2

The Blossoms of Los Feliz

Spring is here and it makes my joints ache. All those jacaranda blossoms on the walk outside to sweep up. Jacaranda trees thrive in Los Angeles, like blondes and Mexicans. There's no getting away from them, not even in my dreams. They've haunted me from childhood, when I believed a jacaranda tree would save me. Can you imagine such a thing, a tree saving a life? A silly girl thought so once.

I'd been sent to my grandmother's home in Chavez Ravine by a mother whose face I didn't remember and whose cruelty Abuelita wouldn't let me forget. The dirt road outside my *abuelita*'s house led to an outdoor *mercado* and was covered with an amethyst sea of pulpy jacaranda that felt like old skin and calico under your bare feet. I'd collect sprays of young jacaranda, then run down the road with them, petals raining from my arms.

When the white men came to build a baseball stadium for playing their games, they smoothed the land out like a sheet of paper to bring in their trucks and bulldozers that would destroy our homes. But there was a problem. The land was uncooperative and petty, swallowing contractors' flatbed trucks and, I prayed, the workers

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 25 3/10/10 5:50 PM

themselves into sinkholes and collapsing earth atop surveyors' flags. The jacaranda trees gave them the most trouble. They felled the mightiest bulldozers, which couldn't tear them down without themselves being damaged. I thought that if I grew a jacaranda tree in my room, it would anchor our home to the land and we wouldn't have to leave.

I found a thin branch with several young sprays and set it in an old wooden *batea*. We had no running water, and the rainstorms that fled across the ravine didn't give the dry, cracked ground a chance to soak up what poured out of the sky, so at night I'd slip out of my window barefoot to steal water from a neighbor's well.

I planted the *batea* in our swept-smooth dirt floor and waited for the spray to bear seeds whose roots would burrow deep into our ground. Two of the buds matured, plopping atop the water's surface before they could open, but the rest weren't growing fast enough and the sounds of the bulldozers kept getting closer and closer. I poured heavy gulps of water into the *batea* to get the other buds to bloom. I didn't want to hurt them. I wanted to give them more of what I thought they needed.

That night, a bad dream crept to my bed like a relative with filthy thoughts. I was a jacaranda blossom struggling to stay alive but whose violet color was dripping off my petals into a standing pool of water. But I was also me, laughing as I held the dying blossom by its bud under the water. I reached up with as much strength as I pushed my body down, drowning both my selves. There was the *drop drop drop* of running water, then a hard patter, then a shrieking roar, a scream pouring out of my mouth as I awoke coughing strands of spit on the side of the bed I shared with my *abuelita.* It was a vivid nightmare, one that revisits me, a persistent yet incurable sickness.

Fumbling to the *batea* through the rough darkness, I saw that the other buds had shriveled up. Two jacaranda flowers were submerged underwater. I cradled them out of the vase to dry them, but their milk and seeds popped out as the flowers tore apart in my hands. My

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 26 3/10/10 5:50 PM

abuelita heard me crying and without asking where the water had come from told me that a drowning flower moves toward the water, not away from it. Its stem may be strong enough to stand on its own, but when its petals grow wet and heavy, they drag the flower back into the water and that causes it to die.

Aurora Salazar, the last woman evicted from Chavez Ravine, learned this lesson when she was dragged by her wrists and ankles like a shackled butterfly off her land. And I would learn that lesson many years later working for Mrs. Calhoun. This is what women do, when they have an ocean of dreams but no water to put them in.

Mrs. Calhoun lived in a large house on Avalon Street in Los Feliz with her husband, Rick, who had followed a story in the newspapers and on television about a drive-by shooting. In 1984, during my twelve-year-old daughter Aurora's spring break, she and I had been standing for a group photo (which all the papers published) on a street corner when a car opened fire near the crowd. Neither of us had been in any actual danger, but because of the attention, I lost my job cleaning the offices of a law firm where I'd worked for four years as a "temp."

Before Rick found me, I was looking for work on a street corner, 5th and San Pedro, near the Midnight Mission. Back then, my English was terrible and Skid Row was where, if you were a woman, needed work, and didn't speak English, you'd gather in a group for the *gabachos* to come and hire you. We all had our own corners on Skid Row back then. 6th and Los Angeles, by the Greyhound station, was for junkies. 5th and San Julian was the park where whores would sell their time: twenty dollars for twenty minutes in a flophouse, or ten dollars for ten minutes in a Porta Potti the city put out for the homeless. And 5th and Pedro was where you went to hire day laborers and cleaning ladies.

The women came from everywhere south, some as far away as

Uruguay, each with her own Spanish dialect. The men had their own corner, across the street from ours. They weren't there to defend us when we were harassed (or sometimes raped) by the bums who swarmed the area but to keep an eye on us while they drank, laughed, and wolf-whistled the gazelles, beanstalky white women in suits and sneakers who parked their cars in the cheap garages nearby. They turned those *pendejos'* heads like compass needles, as if those girls' tits and asses were magnetized. We had the dignity to wait in silence, yawning in the flat gray sharpness of dawn under a mist of milky amber streetlight. Standing in a straight line, arms folded across our chests like stop signs, we prepared ourselves for a long day of aching, mindless work by sharing a religious, rigorous, devotional quiet.

When men want relief they hire a whore. When women want relief they hire a cleaning lady. And they did it the same way—first they examined our bodies. Could we reach the high shelves with the lead crystal without a stepladder? Were we able to fit into a crawl space and fish out their children's toys? Were our *culos* big enough to cushion an accidental fall? They never looked us in the eye because they could see us performing those disgusting chores no decent woman would dream of asking another woman to do. Then they tried to negotiate the stingiest hourly rate, or tossed out a flat fee that always seemed too good to be true, and was; at their houses, you were asked in a polite but insistent voice to do "just one more" messy, humiliating job (digging through moist, rotten garbage for a missing earring they "thought" might have fallen in, or fishing a tampon out of a clogged toilet) before you earned your day's freedom. The men were more direct, pulling up in large white windowless vans and snapping their fingers—"I need two plump, stocky ones and two that can squeeze into tight corners!"—like buying live chickens.

