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## Santa Maria

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*Personal Essay***Santa Maria**

Lisa Ann Jackson

*For, if I imp my wing on thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.*

—George Herbert, “Easter Wings”

When I first met Maria, she was in the kitchen in her pajamas making pancakes and eggs. No one had told her a new girl was moving in that day. She looked surprised, even annoyed, at my dad and me bursting through the door without a knock, our arms laden with boxes. We introduced ourselves and asked her where I could put my things. She pointed me back to her room. “You get the top bunk,” she said.

While we were carrying boxes back and forth, Maria finished cooking her breakfast and sat down at the table. I was struck by her black, curly hair and rich brown skin. She was beautiful. I thought she might be Polynesian, but when my dad asked her where she was from, she said she was a freshman from a border town in Texas.

I had just come home from my mission in April. My plans were to work all summer to earn money for school that fall. I spent several days stuffing envelopes—a job secured for me by a temp agency. While I was grabbing, folding, stuffing, grabbing, folding, stuffing, alone in a spare cubicle, I couldn’t help but think that only days before, my every move affected someone else’s life—mortal and eternal. Now my every move only got me in trouble for not sealing envelopes correctly.

One evening after a particularly frustrating day in that cubicle, I arrived home to find a letter from a mission friend in England. In it was a note which said, in essence, “I don’t know why, but I

feel like you should be in school, and I feel like you need help getting there.” Attached to the note was the means to get me started.

I had struggled with the idea of staying home for the entire summer, but there were no financial resources for me to do otherwise. While I was in England, my father lost his business. My mother’s income barely covered basic household expenses. I had felt strongly that I should go back to school as soon as possible, but fall semester—over five months of working away—seemed as soon as possible. So I stuffed envelopes, and no one knew my yearning.

Except my friend in England. That note could have been pinned to Lazarus and I wouldn’t have thought it more a miracle. Within three days, I had quit the temp agency and was on my way to BYU. When I got there, I looked up an old friend and bought the last contract at her apartment complex.

That’s where I met Maria. We began to warm up to each other over chips and salsa. We soon made it our nightly ritual to discuss the day over mild Pace picante sauce and white restaurant rounds. Maria teased me endlessly because I couldn’t eat anything but mild. “It tastes like tomatoes,” she said. “How can you eat that?” She started buying her own jalapenos to heap on each bite. “How can you eat that?” I would tease back.

While we ate, she often told me about who stared at her on campus that day. “It’s because you’re beautiful,” I said. “No, it’s because I’m dark.” People often stopped her and asked her, in Spanish, what part of Mexico she was from. I only saw it happen once. We were in the grocery store, and a zealous returned missionary with a huge grin grabbed her arm and reeled off something in Spanish. She glared back and said in perfect English, “I’m from Brownsville, Texas.” “See, Lisa,” she said to me. “That happens all the time.” “It’s just because he went on his mission there and he is excited to see someone he thinks is native,” I told her. “But I’m American,” she said. “You don’t understand.”

She was right. I didn’t really understand. But I wasn’t completely wrong when I said people stared at her because she was beautiful. We saw an ad for people to be extras in upcoming Book of Mormon seminary videos. They were looking for people of Lamanite descent or people with dark hair who could look like they were of Lamanite descent. I had dark hair and Maria was clearly Lamanite, so we decided to sign up.

When we arrived at 6 A.M. the day of filming, they lined us up to make us Lamanites. I went before Maria, and while someone braided my hair, someone else colored my skin. She sponged me with Lamanite-in-a-bottle to make my skin rich brown. When I was finished, they put Maria in the makeup chair. The woman in charge of the Lamanite-in-a-bottle started sponging down Maria when another makeup artist stopped her. “She doesn’t need that,” she said. “Why mess with perfection?” “Did you hear that,” Maria asked me. “Why mess with perfection.” Maria beamed. She was proud of her heritage, and that day she didn’t mind when the camera stared at her dark skin. When we saw the videos months later, Maria made almost every cut.

The thought of the miracle that brought me back to school lingered. My presence in Provo that spring—versus that fall or even that summer—had to have eternal ramifications. Why else would the Lord so blatantly get me back to school? Obviously I had to get back to school to meet the accountant who was graduating in August and wouldn’t be there in the fall. I fully expected a December wedding.

Maria and I had lived together for only a few weeks when Mother’s Day came. Maria hadn’t gotten out of bed yet, so I woke her after I showered. “I don’t go to church on Mother’s Day,” she told me from under her covers. “I don’t have a mother.” I could feel her silent addition, “And it’s God’s fault.” “Maria, you have to go to church. Staying home won’t make it better.” I tried my missionary skills to coax her out of bed: I showed empathy, tried to relate—I had struggles, too. My dad wasn’t working. My mission had been tough at times. But I had not lost my mother, and Maria didn’t go to church that day.

Maria’s father left them when she was six. Her mother became ill, and Maria, only eleven years old, was left to care for her. Four children were still at home, and she was in charge of the two younger ones—a brother with Down’s syndrome and a sister. When her mother died, Maria and the other children were given to an older half-sister who was twenty-four years old and not yet married.

Maria never told me details of being raised by her sister, but I sensed them. Her sister struggled with the responsibilities of raising four children. Most of the household duties fell to Maria, including caring for her little brother. She had other older brothers

and sisters, ten children in total, but they all struggled. One brother joined the army and left. Another brother was in jail. Another sister had her own children and her own worries. At her sister's, Maria lived on government assistance most of the time. She was at school on grants and a work-study program. "No girl should grow up without a mother," she once told me. "I needed a mother and she was taken away. Why, Lisa?"

I didn't know. It strikes me as odd to even tell Maria's story. It doesn't seem real, somehow. It seems like a made-for-T.V. movie or an after-school special. But as her trials unfolded over chips and salsa, so did her profound strength. She was at school—the first in her family to go. She had raised her brother and sister, and she worked hard to do what was right. And Maria was right about me. I didn't know then and I don't know now what it feels like to lose my mother, be raised by my sister, and be stared at because of my dark skin and hair. At my tannest, I am not as perfect as she is, and at my most pensive, I haven't felt what she has felt.

I didn't get married that December. It wasn't until years later, when I was standing in the temple talking to Maria after escorting her through her first session that I realized that *she* was the reason I had to be in Provo that spring and summer. The summer was a turning point for both of us. Over chips and salsa, she told me how she would come home each day after school and sit on her mother's bed. She told me how her mother would read the Book of Mormon to her each night. She showed me pictures of her mother when she was young and healthy. As the summer meandered on, I watched Maria slowly imp her broken wing on the Savior's, where she found peace about her mother's death and her upbringing.

Lisa Ann Jackson is interim associate editor at *BYU Magazine* and an M.A. candidate in English at Brigham Young University. This essay won honorable mention in the 1997 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.