

The first time I accompanied Luz and her father to the prayer meeting, he gave me a stern lecture on how I needed to keep quiet. This was serious business, people could wind up in jail, and no one needed to know where I was going or what I was doing, not even my parents.

“I respect them very much, your father especially,” Señor Sabaté said. “He would enjoy our meetings, I think. I regret you’ll have to keep them from him.”

We were standing in his living room waiting for Luz to finish getting ready, and the red blotch in the corner of the man’s left eye darkened as he studied me.

“On second thought, I’m asking too much. A boy shouldn’t keep such secrets from his parents.”

“I told them I’m going to confession,” I said.

He leaned in close, and I got a whiff of the heavy, pungent grease that held his hair back.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” he said. “You could confess your sins right now, here in my humble home, in the absence of priest and pulpit, and you would still find El Señor faithful and just in cleansing you of all unrighteousness.”

He held out a book bound in black leather, and when I mentioned that I had my own standard-issue missal at home, containing devotional writings by saints and popes and theologians, he smiled with casual disdain and flipped through the book’s pages. It was the first Castellano-language Bible I had laid eyes on, and utterly free of intrusive commentary. The Church did not permit Scripture to be translated into vernacular languages, meaning that whoever made this particular Bible had done so outside official ecclesiastical sanction.

“Why do you hesitate?” he asked.

What could I say? If I admitted that just having the thing in my possession might raise all sorts of uncomfortable questions if the right person discovered it, how could I convince him that I was truly interested in going to the Protestant prayer meetings, which were even more illicit?

He must have been aware of all this. It was a test. If I declined the Bible—if I expressed apprehension of having it on my person—I effectively turned down the opportunity to go to the prayer meeting. And be with his daughter. What initially seemed like a fatherly gesture now resembled a dare. A taunt even. Giving me the Bible posed no risk to him.

I reached out to take it, but he held onto it. I had called his bluff.

“Don’t let anyone find it. Understand?” he said.

He relinquished the tome, and my hands felt weak under its weight. When he went to grab his coat, Luz appeared from her room.

“Buenas noches, party pooper,” she said after we kissed cheeks. She wore a fresh, white dress and pink belt, and there was a ribbon in her hair. I was accustomed to seeing girls and women wear austere black dresses to Mass, their hair tucked under lacy mantillas.

“Why am I a party pooper?”

“You promised me none of this would be an issue, and now you’re throwing off a bunch of nervous energy.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Because if you’re having second thoughts...”

“I’m not.”

“We’ve gone lots of times and I’ve never felt unsafe, not even once. Pastor García and Pilar are welcoming people.”

“And we have to go to their house?”

“What choice do we have? It’s not like they’re handing out cathedrals to Protestants on every street corner.”

I snickered. Aware that her father would return any second, I resisted the urge to pull her body against mine. The heat began to build between us. She must have read my mind because she squeezed my hand before heading for the door.

The drive from Señor Sabaté’s house took some twenty minutes, winding past expansive olive groves and sunflower fields, crossing creeks where children bathed in the cool waters. Eventually the gravel road gave way to a dirt path, and we climbed into the rugged foothills beyond Las Cruces. I glanced at Luz, but she only smiled mischievously in response.

The meetings, Señor Sabaté explained, were conducted in the home of Pastor Bernabé María García Arcos, who had carved out a reputation for himself as a country mystic of sorts. For years, he had somehow managed to evade arrest, which only added to his allure. Those who attended, he said, did so in spite of Franco and his Catholic nationalism.

Some, however, like Luz and her father, were dutifully following family custom that dated to before El Caudillo’s grip on the country. Or so I believed.

“I’m curious to know, Miguel,” the man said, changing the subject, “what memories you have of Luz Divina as a child. You two were quite the playmates.”

I squinted at her playfully while she appeared to brace herself for the inevitable embarrassment.

“What was that boy’s name?” I said. “His father grew strawberries.”

She shook her head.

“Matías!”

“I don’t—”

“Sí, Matías. He thought it would be so funny to haul all of Señor Olmedo’s chickens up to the loft of his stable. As a prank, you know. Remember? We all thought it was hilarious, the idea of the old man finding all of his chickens strutting around six meters off the ground. Everyone except you. You were the only one of us looking out for those things. ‘You leave those chickens alone!’ I thought you were going to go tell. Remember what you did instead?”