I wasn't the only American-born woman on this corner who never learned English. In Los Angeles, you could rent an apartment, buy groceries, cash checks, and socialize, all in Spanish. I tried going to the movies to learn English; at the theaters Downtown, Mexicans

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 28 3/10/10 5:50 PM

could come only on certain days and were "restricted" to the balcony. I snuck in whenever I could because I wanted to be more "American," and I thought these movies—"The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain!"—had the answer. Yet whatever English I pieced together dissolved when I walked into the harsh sunlight outside.

When something really stumped me—paying taxes, for example—I asked for help. More Mexicans speak English than you imagine and understand it better than they let on. That's how I met Hector, in church; he could already speak English but never had time to teach me. (I should have known a man who could speak two languages could live two different lives with two different women.) How could I find time to learn English, when I left my house at dusk like a vampire, working in empty, haunted offices all night? And some vampire I was, frightened by all those ghostly sounds in an office, like copy machines that powered on for no reason or phones that rang endlessly. Before sunrise, I scurried out the service entrance with a horseshoe back, clenched shoulders, callused feet, and skin reeking of ammonia.

That's why Rick's letter arriving when it did gave me faith we were not destined to live our lives as victims. The papers painted Aurora and me as tragic near-martyrs, symbols of a community the city had forgotten. Aurora couldn't face her classmates because of this and some incident at school that she started telling me about, then stopped when she told me I'd gotten the details wrong (someone called her "a dirty Mexican"). After the shooting, she stopped telling me anything, became a sour and sullen stranger in my home. She changed schools and talked to me even less, but she was still my translator and my negotiator when I went to meet Rick. Cards and letters flooded our mailbox, but Rick had written on the most handsome stationery that he was looking for a cleaning lady (or better yet, a houseboy), and if I wasn't interested, would I inquire in the neighborhood in exchange for a "finder's fee"?

We rode the bus a half hour to Los Feliz and met Rick on his front

drive under a gang of aging palm trees. He led us around the grounds, which included a shady grotto and swimming pool carved out of a hillside shielded beneath a canopied jacaranda tree that had thin green sprouts and young, tender, but still unripe ivory buds peeking out from its branches.

"You have a swimming pool!" Aurora said.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Rick asked her.

"Maybe." Aurora smiled a confident, gap-toothed grin that meant she was lying.

"You can have a pool party with your boyfriend anytime. If he has an older brother, he can come and bring his friends, too," he said.

When I asked her how much the job paid, she began a back-and-forth conversation until I agreed on a schedule of three times a week, six hours each day. Aurora negotiated thirty dollars per cleaning day, with Rick providing the cleaning supplies.

"My wife will keep everything fully stocked," Rick said. "She's inside."

In a living room that could fit my entire childhood Chavez Ravine home, Rick's wife sat curled on a fancy corduroy couch (a couch I'd come to know very well), her head draped over a glossy magazine. I couldn't tell whether she was asleep or awake. There was a booming, echoed silence, what you'd hear in a cathedral.

Aurora dove onto the couch. Startled, his wife jerked up, and Rick motioned stiffly for her to shake my hand.

"Hello, Mrs. Calhoun," I said.

She dragged her legs off the couch, adjusted her silk blouse, then pinched the waist of her trim, creased slacks. "This is Felicia, the woman from the newspaper," Rick said.

"Hello, Felicia," she said, standing the same height as me in stocking feet. *"Hola. Buenos días* and *hola,* Felicia." She hugged me at an angle, like she was using tongs.

"My wife was the one who spotted that photo in the paper," Rick said. She looked surprised to hear this.

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 30 3/10/10 5:50 PM

"Oh, the photo. The one with your friends. *Amigos. Amigas?* I'm sorry my Spanish isn't better," she said.

I understood this, and said, in English, "It's okay. My English should be better. It's America, your country."

"Oh, I thought you were born here," she said.

"I was. But it's your country."

She showed Aurora and me out, saying she was running late for a medical appointment. We descended the sharp incline back to the bus stop at the bottom of the hill. There were no benches—only Mexicans rode the bus around here—so Aurora and I squatted on the curb, massaging our calves and keeping our feet at what we hoped was a safe distance from the sports cars and new "minivans" speeding down the boulevard. We waited under the shadows of manicured wall hedges and palm treetops whose dry, spiny fronds crackled in the breeze like a brushfire.

"I want a house like his," Aurora said. "I want to live here."

"It's very expensive," I said. "You need to stay in school."

"You don't need to go to school to be rich anymore. I want to have a pool party here," Aurora said.

"My job is to work here," I said. "Your job is to go to school."

"Rick said I could come and swim," she said. "You can't decide for both of us."

"That wasn't an invite to swim," I said. *"Era una invitación a trabajar."*

Cleaners must arrive early, before their bosses have had their morning coffee, newspaper, and can mess up their houses any further. To get to work on time, I walked to the bus stop when the moon was still out. No one was around except the *borrachos* swaggering back home to their wives' cold beds when the bars closed, or the crazy bag lady who wore winter coats year-round, prayed at my bus stop bench as if it were a pew, and talked about her "friend," the Virgin Mary, as

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 31 3/10/10 5:50 PM

if Our Lady of Guadalupe was going to show up on the Line 200 bus at five in the morning. I hated rising early then, so I learned the driver's name and acted friendly; in a few weeks, he'd wait an extra minute or two for me at my stop if I was running late, though I had to listen to his endless bragging about how he kept to his schedule and always followed the rules. Don't know what page of the rule book chatting up women passengers was on, but I knew what his game was. Women can see through a man in a way men will never realize. That's because men never change—they'll slow time down trying to get under your dress, then speed it up once they've done it. I was still recovering from Hector, my one attempt at true love. He turned out to be a yo-yo lover, a man who stings you more coming back than going away.

There were many cleaning ladies and maids riding that bus every morning, fanning out across Los Feliz. Working on traffic islands or mountainous front lawns were armies of gardeners who came in their own pickup trucks, their turtle-shell backs inching across unruly grass they sharpened into crisp right angles.

