

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

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**Breathing Room**

THE MOMENT EVA LEARNED OF PANCHO'S IMPENDING VISIT, the preparations began.

"I have a surprise for you," Pancho had said, over the phone, as if his sudden advent weren't surprise enough.

"What is it?" asked Eva, never one not to appreciate a surprise, as long as it wasn't unexpected.

"You'll see when I get there," Pancho assured her.

"When will that be?"

"Saturday. Well, maybe Sunday."

Today was Saturday, there would be time to call upon that fatalism so often called upon in Mexico, for, as everyone, including Eva, knew, seeming incidents and apparent episodes would fall—nay, lock—into place as relentlessly after the event...or non-event...as they had before.

However, never one to be caught unprepared, Eva, who lived alone now that the last generation was good and gone, every one of them—with the exception of Mamá, whose imminent return from up north...from whose bourne few travelers were able to tear themselves away...was what caused the excitement—informed all living members of her own generation of the upcoming occasion and proceeded to sanitize, if not sanctify, the family house.

It seemed Mamá had been gone forever, though, evidentemente, it was only a handful of years, if counted in months and weeks, if not days, by those who missed her. Eva could still appreciate her sensible suggestions, often enough delivered with a half-smile, just so you'd know it was coming, one corner of her mouth up, the other down...

'Men are stronger than women,' Mamá would say. 'Therefore we must all, be a little, at times, shall we say, indirect, in order to get what we want. Without seeming to, you might let them go without a little something they might want. Need I say more?'

'No, Mamá, you've made yourself perfectly clear.'

At the memory of Mamá's voice, Eva, leaning into her mop, worked all the harder.

The walls, especially in the kitchen, needed a coat of paint, which she was quick to apply and, before it was half dry, she had swiped the dining room table, got out the best needlepoint tablecloth, polished and set the family silver and washed, dried to a shine and...hoping it would not be too bad luck...set upside down before each of the expected-to-be-filled twelve places, the seldom-called-upon-jewels of the family service...

The flowered glasses.

But Pancho's approaching visit, as well as Eva's reflections on hope and disappointment, not to mention the unmentionable hopelessness behind the aforementioned fatalism, went out of her the moment her sister, Vic-

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toria, called to say that a doctor—he'd sounded like a doctor—had called to say that Rodolfo had, after a year of terrible illness, finally given up the ghost. Rodolfo was Eva's favorite brother and she could only regret that she had not been there, at that strategic intersection where the soul left the body, for she had been too busy burnishing the house at high speed that she, and they, her brothers and sisters, had been born in, to keep in mind the slow deterioration of Rodolfo's ravaged body.

His condition was, as the doctors, some time ago now, had said, choosing their words carefully, *delicado*, perhaps even grave, but she hadn't allowed herself to think that he was actually, hat in hand, at death's door.

Eva and her sister, Victoria, cried at each other on the telephone, despite the fact that they lived not fifty meters apart, the latter in the house she had only recently acquired with her husband which, after several years in a two-room basement, would give her children room to swell into fat little facsimiles of those who had preceded them, and decided they'd better order the coffin right away.

Eva, perhaps unconsciously, but, as usual, putting something completely out of her mind, something which had, until quite recently...in this case her brother's, Pancho's, looming return, the surprise, and very welcome visit of Mamá...completely filled it, her mind, that is, covered the fifty meters to her sister's house in half as many seconds and, together, already somehow, both of them, in black—a black to match Eva's thicker, darker eyebrows—proceeded somewhat more sedately to the nearest funeraria, the one everyone in the neighborhood, with some frequency in an ageing population, patronized.

"This beauty...señora...señorita..." said the purveyor of coffins, addressing each of the sisters in turn, Victoria first, as befitted her married state, "is my very best, my largest, though of course I know Rodolfo...descanse en paz...was not as big in his last days as he had been in the prime of his young life—he was terribly wasted at the end—though, with this model, deeply polished mahogany, rolled gold fittings, he will, as so many of my clientes, have, as I like to say, if you will excuse the expression, breathing room."