She glared at me in response.

“You waited until Matías carried another chicken up there, then you kicked away the ladder. There were maybe five of us down below just laughing at him. He started to cry, and a couple of the chickens flapped down from the loft, which I think embarrassed him even more. He went to all that trouble, but he forgot one little thing: The stupid things have wings! So after a couple of minutes, we all agreed he’s learned his lesson, and someone started putting the ladder back. But you stopped them. ‘Matías needs to stuff his face with a handful of chicken droppings first,’ you said. Matías cried even harder: ‘I won’t do it ever again, I swear!’ But that wasn’t good enough. It was getting late, and we all needed to go home, but everyone stuck around to see if he’d do it. He just started bawling. I think he was waiting it out, hoping Señor Olmedo would show up.”

“What a naughty girl,” Señor Sabaté said with a tsk.

“He’s mixing me up with someone else,” Luz said.

Nonsense. The long, waist-length hair; the crooked front tooth? Was she not the same girl who sat next to me right now?

“Anyway,” I continued, “Matías got this strange, empty look on his face, and before we could give him the ladder, he fell. He didn’t jump. He just sort of... fell. Right off the edge. None

of us thought he would do it. I don't think even he thought he would. He landed right smack on the soles of his feet, and there was this loud *snap*, like when you break a tree limb over your knee. He ended up shattering both ankles and puncturing a lung, if I remember right. Not too long afterward, his family moved away. Now don't tell me you can't remember *that*."

Luz maintained her glare while her father drummed a finger against the steering wheel. It occurred to me that what I had intended to be a cautionary tale of a willful boy who finally got his comeuppance turned out instead to be an indictment of a girl who took her punishment too far.

"I just thought it was a funny story is all. Doesn't mean anything," I said.

"But it wasn't me."

"I must have been thinking of someone else, then."

"Luz Divina used to have a little boyfriend named Matías," her father said. "Didn't you?"

"His name was Martín, not Matías."

"I thought it was Matías."

"Martín."

"Huh. Martín."

We came to a monolithic rock face at the path's end, and we parked in a field of grass, joining a line of cars next to a post where two or three tethered donkeys brayed and groomed themselves. A primitive entryway, covered by a rough curtain, protruded from the cliffside, flanked by two small, irregularly shaped windows cut into the rock. Brown smoke curled up from an earthen chimney that jutted out above the ledge.

Señor Sabaté killed the engine and turned to face me.

"I bet you didn't know there were people who still lived in caves, did you?"

“Gypsies.”

“Not all of them are gypsies. This place, Azanaque, has been inhabited nonstop for thousands of generations, in more caves and warrens than the eye can see. The very first Spaniards lived in caves, you know. The cave paintings of Altamira go all the way back to the Stone Age.” He pointed at the doorway. “That’s where the pastor was born. He lives there still with his wife.”

He exited the car, and I stared at the entrance, speechless. What had I got myself into? First a Castellano-language Bible; now this. I imagined walls made of mud, the ends of earthworms wriggling from the ceiling, mushrooms growing in every corner. I pictured this García Arcos as a soot-smearred hermit attired in animal pelts and brandishing a club, incapable of intelligible human speech.

Luz broke the silence, her voice straining at the seams:

“Why’d you have to say all that? I’ve always insisted I had nothing to do with that boy hurting himself. There was a whole inquiry.”

My face burned with shame. She had made an effort to stop me from telling the story, yet I foolishly barreled ahead, believing it would end with a car full of laughter.

“Luz, I had no idea.”

“Think before you speak.”

“I told you I didn’t know.”

“I don’t feel like arguing,” she said. “I can tell you’re not happy about Pastor García’s place, but it’s not what you expect. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

Surprised, yes; pleasantly was doubtful.

“Is it ... clean in there?”

“In case you forget, Papi runs a sanitation and beautification company,” she said. As if that would reassure me of someone else’s cleanliness. “They’re not animals.”

“I didn’t say they were.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Someone could’ve warned me.”

“Scared?”

“I’m not scared. I just don’t want to go home later stinking of mold and dirt.”

“Then stay in the car. We’ll see you in an hour.”