You could hear us coming by the sound of our plastic buckets, knocking what we carried inside them around: spray bottles with homemade cleaning solutions, collapsible mop handles and scouring pads, dried out sponges and boxes of rubber gloves (many owners of these houses, mine included, didn't supply their own cleaning supplies as promised; we'd eat the cost along with our complaints), and a symphony of jangling house keys. If you weren't trusted with keys, you'd better get used to the curb.

It took me a while during those first weeks to learn a different rhythm of doing my job. At the law firm, I had to let others know I was there. Figuring out the best ways to be heard but not seen is a crucial skill for a cleaning lady so I wouldn't surprise anyone staying late, or walk in on lawyers having sex or touching themselves. Turning on the vacuum cleaner when I didn't need to or making a lot of noise arranging my cleaning supplies were the best ways. One law-

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 32 3/10/10 5:50 PM

yer's hands dipped below his waist whenever I cleaned his office, so one night I whipped the vacuum cord at his crotch like a lion tamer. He kept his hands on his papers after that.

In Los Feliz, I needed to be invisible and inaudible. Mrs. Calhoun and I managed to communicate without ever saying a word to each other's face. The massive double front doors made a loud, drawbridge sound when I unlocked them, letting her know I'd arrived. I'd shout "Good morning" in English until Mrs. Calhoun responded with an echoed "Good morning," often from one of the bathrooms. That was my sign to start at the opposite side of the house. When I finished a room, Mrs. Calhoun stepped inside and read a magazine until I finished the next room. Like the arms on a clock, we moved together through six bathrooms, five bedrooms, the split kitchen, two "recreation" rooms (a name that confused me; I didn't have a room to create things in, let alone "re"-create them), and a living room as big as Aurora's school cafeteria. We could spend the day inches apart and never see each other.

Many cleaning ladies would be thrilled not to have someone's eyes raking your spine, correcting your every move, but I felt it was bad luck to spend a day in the same house with someone you never saw or talked to. Sometimes I'd ask Mrs. Calhoun a question but would get no reply. Later, I'd find a note on a large glass table by a pair of sliding doors overlooking the grotto, a place Mrs. Calhoun stared out at most of the day. With the help of an English-Spanish dictionary Rick gave me on my first day, I learned how to translate her replies. "Don't clean the green back bedroom today" meant she'd be shut in there, curtains drawn, for the six hours I was cleaning. "Please clean the oven" meant the charred remains of some grisly attempt at a meal would be lying in wait for me. "Out this afternoon" meant Rick would come in right before I left smelling of chewing gum and alcohol, bobbing and weaving across the freshly waxed floors.

If a dozen people lived there, all coming and going, six hours

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 33 3/10/10 5:50 PM

wouldn't have been enough time to clean the whole house. But these two people didn't really need a cleaning lady, which led me to wonder why they hired me to begin with. I dusted the tables, made the (his and hers) beds, wrestled with the impossible-to-clean reversible pleather/corduroy cushions on their couch, and packed away Styrofoam to-go cartons and pizza boxes into large garbage bags. In the kitchen, foil take-out pans and doggie bags were arranged like an eager student's piles of books in a library. Some stacks were scattered across a cutting block; others were crammed into a refrigerator the size of a bank vault until they went bad. Again, we communicated by note. Food boxes were color-coded with tiny "sticky" notes, telling me what to pack away and what to dispose of, uneaten, untouched. Unused dishes, glasses, copper pans, and silverware were cleaned and polished twice a week. Three of the five beds were never slept in, but I stripped and remade every one of them. The six bathrooms were the most trouble. Each had dried stalactites of vomit and blood around the rims and on the bases of the toilets. To get these clean you need to scrub and scratch with your fingertips while the rest of your body's crouched in a runner's starting hunch, motionless above.

When I finished my assigned chores, there was an hour or two left over that I didn't want to cheat the Calhouns out of. I sorted the stacks of unopened mail and the towers of unread, outdated magazines and catalogs stuffed into overflowing wicker baskets, arranged the dozens of small trinket boxes on shelves, dusted the unused candlesticks and china, and swept dust bunnies off the cool marble floors.

It was one of these extra jobs that led to our first conversation. It had been eight—maybe nine?—months since I started cleaning their house. It may have been as long as a year. I can't be sure, because when you spend your life waiting, time *no me importa.* (I know this word *waiting* has two meanings in English, and I mean it both ways. Either I am waiting *on* someone, serving them, or I am waiting *for*

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 34 3/10/10 5:50 PM

someone, to answer a question, to give me freedom, to love me.) Mrs. Calhoun came into the kitchen holding a magazine.

"Did you," she said and clenched the magazine into a rolled-up wand. "The magazines," she said, "some of them are . . . did you . . ."

"I don't understand," I said.

She slapped the flattened magazine in front of me. She pointed at it and grunted "Uh-huh." Then she pointed at the trash can and grunted "Uh-uh."

"Magazines, yes," she said, clutching it to her chest. "Trash, no. Understand?"

"Magazines yes, trash no?" I asked.

"Yes. Magazines, yes, trash no," she shouted.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Calhoun. I thought you finish them."

"Oh, you, you understand," she stammered. "You knew what I was . . . I'm, I'm sorry." She tossed the magazine on the ground and ran out of the kitchen. I went through the rest of my cleaning routine on tiptoe until the day was over.

I wanted to apologize before going home, but I couldn't find Mrs. Calhoun. Then I heard a low whirring sound coming from a rear unused bedroom near the three-car garage. Mrs. Calhoun was lying in bed wearing a knee-length lavender bathrobe, open down the middle, with a large white baton between her legs. She moved her arm in broad circles, tossing her head back and flicking her blond hair against the headboard, the sound it made like rain lashing a window. This wasn't shocking to me; I'd done this many times since Hector left, with ribbed corncob holders, candles, and a special, hand-carved "happy stick" a *curandera* sold me, but never with anything mechanical. I was ashamed because I was stealing pleasure away from her, the pleasure she got from being alone. I backed out of the room but jerked the door too fast, slamming it shut. Halfway down the hall, I heard the noise stop and her bedroom door open. Her bathrobe was tied tight, her face flushed, her hair stringy and frazzled. She

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 35 3/10/10 5:50 PM

had balled her fists up as if to fight someone, but there was a weird, crooked smile on her face, ready to collapse into laughter at the silliness of two women being ashamed at sharing the secret of how unnecessary men are.

