

Quo Fata Ferunt: Whither the Fates Carry Us

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Zanna Katlyn McKay
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“In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that (s)he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do...”

– James Agee, *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*.

The white of thick snowflakes streaks through the black-blue sky. Outside it is early dawn as Maylinda pushes open the double doors of her non-descript, six-story dorm. The former mental-hospital-turned-residence hall sits at the edge of the campus of a small women’s college—a self-contained collection of old brick buildings tucked at the base of Mount Holyoke Range State Park. She has worked here for thirty-five years. In the dark, quiet foyer she kicks the snow off her boots, takes off her coat and unwraps a red scarf from around her head, shaking off water. “You made it,” she says to me, and smiles as I groggily untangle my own scarf, out of my element at such an early hour.

Stepping lightly in her tennis shoes, she quickly calls her supervisor and then unlocks her closet and rolls out her cart. The bottles of cleaning solutions and dusters clack together as she hustles away down the hall. First she will sweep the floors, then wipe down the mirrors and sinks and scrub the toilets—just in time for the dorm to begin to stir. All across campus, nineteen other housekeepers in twenty-two dorms are each silently carrying out their own morning rituals.

The door of the housekeeper’s closet is thickly decorated with pictures of grinning dark-haired boys and girls, all still young enough to be gap-toothed where their baby teeth have fallen out. There is a small, heart-shaped plaque that says, “My goal in life is

to be the person my grandchildren think I am.” Tacked up amongst the Christmas cards and wallet-sized photos are various pamphlets—one advertising her church, First Central Baptist, one about abstinence until marriage and another about the Palmer Family Task Force against domestic violence with a photo of kids playing in a pile of fall leaves and a list of phone numbers to call if you need help or shelter. There are several postcards with different views of a paisley-shaped island of white sand in a brilliant blue ocean, barely wide enough for trees; on each is written simply: “Bermuda.” On the small whiteboard in the middle of it all, written neatly in small letters: “Maylinda is your housekeeper’s name. She is hard of hearing.”

Because she is hard of hearing, Maylinda sometimes answers questions that weren’t asked, but no one seems to mind—she speaks gently and cheerfully and always politely. She often punctuates the end of sentences with a grandmotherly “dear,” leaning in and saying, “what was that, dear?” At sixty-four, her hair is still a dark-chocolate brown. Her dark-beige skin reflects her mixed British-Indian heritage. She is only five feet tall and wide through the hips, which, if she sits too long get stiff and make her shuffle when she walks. The nurse’s smock and jeans uniform she has invented herself from years of experience.

The first thing she says about her life is “it’s been a long one...” and as an after thought, “thank God.” Then she says: “Before I say anything else I want you to know I’m a born again Christian and I have made peace with God about everything that happened to me. Some people are very angry and bitter. Not me, God has helped me find peace.”

There are long stretches of Maylinda’s memory that are dark, like a family photo album which, instead of being stuffed with fuzzy Polaroids, has sparse, pristine images—

some happy, some disturbing—but is otherwise blank. The few memories that are mundane are electrified by their clarity, by their preciousness.

When Maylinda starts remembering, sometimes things emerge from “the fog,” as she calls it, that haven’t been there for decades. She talks like a detective about memories. As though she is looking at a poster board with pictures from her life tacked up on it, she traces the strings between the photos and stuns herself when she recalls something clearly. She gasps a little, saying, “oh, here it is, here’s how it happened.”

Sitting at the little table in her housekeeping closet, looking off into nowhere, she reaches out her hands as if the memories are flying past her too fast to grab, “oh, yes, yes, yes,” she says, gesticulating in empty air. Then she settles in with this newfound old memory and savors it. Sometimes she smiles; sometimes she takes off her rectangular, red glasses and squeezes her forehead between her thumb and forefinger, shielding her tightly closed eyes. She often laughs, delighted, like a new clue just emerged—like none of it happened to her.

