

Maldita

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Airplanes didn't fly into this town, which left Nadia with the option of getting just close enough to her destination to eject herself out of the main cabin. She took a glimpse out of her window, attempting to peer through the clouds, and caught sight of the familiar blanched water tower that overlooked the village. It was time for her to move. She unbuckled her seatbelt, tied her hair back, and clutched her suitcase to her chest. Placing her hand on the arm rest, she fingered the underside of it and located the soft plastic bulb, that when pushed, would send her on her way. Locking eyes with the moon-faced flight attendant standing in the aisle helped brace her nerves. With a cool head, she flattened the button with her finger, which promptly sent her sliding through a hatchway beneath her feet. Before she knew it, the flight attendant was out of sight.

Her exit wasn't as clean as she'd hoped it would be. Nadia tumbled and gripped her suitcase for dear life while wind ripped over her, making the soft skin around her triceps wave like mud flaps. She looked up, hoping to catch sight of the wide-bodied airliner. Instead of seeing a wandering hulk lumbering through sheets of ice and air, there was only a paltry flyspeck of dark color. Fluttering spaciouly in mid-air, Nadia could see clusters of buildings in the downtown area. She couldn't make out their walls, but she knew they were painted candy pink and etched with scenic murals of townspeople and palm trees. Soon, she could pick out the only mid-

rise building – one sheer black national-bank office that offered the town some cosmopolitan architecture. Flowering, cotton palm trees lined every road and neighborhood, and because of recurring droughts, some trees were barren and dusty, left with only a few corsages stubbornly hanging onto branches. She saw trees folded over like paper cutouts, evidence of other passengers like herself that had arrived in the town by the same terrible fall. All around the town, people had smashed into the plants, causing them to fold towards the rutted dirt. This town had no neighboring towns, nor did it reside within a state. It survived independently and quietly like a dead, homely planet.

Nadia managed to undo the clasp on her large, hard-shelled suitcase. The plan was to climb inside of it; cocooned in the protective case, she'd survive the landing. Because of the speed and the rush of the wind marring her coordination, the doors of her luggage refused to remain open. Seconds from the ground, she could only manage to lodge her head inside the plastic case. Wrought with fear, she froze, and her body kissed the ground at blistering speed.

When she could finally open her eyes, bitter, hard-faced women lingered all around her. They huddled nearby and eyed her contorted body like the fallen *maldita* they thought she was. The old-lady mystics carried bottles of herbs and oils that could thwart *el mal de ojo*, “the evil eye.” They were used to people falling out of the sky. The people of the town called them “straw men,” due to how lifeless and weary the bodies looked after they touched down. Some even thought of them as wretched omens that failed in flying because they were cursed, so god threw them back violently and swiftly to the ground. The full description was “straw men with chapped wings.” The straw men were former residents that escaped the town. Most townspeople were aware that the only reason they returned was due to unresolved business. They were unsure, however, as to how the straw men found their way back.

While Nadia's head rested against the splintered suitcase, the old ladies splashed their potions all over her, while cursing her for being bad luck. They spit and cursed, “*Maldita! Maldita!*” making sure passersby knew the fallen girl was damned. Cascading sheets of dry heat enveloped Nadia, and breathing felt like inhaling and exhaling sand. There was a fully decorated mariachi band crossing the street. The players, wearing thick, pitted ostrich-skin boots

despite the heat scorching them from all sides, casually glanced her way. Peering through the crowd, she read a sign that read, in Spanish, “We vow to kick creeps, thieves, and vultures off your doorstep with our merchandise.” She stood and made her way up the bluff to Quamasia Street.