A handwritten note on the dining room table was waiting for me on my next cleaning day. It was too long to make sense of it on my own, so I asked Aurora to translate. She read the unsigned note in a slow, halting voice:

Felicia,

I am uncomfortable with having to say "good morning" every day when you arrive. I feel I can't start my morning routine until I say "good morning" to you in return.

My morning schedule works on a very specific timetable. I use an electric toothbrush, and it's set on a two-minute timer. I'll be brushing my teeth, and my mouth will be full of toothpaste, and I can't say anything to you when you say "good morning" because there's toothpaste in my mouth, but you keep saying "good morning" until I respond. If I interrupt that process, the toothbrush doesn't reset for another two minutes, and that wastes time.

I don't need to know you're here. Just start working.

"What are you doing over there?" Aurora asked. "Walking around and bothering Rick's wife like you do me?"

When I arrived the following cleaning day, Mrs. Calhoun was lying on a chaise that had been moved inside and set next to the sliding glass doors that looked out on the grotto. Jacaranda trees sprouting white, unripened buds shaded the water. I unfolded the sheet of paper I'd begged Aurora to write out for me and tried to remember how she pronounced the words, which she refused to do more than a couple times because she said I'd never learn otherwise.

"Mrs. Calhoun," I said, "this is my answer to your letter," though *answer* was the wrong word, because Mrs. Calhoun hadn't asked me

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 36 3/10/10 5:50 PM

a question. She didn't want a back-and-forth conversation. I used the slow, dramatic "give me one last chance" voice Hector used whenever he begged me to take him back.

"I'm sorry I walked in on you during your 'happy time,'" I said with difficulty, eyes focused on the paper. "I won't say 'good morning' to you anymore, but please no more lies about your teeth brushing. My daughter read your note, and I don't want her to think her mother isn't doing her job."

The words didn't sound angry like they would have in Spanish, didn't poke through the air with the same fire or conviction. I stood there, having emptied my paper but not my thoughts, shuddering with anger at being humiliated in front of my daughter and fearful that what I'd said sounded much worse to Mrs. Calhoun's ears than to mine.

When neither of us said anything, I started cleaning the kitchen, banging pots and slamming cabinets, working twice my normal speed throughout the house, expecting Mrs. Calhoun to march over at any moment and fire me. By the time I had stuffed the vacuum cleaner in the closet without wrapping up its cord, I couldn't tell whether she was even at home. When I grabbed my purse to dig out my bus pass, I found a slip of notepaper inside. Written in large letters, the words were easy for me to understand: "Would you have lunch with me?"

With uncharacteristic patience, Aurora prepped me for our lunch. She told me what questions she thought Mrs. Calhoun would ask, and what answers I should give in reply. "Whatever she asks," Aurora said, "lie. If she asks you how you're feeling, it's always 'I'm feeling great.' Americans are never honest at lunch or in the bedroom. I learned that on *Dynasty,*" she said, a TV show about rich, catfighting white women she loved to memorize quotes from.

With a change of clothes on a wire hanger in a plastic bag, I came

in the Calhouns' home without saying "good morning." It felt wrong to enter a house this way, *como una ladrona.* Is this how criminals and cheating men feel when they invade a home? Is this how Hector felt?

The sound of running water was coming from the bathroom next to the kitchen. Steam and heat poured out the door, and every surface was damp with condensation. The water was hitting something in the tub. Behind the shower curtain near the drain was a large mound of bright pink and yellow flesh the size of a baby, frothing under a stream of hot water.

What I remember next is a firm hand patting my face and rubbing my cheeks. The water had been turned off. Mrs. Calhoun was kneeling by my side, panic-breathing as she tried to revive me.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You saw the turkey and passed out," she said.

"Turkey?"

"I'm so embarrassed," she said and lifted me up onto the toilet seat. "I bought a big frozen turkey. A turkey," she repeated louder, pointing to the tub. Americans always think you will understand them if they talk loud enough. Through the curtains I saw the pale, wrinkled yellow skin, smelled the undercooked meat.

"I put it in the fridge to thaw it out. But it didn't thaw. I thought if I ran the turkey under hot water, it would thaw out. This was supposed to be our lunch," she said.

"For us?" I asked. "Big, too big, Mrs. Calhoun. This is for ten people, not two."

"I ruined all this food," she cried. "What do I do?"

"I can cook," I said. "I will make the food."

"No, you can't cook," she said.

Offended, I said, "I'm a good cook, Mrs. Calhoun."

"I mean you can't cook when I invited you to lunch," she said.

"There may be some leftovers," I said. "In your boxes, in the kitchen."

"I can't serve you leftovers. But we could order something in," she

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 38 3/10/10 5:50 PM

said, dabbing at her eyes. "Order in? You know, delivery? We call," she said, motioning with her fingers on an imaginary phone, "and they bring the food to us. I have menus. Lots and lots of menus."

Mrs. Calhoun leapt to her feet and ran to the kitchen. She rummaged through a utensil drawer and spread out on the counter dozens of glossy, colorful take-out menus. "Whatever meal you want," she said, "we can get it here. Thai, Greek, Mexican . . . um, maybe not Mexican."

She pointed to the menus and suggested different dishes, most of whose names I didn't understand. I nodded when she said "pizza," and she circled a couple of items from a yellow-and-black checkerboard menu.

"My address is on the back," she said. "Their number's at the top of the menu."

"Number?" I asked.

"Yes, to call, to order. Order?" she said and made the same dialing motion with her hand.

"Oh, no, I make a mistake," I said.