She joined her father, who stood finishing a cigarette. They made quite the pair. Tall and pretty, Luz towered over her stocky father, who had the rough exterior of a seasoned boxer. He had fought in the Battle of the Ebro, and he carried himself as though he were still on the battlefield, scanning the horizon, posture braced for conflict. I found it hard to believe that this man’s genes had played any role in producing such a striking young woman.

Señor Sabaté impatiently motioned for me to get out.

*Well, I thought, you wanted to spend time with her.*

The first thing that struck me upon passing through the cave’s entryway was the agreeable earthy scents of limestone and mineral mixed with linen, incense, and, curiously, lacquer—a far cry from the fetid mud pit I had expected. The dwelling was modestly furnished with all the trappings of a typical Spanish home: handmade artisan rugs, simple yet well-crafted furniture, shelves lined with books and framed portraits, paintings of pastoral scenes and churches. Square corners and flat surfaces brought comfort to human sensibilities, and where limestone was not whitewashed or nakedly exposed, man-made walls stood floor to ceiling. Built

into one of these walls was a grand fireplace, inside of which crackled a fire. Heavy sconces hung from the walls at intervals with lighted candles, and in the main commons area, a single light bulb dangled at the end of an electrical cord that snaked across the ceiling and through a small hole to, presumably, a power source of some kind.

I followed Luz and Señor Sabaté through an archway, and I found myself in a great hall measuring perhaps six or seven meters wide and twenty meters long. Elsewhere in the dwelling, the floor appeared to be nothing more than concrete. Here it was made of a series of interlocking clay tiles dyed a rich burgundy. Pushed up against either wall—which sloped gently up toward the barrel-arched ceiling—was a row of chairs facing inward, many of them already occupied by men and women awaiting the start of the service. The entire chamber was illuminated by a wrought iron chandelier that held no fewer than twenty candles.

Luz saw how I marveled at the room. Beaming, she leaned over to whisper in my ear: “Told you.”

At the far end of the chamber, standing in front of a large wooden cross, was a man I could only assume was Pastor García Arcos. Next to him, his wife. Both appeared to be somewhere in their sixties and were similarly shaped. Cave living, I reasoned, did not mean that one must go hungry.

Nor did it mean that one had to resemble a Neanderthal. Except for the man’s white beard, which came down to his collarbone, the two were the very picture of ordinary. Had I come across them strolling the streets of Las Cruces, I would never have guessed that they resided beneath the earth.

The bearded man waved and called out: “Brother Rosendo!”

Señor Sabaté embraced him warmly and gave his wife two kisses.



“Buenas tardes, Padre,” I said, and I reached for the pastor’s hand to kiss it.

“Oh, my dear boy. We don’t do that here,” he said. He eyed Señor Sabaté and asked:

“First time?”

“Miguel’s a friend of Luz Divina.”

“I see. Well, Miguel, friend of Luz Divina, Pilar and I are happy to have you.”

“Gracias. You have a beautiful home—”

“And speaking of Luz Divina,” Pastor García said. He took her hands into his own and moved in close. “How are we this evening?”

“Bien.”

“I hear your father is keeping you busy.”

“Sí, he is.”

“That’s good. You know what El Señor says about idle hands.”

“Sí.”

“Dios alone is our defense.”

“Sí, He is.”

“He makes us strong, makes our pathway safe.”

“Sí, He does.”

He kissed Luz twice, and we took our seats.

“I’m so mortified,” I said.

Luz laughed through her nose.

“Why?”

“I tried to kiss his hand.”

“You also called him Padre.”

I cringed. “I wish the ground would just swallow me up.”

“Relax, you’re doing fine.”

The service kicked off with a hymn, followed by general greetings and housekeeping business, all of it conducted by Pilar. These familiarities helped put me at ease, despite the alien surroundings. Even with so many people seated in the hall—I would say they numbered around thirty—the cave walls kept me feeling cool and comfortable.

When Pilar announced the presence of a guest, my stomach twisted into a double knot.

“Tell us what brings you here today, Miguel,” she said.

Dozens of eyes turned toward me, and I shifted in my seat. It was a tricky question. Admitting that I came on the invitation of a girl I liked didn’t feel like the right answer, and it risked raising suspicions that I might tip off the authorities about non-Catholic worshippers. At the same time, it would be a lie to say that I had thoughts about becoming a member of the prayer group.

