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What I Know About Love

Lina María Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas

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SOMETHING MINE

I met him first; I pressed my fingers against his lips before she even knew his name.

Over a chessboard with two of our friends around us—their names and faces are now faded yellow in my mind—I reached over and tested them, this soft bit of skin between my fingers.

It wasn’t for too long, or altogether welcomed for that matter, and I don’t know why he let me, but when my hand came back I checked it for traces of him.

TRACES

Margot was a nun once, but there isn’t anything left of that anymore.

Her husband is long like a lecture and thin
like Bible pages. He tried to tell me—but his toothless accent was too thick so I had to hear it from someone else—that he was an Argentinean soccer player once. He stood around as I dove headfirst into knees and shins belonging to boys with worn-out tennis shoes trying to score against my team. My arms wrapped around the ball like desperate lovers, and worn-out tennis shoes raced back into midfield.

Her husband, whose name escapes me now like so many other soccer balls did then (even desperate lovers often miss each other), held his hands behind his back and mumbled unintelligibly as passes were missed and kicks miscalculated. Every day, behind my goal in the tall grass, there he stood with nothing but jumbled words. He
never played and never talked to anyone in particular, but day after day there he stood, tall grass up to his knees, on the grounds of the school his wife founded, while we won and lost, lost and won, and sometimes hardly even played at all.

Margot’s once soccer-playing and now soccer-watching husband is still standing there for all I know. Mumbling under his breath, three countries away from his own, for reasons I’m only left to imagine.

FOR LOVE

Lili is dead—dead as a drowned hamster.

Which is what he is.

My older sister Paula killed him—named him, too, in case you are wondering about that. Once, long ago, he was a young, healthy hamster running around with his oversized hamster testicles (as hamsters tend to have), up and down happily (as hamsters seem to do). But with time, age or some mysterious sort of disease overcame him. He started hissing at us from his cage, with green patchy fur, biting anything that came too close, or at least trying to with his now twitchy reflexes. We, fiancé and sister, tried to get Paula to let us take
him to the vet—"If nothing else they can put him down painlessly." She wouldn’t listen. Not to me, not to him, not to anyone.

She held him in a water-filled plastic bag, "until his little feet stopped kicking," she said. I never saw him dead; she wouldn’t let anyone see him, wouldn’t let anyone else put a finger on him, “not like that,” she said.

She loved him too much for that, I think.

**Too Much**

The mid-eighties found me in Colombia, and Colombia found herself in a fit of extravagance: fur coats in ninety-degree weather and gold chains on sticky chest hair. These were the days when little boys wanted to grow up to be *sicarios*. I went to school with them and I watched their dreams on TV, flying through the street like wasps, *bzzzz*, on their motorcycles, *bzzzz*, one driving, *bzzzz*, and another riding. Through cars, through taxis, through wet streets with a gun and a prayer, “Virgen María dame puntería”—Virgin Mary give me aim. The driver would grip the handle tightly and pull it back like an eyelid. Speeding between cars—rabid dogs with the memory of rabbit on their fangs—until they reached the
right window, and then the wasp stung, the dog bit, Bam!, and buzzz again, they were gone.

With someone’s love, for someone’s love.

“Millón por cabeza.” A million for every dead cop. You can do so much with a million, too much even. But they have to be “muertitos muertitos”—dead dead, and sometimes a bullet is not enough, so the wasp stings harder and the explosion follows.

Watch the documentaries, read the books—you’ll find it anywhere. Among the first things they always bought were big-screen TVs for their moms.

**Gifts**

Henry was the best teacher I ever had, the only man who ever got me to understand chemistry. I actually answered questions, raised my hand and enjoyed the miserable science. “Of course water boils at a lesser temperature in Bogotá,” I exclaimed one day in mid-lesson. “We’re at a higher altitude here!”

Makes perfect sense now.

I don’t think he is teaching anymore, at least not at my school. He’s the type of man who makes the same mistake twice. Different girl this time, though.

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Last I heard they were still dating—is that what you call it? I heard he met her parents, and I wonder what they said. I never saw anything “inappropriate”—is that what you call it? Only ice cream: he bought her some once; he offered to buy me some too. I still like ice-cream; chemistry, not so much.

YOU BREAK IT, YOU BUY IT

“If I should die, think only this of me,” wrote the poet Rupert Brooke, “that there’s some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England,” though in actuality he saw very little combat before dying of blood poisoning.

