

GLENN LYVERS

THE DAY I BECAME GUILTY

I was another Mexican girl with a yellow sack for a dress – but with a dying father. Papa was lying in bed on a July Tuesday, under our best white sheets. We were too poor to take him to the doctor, and he did not want to go anyway. Mama prayed for him constantly, and every hour she would say, “Isabelle, go fetch cool water,” and I went - so Papa would not have warm water by his bed. I remember Mama’s black and gold rosary beads – the way she carried them all day, until her hands were cramped and looked twisted. She held them in one hand while she made tortillas with the other. Her lips would move silently while she pressed the dough, and I knew the prayers so well that I could follow along in my head, reading her lips while she prayed silently, the edges of her mouth turning downward.

Before Papa got sick, our house was full of life. It was a faded-orange stucco ranch, set so closely to the road that farmer’s carts would block the porch. My friends would chase me from the street, right through our tiny living room and out the back door. We were like laughing elephants, stampeding on the clattering wooden floors, and it seemed like our house belonged to everyone. Papa would yell at us to settle down, but we knew he was only pretending because he could not hide the smile on his face. He would shake his head at Mama and ask, “Did we ever act like that?” and she would answer, “Of course not!” with a mischievous grin. She said that she married Papa because he was the only person who ever made her smile - he was the center of our world, and when he became sick, so did everything else.

My friends no longer came to play, and the house became still. I was tethered to that place, and to the stillness. In my frozen moments, sitting by Papa’s bed, I noticed all the details of the house I had never seen before. Papa was a construction worker, and his house suffered with him, needing repairs. The yellow walls of his room had cracks, and I could see blue paint peeking through. I would sit by his bed, tracing those cracks with my eyes - they were like rivers on a globe, cutting across the walls and I knew them all by heart. The window by his bed allowed a little air to move the curtains, and sometimes, they were all that moved.

It was my job to fetch ice from the church. It would be chipped from the block and Mama would gently rub it on Papa's lips, sometimes for hours. When I carried the ice home, my older brother Antonio would embarrass me by pointing out to his friends that my chest was not flat anymore. I hated him for that, and sometimes I wore extra clothes to hide my shame. But on this day, I would not be going for the ice. The rocks and baby cactus along the way were sharp, and my sandals were broken, so it was Antonio who had to go. I was happy that he had to do my work; he deserved it. But before he left, Antonio told Mama, "I think Papa needs cool water" – and then he laughed as I went to fetch it.

Antonio and I loved our church with the type of faith only children are blessed with. Our church was called, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and she rested quietly atop a great wind-swept hill, until her bronze bell would ring, calling out, in deep rich tones which would echo off the houses and into our hearts. The people would ascend the hill in a procession of small groups, carrying their bibles and babies to pray.

The hill itself was overgrown with green cactus and thick brush. Hidden within the brush were little blond flowers, brittle and intricate, which could only be appreciated while looking carefully. Antonio would gather the tiny flowers, using the delicate cuttings to mark the pages of the hymnals, reminding us all that the beauty of God was everywhere. The inspiring wooden doors of the church had no locks, and they would groan loudly as they opened, announcing each visitor to the great room. The sunlight filled our church; it would cascade from the windows above, spreading out like warm butter onto the toast-colored pews. It was no great cathedral, but Mama told us it was the greatest of all churches, because our church was not the great bell or the large crucifix above the altar, it was the singing of the people. The singing was like heaven, lifting our hearts to God – and when the choir sang Halleluiah, I felt like my feet would leave the ground.

My Aunt Gabriela stopped by to check on us. She was a formidable woman, powerful from working in the fields, but with the heart of an angel. She stared at Papa and lit candles for him, kissing his dark eyes and rubbing his cold feet. She warned Mama in hushed words that Papa was waiting to die. She said he was too proud to let anyone see him lose control and pass on - he would wait until he was alone. This made perfect sense to me because I saw Papa's pride. He fought in the village circle, upturning carts of red potatoes and breaking the axe handles of a vendor who overcharged me nine pesos. He told me it was

the food in my “Mexican mouth” he fought for, and that it did not matter if it were nine pesos or nine thousand. I was proud too, so proud of Papa that I stood tall and firm with clenched fists when the police came. He said later that I looked like a Chihuahua, small but with the heart of a wolf. He was prideful, it was his way, and even death would not take him, unless it was on Papa’s terms.

Mama chimed, “Isabelle...” using a musical voice, which sounded like a song, but instead, meant chores. She explained that Papa was never to be left alone. She told me it was important, and that I was to stay with him until she returned from the neighbors. She was going to get batteries for Papa’s radio. I did as I was told, quietly at first, and then I sang to Papa, a song about butterflies which we made up together on the bank of our secret fishing spot. He opened his eyes a little and I saw him smile. “You remember our song Papa,” I said, beaming – and he gently smiled back. The clock ticked the rhythm while I sang softly, and as well as I could.

