Margarita Didn't Mind

Lina Ferreira
She wore a white lace dress; a normal dress, I guess, for the occasion. I wonder who picked it. As I stood over the wooden box, it seemed to me that the dress had grown an unnatural extension, and it ate up her neck in sloppy stitches. The stale white dress was more alive than she was—hands stiffly bent over stomach and eyelids pulled over like the final bed sheets of the corpse. She doesn’t look peaceful at all, sleeping there. I thought while I watched her encased in white silk, just very still and quiet, like the silence in hospitals or of angry parents.

I arrived at the funeral home with my father and sister—was it day or night? I can’t remember. It probably didn’t matter because immediately after entering the angular edifice,
we were pointed towards the basement, where it’s always either an artificial day or permanent night. My foot hadn’t touched the last step in our descent before I noticed that the dimly lit room was invisibly divided in two: the living and the dead, the mourning and the mourned. Next to the coffin stood my uncle: shadows poured over his face, fading into his black beard—but no tears that I could see. Next to him, like his quiet feminine replica, was my cousin’s younger sister—tearless as well. And then there were the rest of us, standing behind the imaginary line, watching them: corpse, sister, and father. I think we were all expecting a rupture in their dry constitution, but it didn’t happen; all who cried stood at a distance.

We walked to the corner farthest away from the casket, as the maid scurried around under a stained plastic tray laden with plastic coffee and tea cups; I looked around me and met the accompanying crowd with my eyes. Everyone was viciously quiet, as if they feared to wake the sleeper—even everyone that is, except a group of women in black shawls and salty tears, standing right in front of our solitary corner. They trembled to the beat of the rosary beads slipping through their fingers like seconds of white sand. The sobbing advocates pleaded with heaven, hell, and every spirit in between to let my cousin through Saint Peter’s gate. It once seemed strange to me that almost every Catholic soul has to stop in Purgatory before continuing on to heaven—with the few exceptions of saints, a handful of extraordinary people, and those who go straight to hell. Purgatory in my mind became an eternal tollbooth, designed to keep the highways of heaven and hell functional. But no matter the state of the pavement, they seem to be praying far too furiously for the merely temporary chains of Purgatory.

The reason for their fervor was clearly that my cousin was not a saint, an extraordinary person, or even an average one who passes through the flaming tongues of Purgatory and continues on to join some sort of heaven. I knew this
because my father told me before we went inside, what she had done: a mortal sin. An unforgivable sin. Even if he hadn't told me, I think I would have known. The silence gave it away. It was no ordinary silence; it was negative noise, concave words, the murmuring of corpses, like the cold air between the teeth and tongue, where secrets are held. Immediately upon walking into the room, I saw my cousin's secret hiding in their eyes; they watched me coming in and searched my pale eyes, and they were windows trying to hide the sky. I tried to keep the secret down with the knot and dryness of fear; my father had given me a secret which, if revealed to the priest, would forbid a Catholic burial and leave her to be deposited in a lonely cemetery, away from familiar corpses.

My sister and I leaned in as he whispered my cousin's sin.

"Niñas, ahora no vayan a decir nada al respecto, pero su prima se ahorró."

It makes no sense—you are always forbidden to ask about the most curious things: no one ever forbids you to ask about grass or exhaust pipes. You are forbidden to ask about the one thing gnawing away at your mind: why or exactly how your cousin killed herself. However, some things do tend to clear themselves up. For example, once having heard my father outside the white cement building, it became clear why my mother had objected to our coming—more so than usual, that is. The reason that the women prayed so hopelessly for my cousin: suicides are in the one of the groups that never even see Purgatory . . . the worst group to be in.

"Cuidado de mencionarlo, especialmente en la funeraria. ¿Entendido?"

Although I don’t remember actually agreeing to “being careful not to mention it,” (especially in the funeral home) I imagine we must have agreed, because after the menacing warning, we went in. As a matter of fact, all I can remember is holding my breath with my older sister, sharing for a few seconds with my boxed cousin a moment of breathlessness.
We walked past the priest and down the stairs; I feared he’d be able to tell somehow from my fearful look that my cousin did not, in fact, deserve this holy burial. A few feet from the entrance into the dark underground, she lay surrounded by flowers too beautiful for the living. *Margarita means Daisy, we should have brought daisies—but we didn’t bring any flowers, just ourselves. Encased in wood and silk, she slept in sin; the flowers didn’t seem to mind—but priests do, so I was told. Priests care about a lot of things flowers don’t seem to mind at all.*

The only person in the room wearing white was a busy maid running around with her tray, a white apron, long white socks and a stained hat. She walked away after handing me a boiling cup of herbal tea as I was given further explanations of my cousin’s sin.