"It's easy," she said. "I circled what we're going to eat. Say your name, the address, and give them the numbers. It's easy."

"You should call," I said. "I make a mistake."

"Felicia," she said, and her mood blackened in an instant. "If we are going to have lunch, you are going to have to call. You have to learn how to ask for what you want in English, too." She left me in the kitchen to dial the phone in private.

An annoyed woman took my order and told me how much the meal would cost (twenty dollars for two people—an incredible expense). I changed into my lunch outfit—a simple long-sleeve blouse with an ankle-length skirt—and went to help Mrs. Calhoun set the table.

"You're dressed for church!" She laughed. "This wasn't going to be anything fancy."

"I see. I can change back."

"No, I mean you didn't have to go to any trouble. God, no wonder I hate talking." She finished setting the paper plates and utensils on a rectangular white dining room table next to the sliding glass doors overlooking the grotto. "Let's have a drink while we wait for the food." She poured white wine into two etched glasses from the china cabinet and handed me one.

"Isn't Los Angeles beautiful?" she asked, pointing outside, from behind the glass.

"Yes," I said. "Maybe we eat outside? It's a warm day, very beautiful outside."

"Too hot," she said. "I don't enjoy going out there. Better indoors with the air conditioner. Keeps us cool," she said, rubbing her forearms.

"What about your pool?" I asked.

"No, no," she murmured. "If I got in that pool, I'd never want to come out of it." She paused. "How was calling in the order?" she asked, dialing her imaginary phone.

"Yes, easy," I said. "Too expensive, though, too expensive. I am fine with a sandwich."

"How about a turkey sandwich? We have a lot of that," she said, and we laughed. "See how easy that call was?" she asked.

"I like to speak English," I said. "But it's hard to learn."

"We have the opposite problems. I hate to talk, no matter what the language is. I can get you English lessons on cassette tape," she said and sipped her wine, a big gulp. "You can learn English while you clean."

"That would be very nice," I said and figured it was okay to sip my wine, too. The drink made my cheeks flushed, and I felt hot. There was a pause in our conversation, and we both glanced at each other and the pool many times, while I waited for her to speak.

"You need a Walkman. You have Walkman?" she asked, putting her hands over her ears and bobbing her head up and down.

"Oh yes, my daughter, she has Walkman."

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 40 3/10/10 5:50 PM

"How old is your daughter?" she asked.

"Twelve," I said. "Straight A student, speaks English very good. Too good. She forgets her Spanish. Her English is much better than mine. But she doesn't help me practice."

"Why not?"

"We do not talk a lot."

"Well, she's at that age. Isn't she? Don't girls go through a 'phase'?"

"We used to talk, like friends."

"I don't think I ever left that phase. Talking's overrated. Silence is better. Silence can bring people together."

"Silence with my daughter is good?"

Mrs. Calhoun stared out at the grotto. "What you don't say can mean more than what you *do* say. Look at us. You have a hard time with English and I don't know any Spanish. But we get along great. Appreciate the silence between you and your daughter. She's angry, but in time . . ."

"She has no reason," I said. "No reason to be angry."

"Maybe she's upset over that shooting. It sounded like a terrifying moment," Mrs. Calhoun said. "That poor girl who was killed."

"My daughter was never in danger. Never."

"How about you?" Mrs. Calhoun asked. "How did you feel about what happened?"

"How did I feel?"

"Yes, how do you feel now?"

I remembered what Aurora told me. "I'm feeling great."

Mrs. Calhoun had a strange, confused grimace on her face, and I wasn't sure if I'd communicated what I meant to say.

The doorbell rang, and she slid over two twenty-dollar bills. "One for the meal, one for the tip."

"Twenty-dollar tip? No, too much."

"It's fine, Felicia. Answer the door," she said and gazed back out at the grotto. The jacaranda tree's blossoms were almost in bloom, and a breeze was swaying its branches over the water. When I returned

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 41 3/10/10 5:50 PM

with two small pizza boxes, Mrs. Calhoun hadn't moved. Inside each box was a pizza the size of a flour tortilla. How did white people get away with charging so much for so little? I slid the pizzas from their cardboard boxes to paper plates and sat across from Mrs. Calhoun.

I don't remember how much time passed or how much more wine I sipped before I asked, "Mrs. Calhoun, why do you not like to talk?"

We sat by the sliding glass windows in silence, watching the dangling white baby bell blossoms shudder on the boughs of the tree.

The next cleaning day, a Walkman and a box of *¡Inglés Ahora!* tapes were on the dining room table along with an open invitation to lunch. My routine gave me time to listen and memorize the tapes; the lunches, time to practice. My improving English led to longer and more interesting conversations, but they didn't grow more personal. I was no better able to ask about her troubles, or share troubles of my own. Our chats were mirages, appearing to offer a kind of connection or friendship if I answered things correctly, then yanked away as she ran to another part of the house to retch behind a closed door or curl up on a bed and not move for hours or retreat to a bedroom when the doorbell rang.

What we did best together was share space. While I scoured the counters or washed windows, she'd sit nearby, often on that corduroy couch dressed in nothing more than her lavender bathrobe, and watch MTV with the sound off. Sometimes I'd watch along with her while I cleaned and saw music videos with ladies wearing nothing but underwear. These videos also had unbelievable stories to explain why the ladies were in their underwear. I laughed at most of them but would stop and watch whenever they played the video for a song called "Borderline" by Madonna. I didn't understand what the words in the song meant, but the video was a little movie about a Mexican woman not forgetting where she came from. I liked that.

Mrs. Calhoun seemed afraid to be alone. And I think I felt all this

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 42 3/10/10 5:50 PM

silence wasn't healthy for her. Rick was never around, and whenever I tried talking to Mrs. Calhoun to break her silences, I'd be left standing there flushed and aggravated, unable to find the words I needed to have a real conversation with her. It was life with my ex-husband again, where silence was as close to honesty as you got.

Mrs. Calhoun was in the bedroom with a direct view of the grotto when I came in to practice another conversation with her. She was sitting on the bed in a stiff, upright Barbie doll pose, staring out the window.