A featureless cloud draped soundly over the corner of the road. The gloom of the house radiated atop the embattled hill on Quamasia. Before Nadia entered the fog surrounding the house, she noticed what looked like sizeable birds resting on the pipes of the house next door. They were barn owls, with large, white heads and heart-shaped faces watching her every move. There were twelve of them, leaning curiously together like perfectly poised groomsman, quietly observing her as she crossed the blackened sod that led up to the house. The neighboring house was belted in flames. Fire quickly wrapped around bushes and rolled through passages of wood and dirt near a rotted fence, and the birds continued to stare. Nadia realized that they had started the fire. As if to confirm the thought, all twelve owls promptly went eastbound to sit and dawdle on tousled branches. While the fire spread, people from the neighborhood climbed the walls of their houses and sat on the spines of their roofs to watch the flames burn wildly through the lot.

Nadia entered the chilled, dense cloud and became imprisoned in its brume. Each house on Quamasia Street bore a unique atmospheric component, related to the history of the house and its residents. The house directly in front of this one had a sunnier meteorological disposition. That house, drenched in warm sunlight and cool, wet breezes, was owned by a man named Vincent who had round, feminine features and an overall joyful demeanor. Because he was altogether a good person, the clouds that parted above his house revealed a spinning, jeweled sun that graciously tickled the flora surrounding his home. Next to Vincent lived Riya and Octavio, a couple who began their relationship dumb with ecstasy, but, over time, began a swift emotional descent down a dry well. Their lives were now spent sitting and having conversations with the walls instead of each other. They sat dumbstruck, like long-haired cave people, muttering to themselves how much life had changed them, while their house was engulfed by a raging sandstorm. A constant flurry of dust twirled around their property every second of every day. And so on with all of the houses on the block. There were

snowstorms, mudslides, earthquakes, and constant rain that took place every day with certain houses on Quamasia.

As Nadia stepped onto the marbled porch of her childhood home, she immediately felt a dark, tipping silence. All she wanted to do was sleep. The plane ride hadn't allowed for any rest, which left her in a slight stupor and grossly hacked under the eyes. She stood there, waiting in unnerving silence, staring at the black, metal gate fixed to the door. Reluctant to move forward with her plan, she felt ill at the mere sight of the black, curly gate.

The front door was surrounded by, and mostly covered in, thick mud; roots sprang out of the dirt like electrical wires, and she imagined the door as an upright grave. She could hear soft, wet whistling tones coming out from the glistening mud. Then, as dramatically as the fantasy appeared, a curved hand stood out from inside the dirt and taunted her with a muddy glove to enter the house. She felt the urge to flee, to be let loose on young pastures, like a wild, frothing mastodon setting foot on warm prairie grass for the first time. Ignoring her instincts, Nadia did as the curled hand asked and sniffed the would-be grave while hastily being swallowed up by the soil.

As she entered through the muddy portal, she could see a figure at the end of a wide, white hallway. There were what looked like pharmaceutical vials strewn all around the mysterious silhouette. Before Nadia could enter into the den of the house, she foundered knee-deep in an entrenched bog and heard the eerily familiar wet whistling sounds nagging at her every time she put one foot forward. The closer Nadia was to setting foot inside the house, the louder they became. The clamor of the now-constant sirens was near-deafening as she approached the floor of the den. The moment her foot touched the carpet, the sounds ceased.

Nadia was in full pursuit of her bounty. She was prepared for madness that would stalk her through every hushed corridor. She reminded herself that the entities in the house would attempt to distract her from her course. The house, although familiar, had changed since her childhood. The modest, three-bedroom home now stretched wider and longer, which gave it the appearance of a labyrinth with coiled walls. The den was filled with a pale heat. Around the fireplace were eight-inch prayer candles – paraffin candles housed in glass tubes, decorated with the images of assorted

saints. One portrayed a weepy-faced Lady of Guadalupe painted on it. Near the mantel there was a large painting of a light-skinned Christ and a photograph of an old, white-headed Pope John Paul II. Jesus had gold-streaked locks of hair with sprightly rays cast behind his head, which made him look like he was floating through uncharted parts of the universe. Flames rose from the top of Jesus's exposed heart, which was drawn in the middle of his chest.