This is as far back as she is able to go: Bermuda, 1955. Maylinda is seven years old and has never left this island of barely twenty square miles. For the first ten years of her life, Maylinda and her four siblings were scattered around. They lived with relatives, near and distant, sometimes “friends” of her mother’s, sometimes in houses for orphaned children, even though they weren’t parentless. They never lived all four together, but sometimes they lived in subgroups. Their mother wavered in and out of their lives. Their fathers, of which there were three between the four of them, were concepts without faces or names. They existed, it was clear, but if Maylinda had passed her father on the street she was left only to wonder at seeing a stranger with the same wide but delicate jaw and

high brow over eyes the deepest shade of brown before black. She calls herself and her three siblings “illegitimate” to this day.

Bermuda, as a memory, is a collection of half-there houses and people. It has little chronology and a childlike sense of space: the ocean, palm trees, the few piercing moments that caused shame and the doldrums of loneliness—all these loom while the adults and the daily order of life have been lost to time.

At seven years old, Maylinda is a small, tan child with thick dark hair that she has been taught to carefully plait into two long braids every morning. She has a dress to play in, one for Sunday school and her school uniform. In the early, light blue of the morning she scrambles up a little rocky incline to the road where she buys warm bread from the bakery with Brenda. The memory of Brenda comes back with some force. “I remember Brenda better than the little ones. Isn’t that awful?”

Maylinda shared a room with Brenda in one of those houses that is only half-there. The metal bed under the window and their clothing trunk she remembers, but not the rest. Not really her little brother and sister, “the little ones,” who also lived there. For them she just remembers being responsible for the “poe”—the chamber pot. Of the people who cared for her, they are remembered more like forces in the house than actual people—forces of violent discipline, mostly—not even a name to know them by. They were more like keepers. She remembers only that they thought she was bad because she did bad things, which was always Brenda. It was Brenda who tore the lace lining of the antique clothing trunk and it was Brenda who stole things, gave them as gifts to Maylinda and then blamed her for the theft.

They may have lived together in that house for years, maybe just one year. It seemed like one long day, getting up in the early morning to get bread with Brenda, fighting with her over something too small to remember, getting walloped for something Brenda did, helping the little ones use the poe in the middle of the night, and then starting again. The only real gift, perhaps, that Brenda ever gave her was Maylinda's first memory of her mother.

One morning, as they peered into the clothing trunk that they shared, Brenda said matter-of-factly to Maylinda that today she could tie her braids with her Sunday school ribbons, if she wanted. It was strictly forbidden by their caretakers to wear Sunday clothing to school, but Maylinda's mother herself had said it was OK, according to Brenda. The Sunday school ribbons were bright yellow silk with delicate white polka dots; Maylinda recalls those ribbons and how much she loved them, loved being seen in them.

After school, a beautiful woman strode purposefully into the living room of their house. Looking back, she must have been young. She was wearing a fitted pants suit and a hat with a netted veil that fell elegantly over her eyes. The woman knelt down in front of her second-oldest daughter with the yellow ribbons in her hair and gripped her sternly by the shoulders. "Maylinda, *why* do you do the things you do?" Over her mother's shoulder Maylinda could see Brenda peeking through the doorway. Brenda tricked me, she thought. "I don't know," she said quietly to her mother, looking back and forth between Brenda and this beautiful, elusive stranger kneeling in front of her.

* * *

The Bible, for Maylinda, was a companion. As a young child she had a non-

congenital heart murmur, which today we call “innocent” and ignore, but in the 1950s was a sentence to isolation. Her grandmother tried to occupy her in the summers by setting her out on the porch with an Old Testament. Maylinda read the story of how God created the world, which sounded like Bermuda. It was full of animals: birds flew through the heavens and fish swarmed the seas. As she watched other kids run through the neighborhood or play basketball or hopscotch, she read about Adam and Eve and the serpent.

Maylinda recalls the story of Cain and Abel as if it is her own memory. Cain was the first son of Adam and Eve, Abel the second. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. When God asked for their sacrifices, Cain offered up his harvest from the earth. Abel slaughtered his newest, most supple lambs. Maylinda recites this nearly verbatim:

And in process of time it came to pass,

that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD.

And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof.

And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering:

but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect.