*"Fue con una cremallera." With a zipper? How? I ran a simulation in my mind; I shouldn’t have, because as I did the creature in my throat dug its claws deeper still.*

*"Y no es que hubiera sido el primer intento." That makes sense; most successful suicides are not the first attempt.*

*"La encontró su hermanita." Now this part was the most shocking: my other cousin, her younger sister, found her. I looked to the tiny shadow by my uncle, a little girl of no more than eleven, but from a distance I felt her to be a great deal older—coffins have an aging effect for the living and a rejuvenating one for the dead. I tried to imagine my little cousin walking in on the human mess, *it was a zipper, it must have cut through the skin, right? There must have been blood.* And of course, the limp body of a sister on the floor. *With a zipper—how, and why?* She called downstairs, she talked to the doorman, and they called the ambulance. I looked over at the little girl, she wasn’t crying—just like her dad.

I had asked my dad earlier, as I watched my little cousin from afar, why Margarita had pulled her own life from beneath her feet like that. He got very quiet and said he didn’t know,
but it seemed to me that he had an inkling he chose not to share. So later, I asked my mom, hoping that some distance gave her the power to guess.

“Esta no es la primera Margarita que se le muere a tu tío.” Not the first Daisy that my uncle had lost, she said. Normally I would have asked, “What do you mean?” but in these sorts of situations people seem to confess without provocation.

“La primera murió en un accidente automovilístico. Tu tío iba manejando... demasiado rápido.” A car accident took the first Margarita’s life. “Your uncle drove the car,” she said . . . your uncle, those were her words, my uncle...my mother spoke without thinking twice about it, but with every “your” she’d say I’d feel a sting of guilt. This was not a distant tragedy or an unfortunate death far away, in the jungle where the dead have claimed their own nation and guns go off with the ordinariness of change jingling in your pocket. The same blood ran through her veins as did in mine, this was my uncle, my cousin—and I didn’t know her; didn’t want to know him.

“Demasiado rápido...” He was driving too fast and lost control, his girlfriend’s sister, Margarita, went out like a sudden eclipse. That was the first Margarita to slip between my uncle’s fingers, “the most beautiful and joyous of that entire family,” my father would say about her years after both funerals. The second Daisy to escape my uncle’s grip was my cousin, the daughter of the first Margarita’s sister. A strange choice of name: I wonder if it was the mother or the father’s choice. If it was his, then one could not help but ask, why would he do that? Guilt.

And now this one was dead too, why isn’t he crying?

“Tu tío siempre tuvo una relación muy extraña con tu prima...” What does “a strange relationship” mean? What did my mother mean? What type of relationship between a father and a daughter can be considered strange? But these things one cannot ask, for fear of being right—to keep the possibility of being wrong open.
When my turn came to visit the sleeper I found that curiosity can do more than fear. Standing by her coffin, wondering where the line was between a respectful length of time and a voyeuristic amount, I found her so easy to love—quiet and empty, dressed once more like a bride. She would have worn a white dress like this one at least one other time, her first communion. Maybe she loved it, like most little girls do...or maybe they had to coerce her into it, bribing her with promises of cake and presents. So there she was, a wedding-less bride and I, without a single memory of her. I didn’t remember her—we must have met at some point in some random New Year’s drunken haze, but I dug channels in my brain and found nothing. Nothing but one single, yellow, moth-eaten memory. It was another death that brought our childhood encounter up—this time it was our grandmother. My paternal grandmother died of lung cancer, but I have no memories of her smoking, or her raspy voice licking my little girl ears like the tongue of a cat. I remember her wrapped in old blankets and surrounded by altars of buttons, knickknacks, shiny pieces of plastic, tacks, and numberless unrecognizable pieces of contraptions only DaVinci could decipher. It was outside her room, just a little past the staircase, that I saw Margarita for the first time. I was scared. I don’t know if I said hi. My mother had warned me about her.

"Ellas jalan pelo, Lina, así que cuidadito." She informed me that Margarita and her little sister pulled hair and I was thus forbidden to play with them. I went around them and waited for them to go down the stairs, I stood there a little bit longer and managed to catch a glimpse of them playing in the tiny front yard before I was called into my grandmother’s room. They don’t seem that bad—but few people do when they laugh.

Not the best memory to have to offer—too similar to the dead bouquet by her waxy wood altar. But since I had nothing else to give, I took a memory instead...I met my cousin at her funeral; she let me watch her sleep. I walked away from her and never saw her again, not even in pictures;
I rejoined my tiny portion of the Ferreira clan by a dark corner. The maid in white handed me another boiling bitter cup, and the women in black gave out one enormous, consuming sob, so that the rest of us had to gasp for air the next few minutes. The priest never found out and I guess Margarita cheated hell—in this way at least. They planted her in the ground soon after that; she didn’t seem to mind; flowers hardly ever do.

Lina Ferreira is Mormon by birth, Catholic by culture, and violent by choice. She is an English major, speaks three and a half languages, listens to questionable music, and watches zombie films. She will be traveling to Italy this winter to finish her novel and finally add the “artist” part to her self-proclaimed title of starving artist. When asked to describe her literary genealogy she replied, “Virginia Woolf is my mother; G. García Márquez is my father; and Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky are my crazy alcoholic uncles.”