The cloudy figure at the end of the hallway had disappeared, but in its place stood Narcisso, a *curandero*. Narcisso had stormy red-orange hair that hung on him like an impressive, wild mane, giving him the appearance of a large, but tender, Barbary lion. He wore his shirt with the first few buttons undone, exposing chest hair that looked like kinky, white string. Around his neck, he displayed an array of crucifixes – treasures, all dipped in gold and fastened on long, glittery chains.

Standing at the entrance of Nadia's childhood bedroom, Narcisso spoke.

“Did you bring your allowance?”

“Yes,” Nadia answered. She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out a frayed piece of square film.

“Let's see it then.”

The square piece of film was a Polaroid picture of Nadia with her mother and sister. In the picture, Nadia's mother sat on the floor with her legs crossed, dressed casually with a look of postpartum depression on her face and big, frowning sinews around her mouth. Her mother's hair was dark-bristled and cropped short, which, along with her long, white face, made her look pale and oddly handsome. Nadia was three years old, and her sister was seven; both of them hung on their mother's shoulders waiting for a flash of happiness. The picture captured the girls waiting with affection, complete with wide, stupid grins on their faces. Nadia's mother looked undernourished and underwhelmed about being a new, young mother.

Narcisso accepted the photograph under the condition that Nadia would never get it back. She could hear an operatic trill coming from another room. It was the sound of her mother's high and tremulous voice, which she hadn't heard in years. Nadia and her sister had named it “the devil voice” when they were children. Vowels and consonants tumbled out of her mother's throat, independent of actual words. The flailing, meaningless utterances jutted forward and sped faster like they were on heated rails.

Before she entered the bedroom, Narcisso reminded her, “Remember, girl, in this house, Hell breathes through doorways.”

“I don’t believe in Hell.” And, with that, Nadia entered the room.

The wall immediately overwhelmed her. The wallpaper, which Nadia remembered as being symbolically hopeful as a child, had pastel flowers strewn all over it. The flowers were small white calla lilies and larger scarlet trilliums, choked with tiny bright orchids and fresh healthy leaves. The wallpaper, as lovely as it was, was stamped onto a useless partition that when pushed with just enough force and at just the right angle, would collapse like poorly spun gossamer. The wallpaper went up soon after Nadia’s mother had been released from a clinical-white room, fixed with celestial-blue lighting. For three weeks, her mother stayed in a room and sat atop a rollaway bed in an electric-blue power suit, baring powerful, pale legs, while her eyes, as big as portholes, shed thick, silvery light.

Nadia became entranced by the sight of the wafer-thin wall. She felt inundated by the ghosts of her mother’s bouts – ghosts that were left behind to wallow in the fibers of the brown, shaggy carpet. Images of three people suddenly appeared on the wall. They were absent of color and flickered across the flower wallpaper like pictures discharged from a film projector. The images conjured were of her mother, Narcisso and herself on her old twin bed. Although the images were physically right in front of her and fully realized, the bodies of all three were utterly transparent. Nadia knew immediately what she was seeing: a morning when Narcisso the *curandero* and her mother recruited her to speak in tongues. Nadia’s mother was a devout practitioner, and she always wanted Nadia to do it. Reluctantly, a young Nadia obliged her mother and agreed to have her tongue jockeyed by god. With a bible stuffed in his armpit, a prayer curled out of Narcisso’s mouth. Minutes passed, and nothing happened. “You need to focus harder,” her mother said. *On what?* Nadia remembered thinking. Nadia watched the bewitching, transparent scene unfold and remembered that even at such a young age, she was unable to feign the action. The young Nadia felt like she missed a bright opportunity to connect with her mother. There was part of her that wanted to kneel by her mother’s side and play with the hem of her skirt. *Give me another shot*, Nadia had thought. *I can do it this time. I’ll fake it if I have to.* By not participating in the ordeal, she had embarrassed her mother.

If only she had faked it, her life would have magically intersected with her mother's. She desperately wanted to have her mother's cool, hairless arms embracing her. *Let me have another go and I'll make sparks this time. I'll make comets shoot from my mouth.* If she had had just an extra few moments, Nadia would have bowled them over with spiritual lust. But it was over. The rare opportunity for her to connect slid swiftly down a wet slope.