“I think we may have put Miguel on the spot,” Señor Sabaté said, reaching behind Luz to squeeze my shoulder. “Luz Divina asked if he could come, and I agreed because I think he’s a fine young man, and his father helped in the fight against the fascists all those years ago, for which we should be grateful. He’s very sick now—Miguel’s father, that is—and I’m sure Miguel would appreciate it if we all prayed for his recovery.”

He winked in my direction.

“Bless you, Miguel,” Pilar said. “We’re indebted to your father, as we are to others among us who served.”

Pastor García cleared his throat.

“That’s a perfect transition into today’s sermon,” he said, striding to the center of the hall. “My brothers and sisters, let us be reminded of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit that San Pablo describes in First Corinthians—wisdom, knowledge, faith, working of miracles, and so on. Among those is the gift of healing. Physical healing, yes, which is a ministry of His church. The laying on of hands, the healing of the sick. But then there’s also *spiritual* healing and—this is my message to you today—the healing of an entire people. Do you follow me? *The healing of a people.*”

These last words came in staccato bursts that reverberated off the stone walls.

“There is a great pestilence in España today that has been wreaking havoc for over twenty years. An entire generation! Some of you in this room, like our dear Luz Divina and young Miguel, have known only this pestilence that rots the soul of España and contaminates our fellowship with Dios. A small splinter, left unattended, is enough to invite infection, bring on a fever, hasten death. The splinter I’m referring to just happens to reside in Madrid, but it affects us all, even here in Andalucía. I needn’t say his name. The less we hear it, the better. It chafes the lips and stings the ears. Instead, let us call him the Wicked One. And as the Gospel tells us, when the wicked rules, the people mourn.”

Red-faced, Pastor García paused to wipe the perspiration from his face with a handkerchief.

“My brothers and sisters, no one is coming to help us. The Americans crossed the Atlantic and laid down their lives to liberate the Jews. They crossed the Pacific to push back against communism. They won’t do the same for us, I’m afraid. We certainly can’t put our hope in their Catholic president. Their military bases here on our soil are far too precious. No one is

coming. The only thing left is faith and prayer—which is enough. It is enough, and then some. So, if it's healing we seek, cry aloud and do not hold back! Lift up your voices like trumpets!"

There was no ambiguity in what he instructed. The congregants knew precisely what he meant. The voices came in a cacophony, all of them murmuring thanks to *El Señor Dios mi Padre, I pray that the sick will be healed Jesús First Pedro two twenty-four He bore our sins in His own body that we being dead to sins should live unto righteousness by whose stripes you were healed gracias Dios He was wounded for our transgressions He was bruised for our iniquities and with His stripes we are healed I thank You for all the gifts if any lack wisdom let him ask of Dios and it shall be given him gracias Señor praise You Jesús I love You Señor—*

The chamber reverberated with their prayers. I was accustomed to chanting in strict unison, but in a prescribed manner—the Penitential Rite, the Profession of Faith, the Lord's Prayer. There was comfort in the routine. On the other hand, I was mesmerized by the worshippers' ability to recite Scripture from rote memory. They spoke with an unwavering conviction that allowed them to unleash a torrent of verses, without doubt or hesitation. And the unabashed opposition to Franco! I had heard my parents' groans, caught them rolling their eyes when a radio announcer invariably gave El Caudillo praise, but ever the pragmatists, they knew not to speak out too loudly. By contrast, there was no such self-censorship here in Pastor García Arcos' place of worship.

Next to me, Luz chanted as nimbly as any of her fellow worshippers. With head bowed and eyes closed, she swayed back and forth in her seat. Shortly, a change came over her. She held her right hand aloft, then her left, and the Castellano she had been speaking retreated, and another language slid forward to take its place. As if a deck of cards had been reshuffled.

I couldn't immediately recognize the language. English I knew to some extent. This was not English: The consonants were too sharp, the pronunciations too front-of-the-mouth. Simple repeated syllables, almost like chirping.

Having grown up attending Catholic Mass, I was somewhat familiar with Latin, a few words and phrases of which I had picked up over the years. This was not Latin.