And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

Cain leads his brother Abel into a field and kills him out of jealousy and spite. They were the first murderer and the first victim—family, no less. Better even than the moment that Eve bit into the apple, Maylinda came to understand sin as she sat by herself

on her grandmother's porch in the Bermuda heat and read the story of the first violent crime that man ever committed. Abel's blood hardened the earth against Cain. Cain was banished to wander alone forever.

She filled in the gaps in the story with her logic. Why, if Cain had offered God his hard-earned harvest, had God favored Abel's slaughtered lambs? She imagined that if she were God she would have accepted Cain's offering of wheat, which was all he had. It followed her logic, then, that God had preferences, as any human being. He had whims and tastes and was occasionally cruel, no matter what you offered him. Perhaps that's why her mother only came to visit her when she was bad, or why God had given her a misshapen heart which, instead of pounding strong and clear like the children who ran past, made a weak "swoosh" after every thump.

The day Maylinda remembers as her last in the house with Brenda was the day they played hooky. She, Brenda and a few other children from the neighborhood had co-opted an adult-sized bicycle from somewhere. They each took turns running along and jumping on it until they wobbled too hard and fell off. After slowly making their way to the beach, bruise-kneed, they lay in the sand or played tag or hide and go seek, laughing and running amongst the jutting dark rocks for hours. Maylinda picked up a clear, gelatinous blob at the edge of the surf. Brenda advised her to put in it her mouth. That was the end of Maylinda's day of hooky. She walked home alone with lips swelled five times their normal size. She remembers the searing, stinging-burning-itching of her swelling jellyfish sting...but her mind goes blank when she gets back to that house and the specters that lived there. She must have arrived covered in sand and smelling like the sea, clearly having been nowhere near school that day.

Through some unknown words and deals between the adults behind the scenes of her life, Maylinda was moved to her uncle's house in Somerset Village, one town away. She didn't see Brenda again after that, and she didn't have any other friends whose names come back to her now.

Her uncle was a very religious man. She had only seen him at church until she moved into his little house near the beach. He gave her storybook versions of bible tales with bright cartoon illustrations, instead of the Bible itself. He was a salvage diver who owned a trinket shop where he sold his booty as well as his own creations. In the evenings, in the soft light of the shop, Maylinda sat with him and watched with mute amazement as he slid a carefully made, impossibly small ship hull into the mouth of a bottle and then righted the sails, like magic, by slowly pulling a white string.

During the day they went out on his boat together. He would lower himself into the water with an antique diving suit and walk along the bottom of the ocean among the numerous wrecks off the island. Maylinda, on board, waited for a tug and then reeled up a bucket where her uncle had put fresh mussels that he plucked for her as he went. She cracked them open with a penknife and popped them in her mouth raw, like salty candy.

One of these sunny days on the deck of his boat, far out off the coast, her uncle taught her to swim by throwing her off the boat. When she emerged from the water, briefly, she was amazed at how far he had managed to throw her. She submerged again and struggled and then popped back up, gulping salty water. Her uncle cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. "Swim, Maylinda! Swim!" She tried to shout back that she had never learned how. "A little girl that lives on an island should know how to

swim! Paddle, like a dog!” She flailed, bobbing up and down. She thought: “What does a dog do when it swims?” “Paddle, like a dog, Maylinda, come on!”

Her uncle said little except about the Bible and let her be wherever he was. At the end of the summer he threw her a birthday party at the church that they attended every Sunday. It was her first birthday party ever. The church was overrun with children, most of whom Maylinda did not know, but she played anyways. At this point, everyone had forgotten about her heart murmur. She loved to play soccer; she loved to beat the boys. There was an enormous pink and white cake, the likes of which Maylinda had never seen. They began singing happy birthday to her when they brought it out and at first Maylinda didn’t know what was happening. Happy birthday, Maylinda? It must be a party for me, then, she thought. That night she had a dream, which she remembers to this day, about that beautiful pink cake.

