificent bell of San Agustín. It was made of bronze, and had come from across the sea so long ago that no one could remember a time when it had not sung its song for the little town. It shone, even in the darkness, with a wonderful light all its own, and in the hush of the tower, it seemed to tell a story.

For on the magnificent bell there were all manner of marvelous creatures, forever stilled in bronze, yet looking as if someday they would come to life. Near the crown of the bell, beautiful women—or were they angels?—strolled under the branches of enormous trees, their faces forever fixed in metallic beatific