During his psychotic episodes, my Basque father sometimes reverted to his childhood language of Euskara, an ancient tongue that was unrelated to any other in Europe. It was outlawed throughout Spain, along with Catalan and even Galician, traditionally spoken in Franco's native Galicia. Banned languages all, as they threatened to shatter the chains of national unity that El Caudillo spent so much time and effort forging. Merely speaking them was an act of rebellion and insurrection of the highest order.

And yet what Luz spoke was not Euskara. Nor French, nor German, nor Italian. Then what?

The words came in such rapid succession that I feared Luz might pass out. I tried to catch her eye so that she might see my mixture of surprise and admiration. She hadn't told me she was fluent in another language. But when she opened her eyes, all I saw was white. I looked to Señor Sabaté for some explanation. His own eyelids heavy, he ran his palm up and down the back of his daughter's hair. "Oh, cariño. Sí, cariño, oh," he intoned, barely at a whisper.

Others took notice of Luz, but none looked as unsettled as I felt. Some stifled their own prayers, bringing her voice to the fore. They leaned back in their seats and raised their hands, mouths agape, their faces twisting obscenely in what appeared to be pleasure. A pregnant quietude descended on the room like a light mist.

Pastor García, his own hands raised and eyes closed, spoke over Luz.

“Put yourselves there with the Apostles in the moment when the Holy Spirit first came to them. Can you imagine it? The wind howling from the heavens, rocking the very timbers of the house. Like a great hurricane hurled from El Señor himself.”

He guided Luz out of her seat, and the two paced to the center of the hall, just below the chandelier.

“And then the tongues of fire, blazing with a terrible fury. The Apostles, bless them, were shaken to the marrow to hear the howl of such a mighty wind. Imagine the awe they must have felt in that glorious moment.”

Luz spoke, and above the two, the candles began to flicker as if in response to a sudden strong draft.

“And the Holy Spirit. Oh, the Holy Spirit,” the pastor moaned, slumping into a chair. Sweat poured down his brow and stained his shirt.

Luz’s chanting grew bolder, and the candles’ flames spun and danced on their wicks, casting strange shadows on the congregants’ faces. Pilar threw herself forward and placed her hands on Luz’s ankles.

“The Spirit. The *Spirit*,” Pastor García said. “For the very first time in history, this mystical, awesome force came to us, brought us unity and wisdom—and *power*.” He let the last word ring throughout the chamber. “Imbued with that power, the Apostles began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. The language of Dios Himself! But the best part? That same power can uplift everyone here just as well, if only you open yourselves up to receive it.”

Others followed Pilar’s lead in ones and twos, and soon as many as twenty surrounded Luz, all on their knees, all reaching in her direction, if not actually touching her. Among them

was a bearded man clad in tattered clothes, his disheveled appearance hinting that he hadn't visited a barber or bathhouse in some time. Whether kneeling before Luz or still seated, a number of congregants began making what I can only describe as garbled noises. Infant, mouthy nonsense. It was clear that none of them shared Luz's aptitude at speaking in, or mimicking, this other language. No one seemed bothered by this, however. Least of all Pastor García, who sat gazing at Luz, head tilted back, with a look of deep satisfaction and pleasure as he reached down to touch himself over his trousers.

The candles flared and gyrated, gyrated and flared, some blinking out only to reignite with an electric snap.

Luz's words came to an abrupt halt, and everyone fell silent as she toppled over like a pile of wet laundry. Had it not been for the throng of bodies encircling her, her head may have struck the hard, tiled floor.

I tried to make my way to the center, but the pastor and Señor Sabaté beat me to it.

"She is slain!" Pastor García shouted. "My brothers and sisters, she is slain!"

The fall had made Luz's dress ride up around her waist, giving everyone a full view of her thin, white bragitas. Men around me, including the one dressed in rags, stood and gawked, but no one made a move to cover her. Instead, Señor Sabaté placed a seat cushion under her head.

"Is she okay?" I asked, but no one answered.

Luz came to, and she covered her face with her hands and giggled as though she had just recalled a joke. Women and men alike *awwed* at the sight of father and daughter embracing each other. Pilar brought a glass of water, and once Luz took a few sips and words of consolation and

reverence were offered, Pastor García floated the idea that we should retire early, lest we tempt fate further.

“And this was a brand new dress,” Luz wailed in mock dismay as she was assisted off the floor, and everyone laughed.