Victoria, who always kept her cash in the house, shrewdly divided between the sugar bowl and the space beneath her mattress in the hard, cold bed she shared with her husband, counted out the down payment and the deal was done. Eva and Victoria spent the next hour at Victoria's calling everyone; running down, by phone, the visiting priest who would surely visit that day since he had known the sisters as long as they had known themselves, longer; reserving the church for the purification that precedes putrefaction and, between episodes of holding each other and crying, looked at photos of the family at happier moments in happier times. Of course, at the viewing, the vigil, all would be there, even Rodolfo...while he would hardly be aware of it although, on the other hand, in his own peculiar way, he might be...as would be, of course, everybody else, including...

"Oh my God, I completely forgot!" exclaimed Eva. "I don't know what's happening to my mind. Pancho called. He may be coming home, today, tomorrow, I don't know which, and he has a surprise for us. A surprise..."

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“Mamá!” screamed the sisters, for once screaming together, for what could be worthy of such anticipation, such calculated teasing on the part of the shrewd Pancho, who was always up to something, even at the family’s expense, if it served his interests, other than the return of Mamá, on the horizon since he called, but now just around the corner?

What luck, thought Eva, that Rodolfo’s death and Mamá’s return—though, for reasons of propriety, Eva kept that thought to herself—should so providentially coincide. But clearly, for Rodolfo would certainly, when she had time to ask for it and he had time to give it, certainly send down his jot and tittle of forgiveness, the challenge was to be ready for Mamá. Rodolfo could, within the parameters of the natural world, of death and decay, wait.

“What should we make?” asked Veronica, near, as often enough, to hysteria as they hurriedly retraced the familiar fifty meters between her house and the one Eva now occupied alone, her eyes shifting left and right at breakneck speed as if unsure from just which direction Mamá, the surprise their brother, without a dry tortilla of doubt, must have hinted at, would arrive in a yellow and black taxi from the airport which, of course, was in only one direction, always had been, north from Pueblo Nuevo and was certainly, therefore, Victoria realized looking over her shoulder, and once more assuring herself, the direction from which Mamá would arrive. But the point was, she reminded herself—the meal, the meal!—for we are what we eat.

‘The family makes the meal,’ as Mamá said, implying that someone, besides her, ought to get to work, ‘and, with time, the meal, or meals, make the family.’

“Oh, how beautiful!” screamed Victoria, the moment she saw the familiar table decked out in its unfamiliar best. “You’ve made our humble house so beautiful! How did you do it, Eva? You’re an artist!”

“Well...” began Eva.

“But what will we make, Eva?” interrupted Victoria, remembering the task at hand, while walking briskly one way around the table, then the other, raising thin eyebrow and anxious eyes to the ceiling while wringing her hands...

“What will we make? What will we make?”

“Well, I was thinking...” began the considerably cooler Eva, cooling yet further in her sister’s presence for, after all, who could be more hysterical than Victoria and the younger Eva had to distinguish herself in some way. If both sisters were on the same wavelength, the one Victoria claimed for herself, it might break the windows in both houses, even at fifty meters.

“Let’s begin at the beginning,” suggested Eva.

“El caldo!” screamed Victoria, “la sopa, clear, with the pollo shredded to the ensalada!”

“But first, tostados, tostados con...”

“Ceviche de pulpo!”

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"Carpaccio de res o de salmón; y después, pizza con saltamontes o..." said an unruffled Eva, in her mind completing the list.

"...o huevos de hormigas cocinado al vapor...or...best of all...gusanos crudo..!" screamed Victoria, adding her own two centavos.