"Mrs. Calhoun," I said. "I would like to have a talk with you."

"Your English has improved," she said. "Do you know that?"

"No," I said. "I try to listen more than I talk, but thank you."

"Do you know what day it is today, Felicia?" she asked.

"Wednesday, Mrs. Calhoun."

"It's the last day of spring."

"Yes, I see. But I would like to have a talk with you."

"I know what the reason is," she said. "My husband promised your daughter a pool party." She stared out the window again. "You can't start summer without a pool party."

"I would like to talk about another thing."

"We'll have it this weekend. Have Aurora invite all her friends. My husband will be there to make sure everyone has fun." Where would Mrs. Calhoun be, I wondered, since I'd never seen her leave the house once.

"Mrs. Calhoun," I said, "no, you don't understand me."

"We can talk at the party," she said and lay down on a pillow.

"No," I said, and again, the English words failed me. In Spanish, I could make a man tremble, force a woman to bite her tongue. But not in English. *¡Inglés Ahora!* didn't have those kinds of exercises. "No," I said, "no, give me one minute, please."

"I want quiet right now," she said.

"No," I whispered, because she said she wanted quiet. And I left in silence because silence was what I thought she needed.

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 43 3/10/10 5:50 PM

* * *

Aurora invited an even mix of boy and girl friends to take the bus with her on a warm Saturday up to Los Feliz, spoiling them with the promise of pizza *and* bus fare to and from the party. I was furious and insisted she had to use her piggy bank money to get everyone there. The driver who flirted with me was working that Saturday, and I asked if he could give Aurora a deal on the bus fare for twelve kids. He said they could ride for free if I went out on a date with him. Aurora overheard me refuse and called me a bitch as she dumped her piggy bank into the fare box.

When we arrived, Rick shook my hand, patted Aurora on the head, and after asking if any older boys were coming, pointed the children to a pool house for them to change. Aurora huddled with her best friend, Duchess, who wasn't swimming and didn't seem to enjoy the surroundings, while the other children took turns diving into the pool. Water splashed on the jacaranda tree's green fronds overhead, dampening the bright violet blossoms that peeked out from its branches.

Mrs. Calhoun watched the party from behind the sliding glass doors. "Come outside," I said through the glass. "Beautiful day." She smiled and waved her hands no, as if swatting away a fly.

"Can't overprotect her," Rick said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Nobody can make her live a life."

"You are her husband," I said. "You can help her find a different life."

"I thought I did that when I married her." Rick laughed. "Listen, I want to ask you. I'm getting into the club business and need men who want to work. Where can I find some young, strong Mexican men?"

"You are asking me?" I snorted. "When you find one, let me know. I have a daughter that needs raising."

Around lunchtime, a young Mexican arrived hefting six "real"

pizzas (not flour tortilla size) wrapped in a plastic tie strap atop his shoulders as though he was a pack mule. Rick led him over by the pool, instructing him to drop the boxes amid a ring of deck chairs. I thought I saw Mrs. Calhoun say something, but the sliding doors were closed and there was no one inside for her to talk to.

Fat drops of sweat plopped on the pizza boxes while the delivery boy set up paper plate and napkin place settings. Rick shadowed him, touching his forearms while he leaned over a table to grab a stack of napkins, whispering in his ear before he went back to the van for the rest of the food. When he returned, the delivery boy pointed at his watch.

"This guy needs to get going, Felicia," Rick said. "I think I left my wallet in my swim trunks. Finish setting the food out, will you?"

The delivery boy dumped a stack of Styrofoam boxes in front of me on the table and was walking with Rick to the pool house when the sliding glass doors opened.

"No!" Mrs. Calhoun shouted.

The kids stopped laughing and playing. She took two small steps outside.

"Don't touch a thing, Felicia. *He,*" she said, pointing at either Rick or the delivery boy, who were standing side by side, "is to finish what he started."

She went back inside and slammed the glass door shut, disappearing into the house. Rick ran to the pool house for his wallet while the delivery boy sulked by the table. He counted up Rick's money and stormed off to his van with that arrogant postargument strut my husband used whenever he knew he was wrong. I called the kids over to eat and brought two slices to Mrs. Calhoun's room.

Outside her window, the blossoms fell, a steady rain into the pool. Mrs. Calhoun was lying in a curled ball on her bed with her shoes on.

"Good morning," I said and walked over to her nightstand, where I placed the pizza.

"Good morning," I said and took off her shoes.

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 45 3/10/10 5:50 PM

"Good morning," I said and knelt by her side.

Mrs. Calhoun smiled. "Good morning," she said.

"Would you have lunch with me?" I asked.

"Yes, I will," Mrs. Calhoun said. We ate together as the sounds of a dozen children and my daughter's laughter, something I hadn't heard since the shooting, echoed through the house.

Alma Guerrero was a three-year-old girl who lived with her mother in a rough part of Echo Park, on East Edgeware Road. It was in the heart of a patchwork of hills blistered with junkyards and tin shacks made from leftover metal sheared off from the remains of disassembled World War II aircraft. This area belonged, at any one moment, to the street gangs White Fence, 18th Street, 13th Street, Diamond Street, Echo Park *Locos*, and perhaps the most terrifying gang in East Los Angeles, the Department of Urban Reclamation for the City of Los Angeles, which had marked off the land for a multimillion-dollar super high school/shopping mall/condominium complex that took years to construct and, a month after its inauguration, was condemned for being built atop a toxic stew of cancerous sludge that had steeped underground for years.

Alma used to dance with her mother outside El Guanaco, a *mercado* near Angelino Heights that sold rock-hard Twinkies, Colt 45s, and homemade tacos and burritos in the back. She and a half dozen other girls and their mothers gathered there on the corner spontaneously, then every Friday afternoon, when I recognized El Guanaco in Madonna's music video for "Borderline." In the video, Madonna, dressed as a classic "Low Rider" *chola* in a forties-style hair bonnet, white wife-beater, long drape coat, and baggy pants that came up past her waist, had been kicked out of her *gringo* photographer boyfriend's fancy loft for spray-painting a streak on his sports car. Out on "her" streets again, Madonna walks past El Guanaco and is welcomed into the arms of her *cholas* hanging outside, who realize she has not

abandoned her *chicas* or her 'hood. They walk into the *mercado,* and after a selection at the jukebox, Madonna dances into the arms of her former boyfriend, a young Mexican guy who has pined for her throughout the video and represents the Mexican roots, the Mexican *life* she cannot turn her back on.