My song was interrupted by Antonio. He’d returned from the church, holding the ice with both hands, kicking the front door to get my attention. I hesitated for a moment, looking at Papa, unsure what to do. “Isabelle open the door!” Antonio insisted loudly, so I left Papa’s room for a moment – a moment which has haunted me for 60 years.

I pulled the door open with a grin, but instead of Antonio, I saw Mama’s anxious eyes. She pushed me aside roughly and ran to Papa’s room. For a moment everything was so quiet that I could still hear the clock ticking. I went to Papa’s door and saw her over his bed. Then I heard the sound of Mama taking a deep purposeful breath – the kind someone takes before they scream. She turned to me and clenched her fists so tightly that her rosary broke – and I watched in slow motion while batteries and rosary beads tumbled and bounced with little thuds and pings, scattering all over the floor in that horrific stillness.

Mama’s scream was like nothing I had heard before. She cried “Isabelle! Isabelle! You killed your Papa! You killed your Papa!” Her screams were so loud that they punched holes in me – holes which are still filled with the perfect clarity of her painful words. The ice dropped from Antonio’s hands with a crushing thud. He started pleading with Papa to just be asleep. “Please, Papa, please just be sleeping, Papa, I need you, Papa, I have your ice, I’ll never be a bad boy again, please, Papa...” Then Mama stood tall and her cries hardened, “I just asked you to stay with him for five minutes and you did not love him enough to do this one thing. You killed him, you did this!” Her words were in her eyes for me to see, and for a bewildering moment, she did not even

look like Mama to me.

Antonio began to shake Papa, pleading for him to wake up. "Please, Papa, wake up Papa, please, please..." - his cries had turned into prideless desperate begging. I felt a sudden sickening in my stomach. This was all my fault and I ran mindlessly from the house. I ran all the way to the church and threw myself on my face in front of the altar, crying out, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Ohh God, help me, I killed him... I killed Papa!"

Hours later, Aunt Gabriella came to the church. She carefully pulled the cactus needles from my crimsoned feet, wiping away the blood with her apron - it felt like a dream. I remember how slowly she lifted me from the floor, wrapping me up in her powerful arms and rocking me like a baby while my tears dotted her yellow linen blouse. She carried me all the way to her home, returning me to Mama the next day - after Papa's body was taken to the church.

I wanted to talk to Mama and tell her I was sorry, and sometimes, I think she wanted to talk to me too, but we just couldn't. It became a wedge of sorrow, hanging thickly between us, sapping all our happiness until we did not even speak anymore. Two years passed like that, and a week after my 14th birthday, I came home from school and found Mama on Papa's bed. She was lying there with her legs exposed and I knew she was dead - the way she was sprawled out, one fuchsia shoe dangling from her foot. I was surprised but I did not touch her; I simply backed away. For Mama there was no shaking, or pleading - no screaming or tears. She was just dead - spread out on Papa's bed with the same look of unhappiness she wore every day. Later I felt guilty for not crying. I wondered what kind of daughter would not cry when she found her mother dead like that. I felt pathetic and sinful.

At Mama's funeral I hid my face completely, not because I was worried people would see me cry, but because they might judge me for not crying at the funeral of my own mother. I barely noticed how plain the coffin was, the type the church gives those who have no money. I wondered if she was even alive when I left for school that day, because the silence of that morning was like every other. When the funeral ended, it started to rain. The sky had found tears for us all, and sent everyone scurrying back to their homes, leaving only Antonio and his friends to fill in the hole. Aunt Gabriella said Mama died of a broken heart, and she took me in, leaving the ailing house to Antonio.

Living with Aunt Gabriella was strange at first. It was never awkward or silent. In the days that followed, she spoke with me every day, and in ways Mama never did. In time I came to understand that Aunt Gabriella talked with a purpose - she used our conversations to gently reopen my heart. After breakfast one morning, I was preparing to leave the house for school and the thought of Mama, dying on Papa's bed, took me completely by surprise.

I could picture her suffering, alone in the stillness of Papa's room with no one to help her. I suddenly felt profoundly sad and lonely. My emotions welled up and crashed like an ocean on my heart. The sorrow and tears I had been missing burst forth uncontrollably, and with them, I became my mother's daughter again. I loved her, and missed her – and knew it completely.

I have lived a lifetime since then, and I'll never know what words might have passed between Mama and me, if we had been able to talk about the great sadness of that July Tuesday. I'll never know if she could have forgiven me, or if she really blamed me for Papa's death as much as I have blamed myself. The events of that fateful day took Papa, and then Mama – and have lasted all of my life, because it was the day I became guilty.