As Nadia watched, the kink in her chest grew stronger, tighter; the dead place inside of her re-awakened – something that had been dormant since her exodus from the town. The seemingly quiet air churned with green smoke, and the screams that came from the other room turned into faint, raspy purrs. Nadia sensed her mother's disapproving head and felt weak. The dead place, the fear, was tar-filled and pecking at her conscience. The flower wall seemed canted and blurred. Nadia toppled over the side of her droopy twin bed and vomited on the comforter, erasing the transparent vision from the wall. She felt like a beached animal, stuck on the floor of the room, and felt as though she had awoken face down in a sand trap. Lying on her side with a leg outstretched, she felt like the entire room had capsized. Nadia looked up at the skylight in her old room. She knew that there was an intense heat outside, but through the small, rectangular window, the sky looked as though it was filled with freezing, wintry, blue light. She reminded herself why she had taken her breathtaking escape in the first place. In that brief moment of composure, Nadia stood up and walked out into the kitchen.

There stood two aging, yet mighty, guardians howling at each other while twisting nests of snakes wrapped around their feet. Evita and Olga were the original owners of the house, but now took up residence as spiritual cleaning ladies that fought hard to purify the melancholy etched in the foundation. Olga had once been a severe and unyielding fist. She bore seven children. Olga was a large woman – tall and crass with a body that was reminiscent of Big Bird's. The bottom half of her looked like a drum dressed in a bowl-shaped shell. Her name suited her big body well. It was a short name, but big-sounding, almost weighty. *OLGA*. The sound of her name was waterlogged. Like waders stuck in mud and heavy with fish. Her body was pear-shaped and unbearably crouched at the neck. She stood in the kitchen, this huge bird woman blissfully hacking away at a grey cow tongue.

Evita, on the other hand, was pale and wispy, with white hairs slicked back on her narrow head – soft, fine-spun plumes that rested side-swept close to her ears and exposed bald patches at the crown, revealing a tender pink scalp. Over her floral-tipped gauzy nightdress, she wore a Mayan headdress and neck charms. Both guardians had their own aching distressed histories, but put them aside to relieve the misery that overtook the house like weeping vines around its walls. They were dedicated to first finding Nadia's mother, who for years had been hiding somewhere inside the house, and once she was found, they would cure the malady.

Both women turned to Nadia when they realized she was watching them. They spoke to Nadia in Spanish.

“We can help you find your way to her. We can't do it ourselves.” Olga lifted up the bottom of her skirt and revealed an inflamed leg, afflicted with elephantitis. “There's no way we can run around looking for her on our own. This house has grown, and the rooms are too far and wide. There's only so much two deaf old ladies can do.”

“I'm not here for her,” Nadia said with her head angrily hooked forward.

Evita spoke: “You dropped from the sky, risked your life to come back to Quamasia, and for what? If not for your mother, for what then?”

Since entering the house, Nadia had developed healthy, grim folds around her mouth that illuminated her. “I'm not here to help her. There's something I want. Something I wouldn't be able to live without.”

Evita replied patiently, “We can help you find it. Whatever you need, we can help.” Olga and Evita stared directly at Nadia.

“You sacrifice virgins and roosters. You have conversations with the deceased. You perform black magic. Witchcraft.” Nadia spoke with a clipped demeanor.

Olga stood with bison power in her balled-up fists, and Evita stood there, dumbfounded, with her dandelion head. “We don't seek intervention from Satan.” They believed their milder form of witchcraft was part of traditional Mexican folk notions. While it had nothing to do with reason, it also had nothing to do with black magic. It was spiritual mysticism that was integral to the wiring of their families. “We know a lot about you, Nadia. We know how the relationship with your mother began underneath a cloud. We know

about the time you were sick and how desperately you wanted your mother to stay in bed with you.”