It started when I invited Ana Gomez from church to a *tienda descuenta* that had MTV inside to attract business, to try on new two-dollar dresses. When the video came on, I saw El Guanaco and pointed it out to Ana. It was visible on-screen for a few seconds, but she was as delighted as I was to see a place we walked by every day on television. There was something magical about it, a place in our neighborhood worthy of being on TV, and not because someone had been shot or killed. We agreed it would be fun to bring our daughters there, like a free tourist attraction we didn't have to travel hours on the bus to see. Aurora wouldn't come, but Ana's daughter did. Two mothers became three, then four. One sweltering Friday afternoon in April, seven mothers—the biggest gathering yet—met on the street corner outside El Guanaco with their daughters. I dragged Aurora there that day; being the oldest, she towered over the other girls dressed in their own Madonna-style outfits. Mothers and girls chatted together on a street corner in what was considered a dangerous part of town day or night, in loud, sassy conversations, both groups wearing acid-washed skirts, see-through mesh tank tops, traffic cone orange spandex tights, aquamarine ankle-high socks, tangerine pumps, shiny silver crucifixes, lace gloves, and black rubber bangle bracelets that were called "promise bracelets" because of the way the bangles were made to crisscross in the shape of a heart across the wrist.

A portable cassette deck was balanced atop a mailbox, playing songs taped off the radio. Beer bottle shards were kicked into the street by unsteady pairs of high heels, and the girls made a runway out of the curb, jumping, singing, and dancing around a streetlight as if it was a maypole. Their mothers stood around them in a circle on

the sidewalk and on the street, clapping their hands to the beat and encouraging each girl to outdance the others *Soul Train* style. Alma wore an adult-size white T-shirt with Madonna's face on it and a pair of hot-pink tights. Her mother had wrapped a black leather belt with a silver hoop buckle around Alma's waist, turning the bottom half of the shirt into a skirt. Alma waved her arms and jumped in place on platform heels until her mother picked her up and swung her around the streetlight in short, ballerina-style arcs.

Over the hills, the smog above East Los Angeles reduced across the sky like skin on a boiling pot of milk. It was sunset, and the mothers decided it was time to go home. I wanted a picture—who would come to a tourist spot without one?—so I unwrapped a cheap Kodak Instamatic camera from its foil wrapper, lined everyone up against El Guanaco's graffitied walls, then dragged over a flirty old *abuelito* in a straw hat who had been sitting on his front porch stoop to take the picture. It'd only take a minute, I promised.

A chorus line of Mexican Madonna daughters knelt in front of their mothers wearing fierce, take-no-shit smiles, except Aurora, who resented being there and resented kneeling in front of me. The idea to come to the corner was mine, to get her out of her room on her spring break and stop her sulking about something that had happened at school, something about a young boy calling her a dirty Mexican and refusing to dance with her at a party.

Come with me, I said. I'll dance with you. There's this place where all the girls dance like Madonna, I said.

Dance on a street corner, Aurora scoffed. Oh, Momma, you don't understand, she said.

On the corner, I asked Aurora, *"Siéntate delante de tu madre, por favor,"* right next to Alma, so she would be the same height as the rest of the girls. Even in her flat sneakers, Aurora would have blocked me out.

"I don't want to," she said in English. "I'm too old to kneel with the little kids. I can stand with the women."

"No eres tan viejo para ser una mujer," I said.

"I'm not a little girl anymore," she said.

There was a "hot and cold" argument between us. I shouted *en español,* Aurora snapped back in English. The mothers grew impatient and demanded the *abuelito* snap the photo.

A short distance away we heard the sounds of sirens and gunfire. In the choppy, rolling valleys of Echo Park, noise boomerangs in many directions. An ambulance siren sounding like it was on the next block could really be half a mile away, or a gunfight could be sending stray bullets right through your front screen door while your ears told you it was somewhere up in the hills. (You could die around here making these mistakes.) While the *abuelito* fumbled with the shutter button, two pairs of headlights approached over the horizon, as if the setting sun had broken into large marbles. Five loud gunshots in quick succession, not firecrackers or popping corn but deep hammer thrusts, cut the fleshy air. The mothers screamed, their voices angry, then terrified as they dragged their girls' baby high heels across the sidewalk to hide. Broken glass splashed across the street like ocean spray.

The mothers threw themselves everywhere, curled up into tight armadillo balls. I tried to throw myself on Aurora, but she squirmed out from under me. Madonna played on the undisturbed tape deck as we rose off the ground. The sound of her voice outdoors, in the wake of the gasp-for-air silence that follows gunfire, and the music box with a synthesized dance beat melody—it was like hearing a beautiful, off-key hymn sung by a child in an empty church.

As we rose off the ground, one mother joked her husband must be starving for dinner to resort to a drive-by shooting to get her to come home. We laughed while plucking flakes of glass off our bodies. No drive-by shooting was going to ruin *our* day out.

Alma was lying on the ground. We all thought she'd fallen and scraped her knee, or was playing dead the way little children do all the time in the *barrio.* When her mother turned her on her side,

blood poured out a small hole in the front of her neck, collecting on the Madonna T-shirt draped across her limp body. She knelt beside her daughter and tried to revive her by breathing into her mouth. Bubbles fizzled out of the wound. Alma's mother ripped off the bottom half of Alma's shirt with Madonna's face and wrapped it around her neck to stop the bleeding.

Crowds gathered on the porches and stoops of the surrounding houses, watching and pointing fingers, their words blending into a long, animated parade of shouts, exclamations, and laughter. Kids ran around in circles and danced to the sound of Madonna's "Borderline" on patches of dirt and weeds that made up their front lawns, oblivious to the dying girl on the sidewalk across the street.

