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Symposium Submission

A Tale In Three Beginnings

Prologue: *The Neighborhood Association*

The return of the youngest Owens girl to the house at the top of the hill came as little surprise to anyone. It was even less of a surprise when this return was punctuated by the arrival of a police detective inquiring about the young woman's moral character. Though the neighborhood association pretended to have left the tales of witchcraft, murder, and misery in their youth, they were civilized beings after all, the lot of them couldn't shake the feeling that something not quite right existed in the Owen household.

This information was not shared with the police detective. Not because of any moral desire to protect a neighbor whom no one in the neighborhood had ever spoken to for longer than it took to accept a casserole through a doorway, but because it seemed to them that the admittance that something happened with the Owens girls and that had caused every single man of theirs to disappear to God-knows-where, presumably down an Owens throat, would be like an admittance that their own street was tainted.

If they had been the ones to raise the Owens girls, or at least to live around them while they'd been raised, than who was to say that they had not caught whatever it was that made the Owens girls so wrong? Or that they themselves weren't partially to blame for it? Or even for whatever ghastly fate had befallen the Owens men?

After all, they had neither warned the men nor tried to teach the women.

No, it was best to keep their mouths shut and go about their business as though they had no idea that the reason Hanna Owens had returned home was because her husband had disappeared.

Chapter 1: *Present*

The detective was not expected that morning, although perhaps it might be better to say that he was not expected any morning. Given her family history, it might have been safe to presume a police investigation unnecessary. Whatever had happened to Jeremy Rollins, be it runaway or foul play, it was unlikely to be solved by mortal means.

But the firm knock at the front door which called Hanna from making Angelisa's lunch *was* the work of the same police detective whom she'd sat down with not two weeks ago to report her husband's disappearance, which meant someone thought the case worth looking into.

“Detective Dowd.” There was quiet for a moment, the two of them looking at each other, and then, with an air of deep politeness, Hanna invited him inside. The importance of this politeness had not been lost on her, especially when one was faced with a police officer, so she offered him a comfortable seat on the aging armchair in the living room and a glass of cold iced tea.

“Mrs. Rollins, do you know of anyone who might want to hurt your husband?” The detective fidgeted with his tie, dark blue and with a dark stain that looked rather like the state of Massachusetts, and flipped through a small notebook. He reminded her a bit of a child that had gotten into his father's closet, with clothes that were a touch too big and that stain that was probably coffee, and his wide eyes the color of black coffee that looked at her so sincerely.

Hanna dropped onto the couch across from him, folding her hands in her lap. “No. I can't think of anyone who would want to hurt Jeremy.”

“Are you sure? Anyone who might have been angry with him for some reason? Maybe an ex-girlfriend? An old boss? Someone he might have done something to?”

“Are you investigating a kidnapping or a murder?”

A long breath of silence. “We have reason to believe foul play was involved.”

Foul play. She supposed the term was meant to be frightening, to imply some sort of disastrous

end or bloody scene. Perhaps a body in a ditch, lying naked and in pieces, discarded like a child's forgotten toys. When she pictured that sort of thing, it always came out more cartoon-ish than anything else, not frightening anymore than a deconstructed GI Joe was frightening. It didn't become a bloody, dangerous, deadly thing until someone said *murder* or something like that. "I see. So you think he was killed?"

"I didn't say that." A pause, Dowd took a long sip of his iced tea, and then, "Have you received any strange phone calls since your husband disappeared?"

"Like heavy breathing or something?" It wasn't funny, but something about the notion struck Hanna as so wholly ridiculous that she was biting down on laughter anyway. It was as though she'd been thrown directly into one of those crime dramas she watched on Thursday nights while she was folding the laundry, the kind where there was always some mangled corpse on screen and two detectives standing over it in angry deliberation and boasting a new killer every week. Television shows that showed police officers hunting one killer over a season, though much more accurate to real life, never seemed to have the same amount of pull as shows that pretended solving crime was as easy as the right fingerprint.

"Anything strange at all ma'am." Dowd gave a tight-lipped smile, as though he knew that Hanna was holding back laughter, which did make her feel the slightest bit guilty.

"No. I haven't received any strange phone calls. Is that good or bad?"

"I couldn't say."

Hanna nodded. "Right. Okay."