One morning, early, her uncle woke her up as he moved around the house preparing to go out on the boat. If she wanted, she could sleep in on these mornings. She had discovered that his bed had a feather duvet on it, so when he left she sleepily crawled into the soft, comfortable warmth and immediately fell back asleep. When she awoke the bed was wet. At first, she didn’t understand. She lay for a moment caught between the dreamy warmth and the confusing wetness. And then the horror of the situation dawned on her. She leaped out of his bed. The shame overwhelmed her as she changed out of her pajamas. She thought of Adam and Eve hiding from God in the Garden of Eden after they had disobeyed him and eaten the fruit. She felt suddenly naked, as they had felt when they decided to cover themselves with leaves. She grabbed her other clothing and left, walking the ten miles back to her grandmother’s house. “I ran away,” she says quietly,

the memory of that morning slowly washing over her as she leans back in the chair in her housekeeping closet. At church, sometimes, her uncle would approach her and try to say something. He would begin to lean down as if to say something just to her, and she would always squirm backwards, bumping into people, disappearing into the crowd of milling adults in the churchyard.

After she left her uncle's house the fog settles back in. In most of her memories after that summer Maylinda, like Cain, is wandering Bermuda alone. When she wasn't reading the Bible, she recalls walking through a tall field of sugarcane, looking up at the bright blue sky through the yellow stalks whose green, leafy tops waved above her head. She walked to deserted beaches and waded out to where the water was over her head, trying to open her eyes and look around. Following schools of fish, she swam into the grottos on the rocky parts of the island. When she got tired, the waves lazily washed her back to shore.

She would wander down the main road into Hamilton, where the houses were pastel with white roofs and the shops had expensive things for tourists to buy and marvel up at the enormous white cruise ships that brought them to her small island. Looking out at the wide blue sea and sky, Maylinda wondered to herself if it were the sky that made the sea blue or the other way around. She would scoop up handfuls of clear Atlantic water and let it trickle through her fingers to see the color.

It was on one of her walks around the island that she saw her favorite uncle for the very last time. Standing on the street corner in Hamilton, a bus rolled up to a stoplight and idled next to her. She heard a frantic knocking and looked up to see her uncle smiling and waving down at her from the bus. He was mouthing something behind the window.

For a moment the sun and the smell of the sea reminded her of the afternoons they spent on the boat and she grinned and threw her arm up to wave back. Then the feeling of the wet duvet snuck up on her and shame welled up in her belly. She withdrew her arm, turned and ran quickly in the other direction as the bus pulled away, her uncle straining back over his seat to see her.

“I hope I didn’t hurt that man,” she says, recalling that sunny afternoon. “He was a good man. He was the only man in my life who didn’t try and molest me.” She leans back in the padded metal chair and thinks. Her eyes wander absentmindedly from object to object in the small room: microwave, fan, the housekeeping department issued safe, the collection of brooms hanging on the back of the door. She sighs.

* * *

Soon after Maylinda turned ten, with no warning, her mother summoned her four children from different corners of the island and declared that she was getting married to an American serviceman and that they were all moving to America together. “It was like being taken from the Garden of Eden,” she says, slowly, looking off at the beige wall as if she can still see the island getting smaller and smaller as the plane soars away over the Atlantic. Maylinda was an adult before she found out that America is just a “hop, skip and a jump,” away from her precious island.

Spokane, Washington in late September: Maylinda had never imagined that a place so ugly existed on this earth. Everything seemed dull gray. Not a leaf on a tree or a flower or anything green for miles. The brightest things were made of plastic. Her smaller brother and sister sat silently in the back of the car with her as they drove out of Fairchild Air Force base to their new neighborhood near the railroad tracks. They looked out the

window, horrified, at the rows of squat, neutral colored houses with grimy plastic siding and scrubby yards of brown grass. Maylinda thought of the nights in Bermuda, once a week, when the only woman in town with a TV would haul it out on the porch and let the kids gather in her yard to watch *The Twilight Zone*. This felt like an eerie twist at the end of the episode of her life.