It was true. Nadia had been ill and one night her mother crawled into bed with her. Even though her mother had never done anything like that before, Nadia knew it was her when she reached over and fingered the latent curvature of her mother’s hips. She could also recognize her mother’s frayed nightgown and hairless arms. Instead of sleeping that night, Nadia daydreamed while her mother gingerly caressed the knobs of her spine. Most times, Nadia couldn’t wait for the woman to leave the room. But suddenly, that night, everything changed. Nadia thought of her mother in watercolors – cozy pastels that made her effortless. Her mother was, for a night, pale pink and yellow, watermarked and altogether breathtaking. She was no longer an overbearing witch with boldness sputtering out of control. The woman lying next to Nadia was a rose-colored saint. She was a pencil sketch coated in a gold wash that made everything look like a bonfire.

“We know how giddy you were when she acted so maternal towards you. You thought if you moved, she would leave and suddenly the brightness of that night would dim. We know about the dream you had about her while she coddled you.”

Olga and Evita knew everything. It was true. In Nadia’s dream, they sailed along a river and ate catfish out of a glove. Layers of bay mud stretched across beltways of estuaries. Everything was breezy, and the coolness of her mother’s display was so deeply gratifying that Nadia didn’t realize how fleeting it was.

Evita chimed in, “You felt like a blushing, wet dog – pitiful but satisfied. You wrote that in your journal later on. Do you remember that? You thought, *don’t leave, mother*. You thought if she left, she would never return. You wrote it all down right here in this diary.” Evita held up the lavender ringed binder that held everything Nadia had ever written since she was eight years old.

“How did you find that,” Nadia asked. “I thought I took that with me when I left.”

“No. You left a lot of things here,” Olga said.

“You thought your mother would be usurped, taken into the mist of a foggy morning and swept into the humidity’s biting air,” Evita added.

Nadia spoke. “Yes. I thought she would be blown down stairs of

a drafty cellar and wedged, corked, deep within the body of the sun. And the sun would sit, not winking or spinning, sustaining life on Earth, like a mother horned owl. I thought she'd be gobbled down by the heat and forever out of my grasp. I thought all of that, and I was right for thinking it."

"Remember that feeling you had, Nadia, when you felt your mother's heart beating right underneath her ribs. Remember how dreamily you wandered outside your bedroom the next morning into the kitchen. *The room was streaked ...*"

"*With auric bars of sunlight*, yes. I wrote it. I remember," Nadia bit back. "Don't pretend to know everything when all you did was read my journal."

"We've never opened your journal. We just know," Olga said.

"It doesn't mean anything anymore. She was taken. Look at her now, frolicking around the house, barking between rooms, just so we can go looking for her. Well, I'm not looking for her anymore. I want what I came here for, that's all."

"You came for more than just that picture," Evita said.

"How do you know about that? If you're not witches and you don't practice black magic, how did you know about the picture?"

"We know because your mother knows, and the wailing that you hear beyond this room and the next are not mere sounds. Her sounds aren't just mushy piles of words. She's been telling the story of your beloved photograph for years now. She tells the entire house about this item you're so fond of – the material thing that, for you, waits in some princely setting and basks in a sun-drenched glow. You care more about this than –"

"You don't know anything. You don't know her. She had her shot. Everything was scraped red and laced with black-licked swatches. The tantrums, the tedium, all rooted in pure delirium. We tended to her maniacal needs and her heinous roars. She was always so doped up and swallowed whole by chemicals. Her body was raided by medication and her mind dragged across spiked rails. She scared us, don't you see? She'd be there with her big, oversized glasses, painting her face with lipstick and terrifying us with that awful, comatose look she'd get when the dosage was too high. Her eyes bulged and glassed over, and the medication slackened her jaw in the most frightening way. Still, we were there and we saddled up to take it in the chest. I would have done anything for her. If anyone had hurt her, I would have bitten back like a loyal, protective dog.

But that's over now."

"There's something small we'd like to do for you." Evita walked over to the counter and grabbed a carton.

"What is it?" Nadia asked.

"We want to open you up. See what's inside that mind of yours and then hold it up to you." Olga took out a white egg from the carton.