"She doesn't move," Alma's mother said. "The music plays but she doesn't move."

The next day, the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* ran a front-page picture of Alma in a torn Madonna T-shirt that covered her like a bloody shroud with the banner headline BABY MADONNA MURDERED BY HEARTLESS THUGS. This corner was the place, the story said, where "little Mexican Madonna-wannabes gathered and danced with carefree hearts," and "if there was a more vicious crime perpetrated in Los Angeles this year," the *Herald* couldn't think of it. Police sweeps followed, netting dozens of suspects, though never the actual killer; not one of the fifteen witnesses "saw" a thing, and none of their stories matched anyway. Little girls made pilgrimages to the corner where Baby Madonna was shot. They left candles, rosaries, pictures of the Virgin Mary, little bangle bracelets, and as the story spread and girls who lived in big houses from neighborhoods near the ocean came to pay their respects, big pink teddy bears and Madonna albums and posters—things a baby Madonna fan would want in heaven. While these gifts were stripped by covetous mothers at night, picking up the choicest relics for their own daughters—who in turn thought that their offerings had been

taken up to heaven with Alma—for a period of several days the shrine was, according to Mayor Tom Bradley, "a spontaneous outpouring of generosity from the City of Angels."

Over two thousand parishioners stood in line to pay their final respects at La Placita, the oldest Catholic church in Los Angeles. A prominent *mariachi* group donated their services for the procession to Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, and rumor had it that Madonna herself had donated Alma's hot pink with rhinestone trim coffin, along with the plot of land she would be buried in. Baby Madonna was a celebrity whose fame grew after her death, and as a testament to her memory, a mural was commissioned on the side of a building facing the Hollywood Freeway. A girl in a midriff-baring tank top rose out of a *barrio* in flames, carried aloft on a golden musical staff that snaked across the wall until it reached the gates of a pastel pink heaven with smiling clouds and characters from My Little Pony and Care Bears scampering about on a clean and spacious playground with angel wings attached to their backs.

The police report later verified that a stray bullet had ricocheted off a streetlight and severed Alma's spinal cord. The argument between Aurora and me was recalled by many of the other mothers at the scene, and the question was asked: Would the bullet have struck Aurora instead of Alma? Did Aurora kneel before the picture was taken, or was she trying to stand? One angry mother who wanted to cash in on the notoriety the story had built in the press suggested *la limpiadora* (she wouldn't call me by name) threw her girl in the bullet's path in an attempt to save herself. The accusation, if true, could have resulted in child endangerment charges. Aurora and I were called in as witnesses to Parker Center, but our versions of what transpired were so different, our statements were deemed unusable and the case was thrown out. Still the damage was done.

When the *abuelito*'s picture was developed, it was examined by several officers connected with the case. Because the camera was

jerked at the time of the exposure, the image was jumpy, and no two investigators could agree on what they saw. Aurora was either being pulled down by me to kneel or pulling away from me to stand up.

What those policemen couldn't find, though, was something I could already see—a mother and daughter in a strangled embrace, looking for the space our faith had left next to each other to fill.

I'd never get the chance to quit; Rick gave me my two weeks' notice after the pool party. The young Mexican boy who delivered the pizza would do my job for less money. Mrs. Calhoun asked her husband to pass along to me a list of his friends and associates who were looking for housecleaners, and in no time I had work lined up every day of the week. There were many bosses to practice my English on, and while I'd never command the language the way my daughter would, I could speak it as well as a man making a promise—that is, with equal doses of earnestness and desperation, along with enough wiggle room to escape out of a commitment by feigning a misunderstanding ("Three days a week? I'm sorry; I thought you said three hours a week. We will need to renegotiate my fee").

Cleaning other people's houses—their cherished possessions in both good and bad taste, the chipped dishes they eat off of, the ratty sofas they make love on, the unlevel, puckering floors they shed curly hairs on—is the most intimate relationship you can have with them. Yet every boss I've worked for wants that relationship to be unobtrusive to the point of being invisible. I have done my best to live my life in between those two places, intimacy and invisibility. Over the years I've absolved the remains of a thousand indiscretions without judgment, and have learned not to ask questions. Men staying over, friends moving in, children moving out; none of this is my concern. If my job is done right, what you find when you get home is a comforting antiseptic, fresh Band-Aid smell, spotless floors, and no evidence another human being, a cleaning lady, was ever there.

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 52 3/10/10 5:50 PM

Cleaning lady? A hell of a term. There's nothing ladylike about it. To be a good cleaning lady, you must learn to act like a man.

On my last cleaning day, I arrived to find a note from Mrs. Calhoun on the dining room table. I couldn't read it because blinds had been installed on the sliding glass doors and the house was coated in blackness. Opening the blinds for sunlight, I squinted to read the faint handwriting.

"Take the day off," it said. "You deserve it."

On the opposite side, "For Felicia," and a list of her personal items, including the corduroy couch. Confused, I wanted to ask Mrs. Calhoun to explain, but the house was quiet, save for what sounded like rain pelting the sliding glass doors, *drop drop drop*. Through the blinds, I saw the jacaranda tree raining crisp, dazzling violet blossoms from its branches atop a floating body in a lavender bathrobe, its legs together, its arms outstretched as if reaching for something.

I plunged into the cold water, wading through the thick swamp of jacaranda until I reached Mrs. Calhoun's feet. The flowers pounded our bodies, *drop drop drop,* with a sudden violence that blanketed us. Mrs. Calhoun's bathrobe was heavy and her body rigid. My head bobbed for air as I struggled to stay afloat; I was drowning. All around me was the loud roar of water, a sound that still wakes me up in the middle of the night, screaming. I could not carry us both back to the rim of the pool. When I surrendered her body, it floated out to the center of the pool and slid under the thick carpet of fallen flowers.

Beneath a raining jacaranda tree, the blossoms shuddered and fell.

Skyhorse_Madonnas_4P_LR.indd 53 3/10/10 5:50 PM