“Now, this is probably on purpose,” she says, leaning forward in her chair, focused, with her eyes squeezed closed, waving a hand in front of her face as if to clear the air. “I have a way of training my brain, after I got molested, to not think about what went on. But the thing is there’s so many gaps.” In the dark times she knows *what* she was doing but does not remember doing it. She knows that she was hiding from her stepfather for those four years. That she was lingering around the library at her middle school until she knew her mother’s shift had ended. She’s never told anyone what actually happened to her, just that when she threatened to tell, her stepfather said calmly, “I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you all.” She hid, she lingered; she forced herself out of her body into “nothingness” when she wanted to forget that she was alive.

Forgetting a period of your life that was a long series of traumas is the exact opposite of what happens to your memory just before you are hit by a car. Adrenaline, in small doses, will cement a few seconds into your mind forever. When you live on stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, from moment to moment, afraid of what will come through the front door of your house or into your bedroom, it seems to cauterize your memory making ability. When every decision that you make sets off the fight-or-flight mechanism in your nervous system—when to go home, what to say that won’t make someone fly off the handle, making sure you remember to put a chair in front of your

door before you go to sleep—eventually your life is reduced to a series of close-calls. You forget what the leisure of regularly being able to let your mind wander felt like. Years later you may not be sure what happened, since much of the time you were simply obeying your body's panic alarm.

There are psychologists who say that kind of forgetting is just repression; there are ones who say repression is an out-dated myth; and some who say that, regardless, the recalled experiences of the traumatized are often just factually false, for whatever reason. Maylinda will spend hours recounting a story that seems to be unfolding in front of her for the first time in decades, losing all sense of time. Sometimes she remembers something and then her next memory contradicts it, “now, how did my older sister get there?” She says, genuinely puzzled. “Well, she must have come over from Bermuda at some point.” She shrugs and shakes her head. “I’d be making things up if I said I remember that.”

In 1963, five years after moving to Spokane, Maylinda was fifteen years old. She recalls that she was six months pregnant the day that Kennedy was assassinated. She didn't know much about the president, at the time, but she felt bad for his wife, Jackie Onassis, who was always well dressed—all the girls at school agreed. Maylinda was taken out of school when she started showing at five months. The father of her first child, and her future husband, Michael, was twenty-three years old and drifted in and out of her life—at the moment he was out.

Maylinda lived at a home for pregnant teenagers run by nuns, working, during the day, to complete her high school diploma. At night, Maylinda and the dozen other girls there sat on the edges of their beds, their bellies bulging under their nightgowns,

gossiping and sharing pictures of their boyfriends. It was the most fun she'd had since Bermuda. She felt safe at night, surrounded by a bunch of other young women. They never made snide comments about her family, as people had in high school. They never tried to beat her up like girls at school had on the walk home when Michael forgot or decided not to swoop in and rescue her in his red sports car.

When she turned eighteen Maylinda, Michael and their toddler moved just across the state border to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Maylinda wore a blue, wool dress pilled with age when they got married at the local Catholic Church. "I never, ever, ever celebrated my marriage or anniversary," she says, matter-of-factly. The fog, which before had settled in patches over periods of her life, sets in deeply during their twenty-five year marriage. They got married sometime in February as she now recalls. The day of the wedding, Michael, then twenty-six, left her and the baby at home in their new house, pulled down all the blinds and said, "I'll be back later. Don't go anywhere. Don't even look out the window."

Thinking back, out of everything that happened, there are a few moments where it seems so clear now. Like the day that Michael left her literally standing in the rain. It was early on, when she was still sneaking out of her mother's house to meet him at the church on the corner. She fastened a plastic hair cover around her head and stood in the rain for an hour outside, getting soaked, just waiting. Michael called a day or two later. She said, "why didn't you meet me at the church." He said, "You didn't want *me* to get wet, didya?"

"I remember that" she says, exhaling, "and what really bothers me is I accepted that. Because I wanted acceptance so I would just let him get away with anything." Now,

forty-six years later, she laughs at the thought of her wedding day, almost in disbelief. “I fought like a cat to marry that man. And then he beats you. And what do you do, you’re embarrassed, *you* chose to marry that man.”