Perhaps Dowd was about to say something else, or Hanna was, but they were both interrupted by Angelisa running down the hall in her brand new light-up sneakers. "Mama! Look what Grandmama gave me!" She was holding a bright purple backpack with butterfly wings sticking out of it. Hanna had been there when Hermina had purchased the backpack for Angelisa's first day of school, had been the one to point it out as something that Angelisa would love.

“It's lovely, baby.” Hanna glanced at Dowd, smiling apologetically. “I need to start getting Angelisa ready for school. Was that all you needed, detective?”

Dowd nodded and pushed himself up out of the chair. “I'll be in contact, Mrs. Rollins.”

“Yes, thank you.” Politely, Hanna stood up as well and then showed him to the door.

Dowd paused in the doorway, looking up at the ceiling, and then he said, “Why does the front door open on the second floor?”

A half-smile. “It's closer to the sky.”

“Ah.” Dowd smiled in return, sudden and wide as a child's. “Thank you again, Mrs. Rollins.”

The detective turned and made a steady, plodding way down the stairs.

After another moment, Hanna shut the door and turned back to Angelisa. “Lets get you ready for school then.”

Chapter 2: *Past*

Lucilla was squeezing her hand so hard it hurts, or perhaps Hermina was squeezing Lucilla's hand so hard that it was making her own hand hurt. It was hard to say. It was hard to tell where her hand ended and her mother's hand began, hard to tell where her body ended and everything else began.

“Just breathe,” the doctor said from somewhere between her legs, lifted up in stirrups so that her hospital gown slid open towards the moonlit curve of her stomach.

Hermina was gasping, staring at her own brown feet hanging in the air over her head. She could feel the child in her stomach ripping its way out of her, like an animal thing trying to escape. She didn't know if this was normal, this feeling in her stomach and the doctor's hands inside of her, but it was real and it was happening and she was staring at the scars around her ankles as it happened.

Lucilla's free hand smoothed Hermina's hair back from her face, the way she had when Hermina was young and feverish, and she cooed softly. Gentle as a breeze.

“Where's the father?” the doctor asked conversationally, like he wasn't elbow deep in Hermina's body and pulling a living thing out of her.

“He's coming,” Lucilla insisted. Because he had to be. There was no way that he would leave them here, like this. To do this thing that he had instigated all alone.

Hermina turned her head into the pillow and found herself looking out the window at the bright curve of the full moon, so much like her own stomach rising above her. Like an unblinking eye watching these events unfold below it.

Lucilla kept repeating herself, as though she can make Hermina's husband appear if she just keeps saying it. If she willed it, he would be here and that would be the end of it.

Suddenly, there was a pressure and a tearing and something was wrong. Something was so very wrong, and Hermina could feel it into her bones. The doctor slid his arms slickly out of her and stood above her, covered in her own fluids up to his elbows. “We're going to have to open her up.” His voice

was just as bland as if he wasn't covered in her blood. "The baby needs to come out now. Please don't panic."

Which was probably the worst thing he could have said, because Hermina's ears began to ring and suddenly her whole chest compressed. Something was wrong, she knew that it was wrong, could feel it in her bones, and it made her want to scream.

The doctor pressed a shining button on the wall and, a moment later, the room flooded with nurses.

Suddenly, Hermina's hospital bed was sliding, the sheets falling sideways so they brushed against the floor as she was shoved across the room, down the hallway. Lucilla was running after her, yelling something that Hermina couldn't make sense of. All she could think was that now there was nothing to see except linoleum and florescent lights, that the moon was moving too far out of reach. She was afraid that losing sight of it meant she'd never make it back.

Another doctor joined the first, this one more frantic. He was holding a scalpel in one hand and the other gripped the first doctor's arm. They were both so white, like florescent lighting, she can almost see the blue of their veins under their skin. She wondered what they saw when they looked at her, if it worried them that they couldn't see her veins the way that it worried her that she could see theirs.

"This is completely normal," the new doctor said, his voice soft. "It's going to be fine, but we're going to have to do a C-section. Okay?"

Hermina's head bobbed out a disjointed nod.

They pushed her into an even brighter room, where the light shone directly into her eyes and it reminded her of the moon.