The sisters, once more together, collapsed into a shared jollity that seemed to last until the next day for they were, as was the custom preceding such events, cooking the night through into the dawn and subsequent sunrise. Everything was ready when the extended family began to contract itself to fit the dining room, if reluctant to take their places at such a magnificently set table, twelve at least, not counting children who were never still long enough to be counted.

But, of course, they couldn't begin, formally anyway, without Mamá, so, standing around and overflowing into the warm kitchen, crammed with rich odors, they attacked las tostados laden with uncooked octopus, raw salmon, and maybe a little slice of grasshopper pizza with side dishes of seasoned ant eggs and soft white worms. Mamá wouldn't mind. None of the above family favorites were hers. She preferred her pozole...corn soup thick with appetizing pieces of pig, sprinkled with tasty shreds of cabbage, lettuce and onion...and chicken and beans consumed with one big spoon.

Knock. Knock.

"Who's there?" cried all.

"Let's see..." said one.

Here they opened wide the door.

So much of the day had passed without the nearly windowless house that the sisters, with their bucolic sense of time, had not realized that darkness had fallen. Four messengers stood in endless night, a spanking new coffin on their shoulders.

"Señora Victoria y Señorita Eva?"

"Sí," said the sisters.

"Your brother's coffin."

Having spent the previous night cooking, the sisters passed this night in vigil in a roomful of candles, surrounded by photos of Rodolfo, whom they confidently placed in the extravagant coffin it had taken four big men to carry. A nearly lifesize rendering of la Virgen stood with them, head slightly tilted as she looked down on a scene as familiar to her as death and pozole. Out of respect for the departed, as the coffin, placed upon half a dozen unclaimed chairs and nearly chock-a-block with the immaculately set table, the family had, temporarily, suspended the starters and sat themselves on whatever surfaces remained.

At dawn, the sisters were asleep in their chairs. At noon, the family, having gone home to freshen up after the vigil, began to arrive for el festival de Mamá but, in a space still overwhelmed by Rodolfo's overwhelming coffin, they were, once more, themselves overwhelmed and, once more, sat discretely along a row of stiff, straight-backed chairs borrowed from their neighbors and considerately placed along the wall. They came in

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laughing as only extended families can, were soon hushed by the not-to-be-denied presence of the dead, until all were stiffly seated, not counting uncountable children who rushed out back to chase the cat, enrage the dog and, with luck, bring down a bird or two with a well-placed stone.

At noon a different foursome, equally massive men clearly in the hire of el funerario, returned for the coffin which they, ignoring the cries of the outraged mourners, proceeded to hoist and, mumbling respectfully as instructed, shouldered into the street.

"There's been some mistake," muttered one.

"You can't take my brother! I paid the down payment!" insisted Victoria.

"Your money will be returned," muttered another.

They were gone, as was Rodolfo.

"The coffin was so big, so heavy," insisted Eva. "How could Rodolfo not be in it?"

"I think he is," said Victoria, "or someone just like him."

A dozen adults nodded agreement as Pancho walked in the door.

"Where's Mamá?" cried the sisters.

"Mamá?"

"You said..." began Eva. "You told me."

"I never told you Mamá was coming back."

"You said you had a surprise. What surprise could there be other than..?"

"I don't remember that," said Pancho, raising pencil-thin eyebrows, more like Victoria's than Eva's. "Maybe I'm the..."

"Is Mamá with you or not?"

"She is not."

Milling relatives, as calm returned, gravitated to the kitchen, forcibly squeezing themselves in, for the combined smells of el plato fuerte along with those of a new round of tempting tostadas had become irresistible. The party, minus the matriarch, was just getting

down to business when a fearsome knock fell heavily upon the door.

"Knock, knock!" added a voice, certainly that of the taxi driver from the airport.

"Who's there?" cried a dozen excited voices, not to mentioned the high pitched screams of children and the by now hoarse hopefulness of two sisters.

The door opened slowly, creakily, as befitted an apparently staged, seemingly contrived, though—if you knew Pueblo Nuevo—predictable moment, and in stepped a much-emaciated-nearly-dead-on-his-feet-but-clearly-breathing Rodolfo.