"You're not fattening me up with mysticism. I don't believe in *curanderismo* or anything like that."

"We don't need you to believe anything. We just want to see what you have inside, that's all."

Evita and Olga didn't have the power to be senior shape-shifters yet. They were able to transform themselves into small creatures like owls or cats, but they couldn't transform themselves into other human beings yet. Along with that, their specialties were in enthusiastic spiritual cleansings. They were energetic in warding off noxious and harmful emotional afflictions. In the tradition of Mexican folk healers, they commonly used raw eggs or lemons to massage over the distressed victim. If they used an egg, they would rub it all over the body while laboriously praying, concentrating heavily on the head. After the massage, the egg was cracked into a glass of water and left underneath the person's bed overnight. It was left to absorb the residual badness as the person slept.

Nadia obliged. "Go on with your Mexican sorcery. Just this once."

"You know, Nadia," Evita spoke while she, taking turns with Olga, rubbed the raw egg over Nadia's arms and back, "what you experienced was nothing compared to the blood-soaked earth and the ravages that have taken place all over the world. What you went through in this house was a speck of human folly, a domestic tragedy that would have eventually disappeared. But now..."

"But now what?" Nadia asked.

"But," Evita continued, "you've taken it with you outside of this town, and you walk around with a queer stink about you. It's now tied deep down into your cells."

Kneeling on her inflamed leg, Olga grunted. "We're almost finished, girl."

There was an orgy of sounds oscillating from one room to another as the egg ritual took place.

With the help of Evita's shoulder, Olga lifted herself off the

floor, grabbed a glass, and filled it with water. She set it down on the cutting block while Evita cracked the egg on the counter. As soon as the white of the egg touched the top of the water, a great shawl of flame hurdled into the kitchen from inside the oven fan and wavered near the ceiling for only a few seconds. After the fire dissipated, Nadia, Olga, and Evita looked back at the cutting block and watched as light filled the glass and illuminated the egg.

“What’s going on?” Nadia asked.

“Just watch. This is a rare treat for us, too. The last time something like this happened was before you were born.” Evita’s glance remained fixed on the glass and wide smiles spread across her and Olga’s faces.

A great mist filled the glass, and within it, a wiry body could be made out. The thin limbs flailed, and the small person blissfully tottered around a white, unbound playing field. When it reached the edge of the field, the light inside the glass came down and created a moment of thinning darkness. When the lights came on again the wiry figure was gone, and in its place was Nadia’s mother. She wore her auburn hair high on her head, which suited her long, white face and oversized glasses. The mist cleared some more, and Nadia could see her mother resting on a pier. Instantly, she knew it was a vacation she and her family spent at the beach. Her mother sat there, remaining off to the side, chafed and sunburned. She shriveled up underneath a baseball cap and huddled for shade. Her fair skin had red, mottled patches that made her neck and legs look scalded. Nadia’s mother moaned incessantly on the surf-softened planks, her head swooning from the ocean air. Nadia looked away from the glass.

“What were you expecting?” asked Olga.

“Not this,” Nadia said.

“You expected to see her as a white-skinned brawler, right? Savagely waving her tomahawk while ransacking the house – decimating everything in her path,” Evita said.

“Something like that, yes.”

When Nadia looked back at the glass, she saw herself at eight years old, obsessively caressing her mother’s shoulder, trying to get her to talk. The eight-year-old Nadia cupped her mother’s chin and pulled her face close to hers.

“I don’t want this. I don’t want to see this anymore,” Nadia said.

“What do you want?” Evita asked.

“I want to be with my sister in the gold-colored car that we took on a joyride when we were children. My sister drove us with the windows rolled down. We were let out of our pens that day, marking the neighborhood with hijacked wheels.”

“You wanted to escape the house again, is that it?” Olga moaned.

“Yes. We did it right and let our tongues hang loose out of our mouths, feeling like we’d gotten away with something. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.” Evita said.