The younger doctor leaned over her and, suddenly, her stomach opened like a flower and her own blood was sliding down her skin. Warm and wet and life-giving.

She felt her mouth fall open and she looked up to that almost-moon, like it could offer her some

sort of comfort. Could hear her prayer that the child they were freeing from her would come out whole. Would come out alive.

When the doctors pulled the drippy thing from her, slick with blood, dark hair clinging to its scalp, it was silent. Everything was silent, like the last breath before death.

The nurses huddled like a clump of red blood cells around the child, moving and shifting in what seemed to Hermina to be almost perfect unison. Like their bodies were connected in some invisible way and they were all pulling each other along whenever they moved.

“Is something wrong?” Hermina heard someone ask in her own voice and she got up on her elbows to see if she could find them. “Is something wrong?”

“It's alright,” someone said without looking at her. “It's all going to be alright.”

But the silence carried on, stretching uncomfortably around them until, suddenly, it broke.

One, loud, high pitched cry.

Hermina fell back onto the hospital bed. “It's fine. He's fine.”

“She, dear,” one of the nurses said softly.

“What?”

“It's a girl.”

The child was held up, crying and still covered in blood, for Hermina to see. A beautiful baby girl with skin the color of cinnamon.

Chapter 5: *Past*

The Puerto Rican men, who had been the topic of much gossip all week, were already lining into the pews when Lucilla and her family arrived at the church that warm Sunday of 1965 and it all seemed quite under control. There was no way of knowing what was to happen by the time the summer was over.

The men were not exactly fashionably dressed, although they seemed to have pulled together

their best pairs of work pants and a few old sweaters which might have been fashionable several years before. In God's eyes, it was the effort that counted, but that didn't stop the whispering, which could be heard throughout the congregation, or the girls swinging their eyes around to look back.

At the very least, Lucilla decided, this was a good way to get the attention off of her. Since she and her adoptive family had moved into town, they had been the center of much discussion and staring. Certainly, it was strange to see a mixed race couple with an adopted white daughter, but it wouldn't have been the strangest thing to happen in the congregation. Just like a group of handsome Puerto Rican men come to work, logging for the summer.

They'd all left their families behind, wives and children, and you could see it somewhere in their eyes. In the way that they moved, a sort of Godly stiffness that men got when they were far away from the people that they loved and were only waiting to go back.

Lucilla tilted her chin up proudly, tucking a loose lock of curly auburn hair behind her ear and tried to focus on Christ. There was, after all, no reason to allow herself the same frivolous distraction that the other girls her age were engaging in. There was nothing so strange as Puerto Rican men, not in this church or this town, and they'd be gone by August anyway, so there was no point in starting to gossip.

It didn't happen early on, it must have been halfway through the service before she turned around to dig through her purse for the collection plate. When she straightened, smoothing her hands down the front of her nicest blue dress, she found herself looking directly into the eyes of a handsome young man.

One of the Puerto Rican men, standing in the center of their pew.

After a moment of staring, the man cocked his head to the side and offered a half-smile.

Something warm burst open in Lucilla's stomach and, for another moment, she couldn't find it in herself to move.

It wasn't just that he was handsome, although that couldn't be denied and must have been part of

it. There was something else too, the warmth in his brown eyes or the softness in his smile. The way that, after church, he came right up to her and offered his hand for shaking. Strong and callused from hard work, the warm brown of caramel against her skin the shade of eggshells. When he looked directly down into her eyes, she felt her heart crack open and she knew that there was no going back.

“Hello. My name is Jomar Ferrer.” He had a thick accent and his *rs* rolled in that beautiful Spanish that she had never been able to emulate. It was deep and lovely and made her whole body shiver.

She smiled softly. “It's nice to meet you. I'm Lucilla Owens.”

“Lucilla.” Another smile. “That's a lovely name.”

Perhaps it was the way that her own name tipped from his mouth, rolled along like it belonged halfway to some other language, so the *illa* became *iya*, but something about her name in his mouth made it seem more beautiful than it had been before. She had never found it particularly ugly, of course not, but it hadn't been particularly beautiful either.

“Thank you, that's kind of you to say.”

“Do you live in town?”

“I do.”

“Would you mind if I came by to see you sometime?”

“I would greatly appreciate it if you did.”