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"...surprise...surprise..." mumbled the favorite brother in a voice that could hardly be heard.

From this point on all was explained to everyone's not very demanding satisfaction and things worked themselves out, as things usually do in Mexico.

The next morning Pancho returned to the north, his surprise...only to be discovered some weeks after a tearful departure, a near orgy of farewell kisses, at the airport...apparently having been to sell the last of the family land and take la plata, a not inconsiderable sum it would eventually turn out, with him when he left. As for Mamá, well, the truth is, she had come to prefer it up north and, after being handed her papers and singing The Star Spangled Banner in her throaty alto, never did return to Pueblo Nuevo. In fact, one winter day, after a decade on hamburgers and french fries, her spirit and her body parted like so much steam rising from a manhole at the half frozen corner of Randolph and State.

But that would be anticipating. The endless night they awaited her improbable return probably ended with all guests departed, except one and, by dawn's early light, Rodolfo and Eva—their sister, Victoria, gone home to fatten her offspring—sat poking at the embers of a dying fire.

"It wasn't so bad," said Rodolfo.

"What wasn't so bad?" asked Eva, holding her brother's warm hand, for grasshopper pizza, ants' eggs and worms had worked their wonders.

"Being dead."

"No. No. Really. You weren't dead. How long?" asked Eva, changing her tune.

"Long enough."

"How long?" insisted Eva.

"Five minutes."

"That's not long."

"Long enough when you think it might be eternity."

"Oh, really! What did you know?"

"Nothing."

"Really?"

"Really, nothing, but it was getting cold."

"You knew that."

"I knew that." Here Rodolfo's voice changed. "So cold that I remembered Mamá, Mamá as she was, as she is.

"What do you mean..." asked Eva, raising those wonderful eyebrows of hers, adding, even as they caught the first rays of the sun "...as she really was, as she is?"

"Cold."

"Cold. Mamá was, is, cold? I don't remember that."

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"You don't remembering anything, dear Eva. You were younger when she left. I'm the elder, and I remember Mamá."

They took turns poking embers which Rodolfo, as the man, was much better at.

"Mamá, he began, "thought like a peasant. That's where our brother, Pancho's, crafty ways come from."

"I don't believe it."

"Everything had to pay out. The bottom line was everything and the bottom line came up fast, like the dry season, like winter. If you wanted to make something other than a killing...say something of yourself...better forget it."

"I seem to remember," said Eva, reluctantly.

"I remember you wanted an education," said Pancho. "What did Mamá say to you?"

"She said 'better forget it.'"

"That's what I said."

"Milk the cows."

"That's right. That's her. A dozen duties on the tip of her tongue. She didn't have to look far."

"No."

"Out they came, one after the another, the moment you thought of yourself."

"Yes," sighed Eva, remembering, wondering why all, all, had awaited Mamá's mythical return with such anticipation. She must have had another side to her, Mamá, that all so loved her, maybe the person she almost was, the one she might have been. Just like the rest, thought Eva, every one of us, all these years dragging behind us, like bales of hay, the persons we might have been, the persons we almost were.

The day proceeded, though not very far, for Rodolfo's near-death experience, not to mention remembering Mamá as she was, is, having been too much for him, he died that afternoon, the coffin came back, the vigil was repeated, the Virgin looked down on all without batting an eye, seeming incidents and apparent episodes fell—nay, locked—into place as predictably as before, nobody changed, nobody did what he or she always wanted to do or became what he or she almost was, for Mamá, alive and well and learning English, had thrown the bottom line to the cold winds off the lake and found a life of her own up there, while here, in Pueblo Nuevo, since there were and would always be the cows, the corn, the hay & etc., the family had left for the fields, the house was, with the exception of Eva who stood...with a strangely puzzled look on her face...empty.