Nadia recalled aloud her own rendering of the event from her diary, written years after the fact: *“We were two baby savages licking the traces of freedom that were all around us. It was childish, but entirely compelling. We had made our way out of the house, out from underneath our mother’s suicide threats. This breathtaking escape was brief, but well worth what we endured as punishment. We drove in bright daylight, stirring the bucket without any remorse for our actions. Golden sunlight washed over the little car that itself was nearly as bright. We drove through sheets of sunlight that traced the gravel around Quamasia, fantastically ignorant of the repercussions.”*

“But you eventually had to return to the house,” Olga reminded her.

“That doesn’t matter. The joy of the car ride is what matters. The anger that made our mother look bug-eyed and fish-lipped was irrelevant.”

“Exactly,” Evita said.

“What are you trying to prove?” Nadia asked.

Olga explained, “Always escaping, always avoiding.”

“Your mystical hoopla never solved anything. What? You think rolling up trinkets inside of a cow tongue is going to heal this place? You think garlic cloves underneath your bed and spraying the house with holy water is going to help? Your ‘Gypsy and the Wind’ notions, your parchment moon and poetic silvery swarms have done absolutely nothing to rid those horrific sounds coming from my mother’s blasted throat. If you’re so great at gripping unattainable stars with your magic, how come you haven’t found her in this forsaken mess?”

“At least we try to ease her might. You, you just run away,” Olga continued.

“I left because I would have killed her. I was a teenaged, pimple-faced cave person that wanted to put her out of her misery. Put us out of our misery! I imagined myself with adrenaline-fueled strength, breaking the skinny bridge of her bulbous red-tipped nose, or kicking her head so hard it would shatter like an exploding bust of cold, brittle marble. In my wildest fantasies, I wanted to send her to *La Petaca*, the witches’ district, where they’d leave her tied to a metal fence like a twisted goat, while the devil prodded her with his horns.”

Olga looked tight-lipped and glared at Nadia. Her arms looked like thick stalks jutting out of her tiny sleeves. “Get out,” she said.

“Before you go, Nadia,” Evita said, “we never answered your question. We have the power of magic, and we devote our lives to healing her, but she doesn’t want us to find her. She makes it difficult with all of her careening in and out of rooms, but, stubbornly, we try.” Evita finished wrapping the grey muscle in starchy white paper and placed it in the freezer. “We’ll never stop trying.”

Nadia traveled through blank corridors and closely followed the sounds of her mother’s voice. At times, her mother would stop shrieking, making Nadia take greater risks with the paths she chose. She turned her head into a room that was otherwise empty except for a wooden desk. In the middle of the room, she found a man with his back facing her. From behind, he almost looked like a little boy. When he turned around, the front of him was droopy. His midsection looked pudgy and misshapen. His face was covered in a long, reddish beard. The room was warm, and he stood there in the moist heat, red-faced and dripping wet. On the desk was a series of paintings of Elijah, from the Bible, taken on a whirlwind and racing to Heaven in a fiery carriage; Elijah in the wilderness; and Elijah with his blessed juniper tree.

“You know,” the red-faced man said, “there are sidewalks in Heaven.”

Nadia remained still.

“Yes, there are sidewalks in Heaven,” he echoed, “but somehow, the longer I stay here, the idea of them seems to be slipping away – sliding out of scene.”

Nadia kept quiet. Without another word, the bearded man

calmly walked to his desk and kicked the wall. Nadia was scared and took several steps backwards. With his pointy foot, the small man banged the wall over and over again until, finally, a round panel opened up, revealing a rock-ribbed tunnel. With his ruddy beard drenched with sweat, the man spoke again, "Have you ever seen how lovely trees look in winter?" Nadia remained wide-eyed and curious about the fresh hole in the wall. "I especially like the way the boles look like they've been jammed into the ground by god. No, no, not god anymore – giants," he said. The man's frantic stare made Nadia worry about traveling through the passageway that would lead her deeper into the house. Looking cock-eyed in her direction, he pointed to the wall and said, "Don't worry. It's like sledding down a winding, dusty road. You'll be just fine."

8