She wanted, eventually, to go to college. At one time school had been a source of pride for her. “I used to be—I used to be the smartest kid in the class but after everything I don’t know how to explain it...but I wasn’t.” She started attending classes with Father Pierre at the Catholic Church where the marriage was blessed in Coeur d’Alene. (She calls it “Michael’s church” and then laughs harder than usual at the thought of Michael being a religious man.) It wasn’t long before she stopped being able to leave the house much. Sometimes Michael would come home from the bar in the middle of the night and start hitting her before she even woke up enough to understand what was happening. He often left her lips split and her eye sockets bruised and tender for days. She had to wear sunglasses to take the baby on walks and go to the store. Her teacher, Father Pierre, stopped by one day to see why she hadn’t been showing up. All he could say when she took off the dark glasses was, “I had no idea Michael was like that.” He didn’t come back or speak to her ever again.

“I’d seen movies where women were abused but they never went to shelters,” she says, half-heartedly shrugging. “I don’t know what they did.” The police came once but seemed satisfied when Michael answered the door and put on a perplexed air, saying everything was fine.

Of the twenty-five years she says the worst things are the ones you find out later. Like when her son started talking about scrounging for lunch with his siblings throughout school and she said, “well, what did you do with your lunch money?” Her son looked at

her, now grown and in the army but still referred to as her “baby”, and said, “what lunch money.” She used to lay out one dollar for each of her four children every morning in quarters on the kitchen counter before she went to work at 5 AM—one stack for each kid. She holds her breath for about ten seconds before she says, “it was my children’s *lunch money*,” in a voice that sounds like someone knocked the wind out of her. “It made me sick when I found out what he’d be doing.”

Her oldest son got in a car accident and suffered amnesia from brain-damage, “he’s actually lucky in that way,” she says, grimacing, “it doesn’t haunt him like it does the others.” Her daughter graduated from Harvard “summa cum...what’s it called? The Latin stuff, summa cum laude, I think.” She shrugs with appropriately false modesty and smiles. She lists her children’s college educations as their first attribute when she describes them. The youngest child, the “baby”, didn’t graduate, is sober on and off, working on and off and never speaks with his other siblings.

“It was my neighbor that saved my life, that let me know I had to get out of the marriage,” she says, skipping decades, hundreds of cleaned toilets and countless bruises. The man from across the street called one day, asking for Michael, who had cheated him out of money. When she said that Michael wasn’t home, her neighbor replied, “well, you tell him, tell him I’m going to kill you. I’m going to kill you all.” It was, word-for-word, her stepfather’s warning from twenty-eight years earlier. “I don’t know what it was. If I’ve ever experienced a miracle, that was it.” She dropped the phone and fell to her knees. Her memory suddenly worked, like someone had switched the light on. “It was like someone pulled all the shades up,” she says. She thought of evil Cain and poor Abel. And all the things, small and large—the guilt, the shame, her swooshing heart, the wet duvet,

hiding, hiding, hiding, the huge round belly that she had supported with her small sixteen year old frame—everything that made her feel like she deserved what had happened to her. She felt her mother’s hands shaking her seven-year old shoulders: *Maylinda, why do you do the things you do?* She thought of the pained expression on her uncle’s face as she turned to run.

She thought of being fourteen and standing in the rain for an hour. She thought of their first house in Coeur D’Alene with no furniture and all the shades pulled down in the middle of the day. She looked around her living room. For everything in the house there was a memory that stood out clearly now. There was the couch where, years earlier, she had woken up after trying to commit suicide, with the note to the police that said: “Please take my children,” still sitting on the table next to her.

All she wanted to do now was tell somebody “I’ve figured it out! I see why it all happens now. I thought I was worthless, that’s why they could hurt me.” She clucks her tongue, thinking back on the chance that *she* had picked up the phone that day. “I could have been—maybe I was a Cain. And I always thought God hated Cain.”