It feels a bit like cheating (doesn’t it?) to make that valiant claim before the battle, and then have the fortune of dying before reality catches up with you. And the whole thought is preposterous, like a flag on a beach claiming an entire continent. Or a pair of lips an entire human being.

All the same, I don’t think people are like foreign fields. (Sometimes I wish they were.)

CLAIMS

She ripped out every wire hanger from the closet, and then the rest of the closets suffered the same fate. With hangers in hand and ready ammunition on the linen, she sat alone in the dark,
waiting for him to come home, gripping her letter, squeezing it like a lemon, like rosary beads, alone, for hours waiting for him to come back to their bedroom.

She never told me how or when he came home, so I’m always left to imagine his footsteps. I wonder if he noticed his leather suitcase, open and with one less love letter inside; I wonder if he felt her lungs drink up the air like a shot of aguardiente when he walked into that darkened bedroom.

My grandmother tightened her fist as she related this part, as she told me of how she took the first hanger and with the whistling of thin wire came down upon him until it was bent around and inside out, like a dried limb. He just stood there, elbows up, hands like lids over his sockets. Took the beating and kept quiet like no Colombian man ever does—he could have reached out and with the back of his military hand sent her down like an injured bird. He could have beaten her, could have kept on with his affair, but instead he just stood there, quietly covering his pilot eyes, quietly gripping his career as she clawed at their marriage.

My grandmother cries a lot these days. If the pudding is not good, if the maid is late, if the pin falls, if the wind blows. I still try to take her se-
riously, sometimes at least. She cried that day too, and words came out all soggy from her wrinkled lips—"I told him I hoped he’d fall, right out of the sky"—and her eyes filled up with tears too young for her face. "I held up the letters and with two fingers behind the pages, I aimed for his eyes."

Loved him enough to want to do worse than death, to take away his wings.

**NOT ENOUGH**

Worst question I’ve ever been asked: "What type of kiss?"

Though the answer might have been worse: "Not the right one."

**ENOUGH**

I was alone at home when I watched the most interesting documentary: how to get away with the perfect murder, or how to dispose of bodies...something.

The best way, apparently, is to put the whole cursed thing into a vat of acid and then there won’t be a single trace left. Poof, gone! Unfortunately it is very complicated—not to mention suspicious—to buy the amounts of acid needed for this method. Fortunately we have other very corrosive chemicals at our disposal in the convenience of our own homes—usually already pur-
chased in massive amounts—that can replicate the effect almost exactly.

The answer to the question in your mind?
Laundry detergent.

We may be about 75 percent water, but in essence human beings are basically giant stains. Or in more accurate terms, we are enormous walking bags of proteins and fats, which are precisely the hard-to-get-out stains that most detergents claim to be designed to eliminate.

As long as you are thinking about what is convenient and not suspicious, then you might as well stay away from purchasing vats, enormous containers, or industrial-size buckets. So instead what you do is fill up your tub and pour in the Tide! Soak for three to four weeks and you will be left with easy to manage (cut, break, crush, or smash), clean white bones. Though by the end the tub will have more than a faded ring, and the room will be forever permeated with the greasy stench of decomposition.

(I watched this enraptured; murder should not be this simple. And it is so simple! It almost—
stress almost—makes me want to kill someone just to try it.)

Apart from that murderous notion, only one other thought was left clean, white, and smooth in my mind: I want someone to love me enough to lend me their tub for three to four weeks.

**WHAT GOD GIVES**

A thought came to me once. I said it out loud as if it made sense, and even now it gives me pleasure to think it, though I am far removed from its meaning and further still from the person I was when it came: “God gave men broad shoulders because they couldn’t have wombs.”

**WHAT PARENTS GIVE**

I don’t really know how my parents met, but I remember the first time I asked. I remember where I was, too—Cartagena, the heroic city of Spanish inquisitions and bloody small-pox corpses flung over stone walls.

But I don’t remember the city for the fortresses or the sea; I remember it because it was there that my parents first told me the story that has now mutated into a voracious monster that devours all conversation. I remember it because
it was there that I first heard the word *burundanga*, which I now know to mean an indigenous form of roofie. My dad used it on my mother, she said, when he kidnapped her from her castle and took her away from her royal heritage and privilege. My dad claims it was not *burundanga* he used, but money, to buy her off the slave trade and remove the stick from her mouth—“the one they wisely placed there to keep her sharp, vicious tongue in check.”

I’m not that interested in the real story.