* * *

In the early morning Maylinda does the quiet things around the dorm. She cleans up the first floor, the common room, the computer and TV room. Then she sets about to disinfect the sinks and toilets in the bathrooms on all six floors, which makes about thirty toilets, twenty-five sinks and as many showers every day. She picks up the inevitable disarray: scraps of toilet paper, matted hair in the sinks, globs of toothpaste on the faucets. Oftentimes there are nastier things awaiting her. Used tampons dropped on the floor, a crust of vomit around the toilet seat. “I try not to blame people when they leave

things like that behind. I know the students are busy and they probably just forget. But sometimes I have to ask God to help me be patient. I never had it where...I would say I had it so good that I couldn't get my hands dirty." Her handwritten sign laminated with packing tape is stuck to the toilet stalls in the bathrooms she cleans. It says: "Your feckless attitude towards your own cleanliness is bad for you, too. I can't be here 24/7!"

When the students begin to stir, she does the louder tasks. She vacuums all carpeted areas and sweeps and dry mops the floors and stairs. She scrubs the showers, toilets and sinks thoroughly. Occasionally her cell phone surprises her, vibrating in the front pocket of her smock, and she pauses to talk to her granddaughter or her current husband, Richard, about something.

Sitting in her office at lunchtime, surrounded only by the whirl of three different fans, she reads out of her two favorite versions of the Bible. The Bibles lay open on the little table at all times, as much of a fixture of the room as the fans. She prays, almost constantly while she cleans. "I'm up there talking to God all day," she says, grinning broadly. "It's all water under the bridge. My life—it just is. And that's all there is to it...I'm working on it, with God." She looks up into the corner of the room, thinking. "I knew a lady, she hadn't dealt with what she was going through. She saw her mother killed by her father," she leans forward slightly, annunciating, "and nobody *ever* helped that kid. She started losing it and everybody kept saying what's wrong with her? What's wrong with her? Imagine that...just now getting help for what she saw." She lifts up her hands off her thighs in a kind of surrender and says: "that could have been me. Here but for the grace of God—that could have been me." She chuckles, for a moment, and then fades to silence. Her expression darkens. "But it's too bad that a lot of women, including

myself, had to spend all those wonderful years like that. You know?” She says slowly, “I could have had a good life and it was my own life.”

* * *

There are two things that make her cry when she looks back: the damage inflicted on her children by Michael and the day, much later in life, when she found her church. Maylinda’s face changes remarkably depending on what she is talking about. When she is talking about her past her face collapses in a little. She looks older, her eyes are smaller and wrinkles gather around her mouth and across her forehead. She hunches her shoulders and kneads her hands together, sometimes squeezing her fingers until her knuckles are white. When Maylinda is talking about God her face is smooth, her features become more even, her whole body seems to puff up a little. Talking about the Bible she thrusts her hands into the air in front of her and then sometimes looks up into the corner of the room behind her and says, “forgive me Lord, I’m paraphrasing here.”

The day she found First Central Baptist is one of the clearest of her life. She remembers that morning moment by moment. The first thing that you see when you come into First Central Baptist Church is the people who have volunteered to be the “greeters” that week. On the morning that Maylinda first came to First Central, it was a team of small grey-haired women whose sole purpose was to cheer up her morning. The church is designed with a foyer that catches everyone before they reach the chapel so that every person is seen and greeted before the service commences. “I went into that place...and I stood in there and I said, this is where I belong.” She is hurriedly trying to wipe off her wet cheeks as she speaks. She takes off her glasses and laughs at herself and sniffles as she continues to cry. “I don’t know how I knew it but I said, this is it. This is the church.”

She pauses to run her index finger under each eye, catching tears, “Just from somebody greeting me.”

* * *

This sunny, nearly-spring Sunday morning Maylinda and her second husband Richard are taking me to church with them. Richard is also hard of hearing and as we drive they often look at each other after I ask them a question, hoping the other heard and will answer. Richard, who is driving, is wearing a burgundy suit jacket and paisley tie. The jacket, where it is just a little too puffy at the shoulders, makes it clear that he has shrunk in stature over the years. His small, bald head is covered in sunspots and otherwise well-worn skin. His pure white eyebrows thin dramatically about halfway towards his temple but his beard is still bushy, though trimmed. His dark blue eyes are rimmed with opaque rings of discoloration. He methodically and often tediously explains the details of things with a serious tone and then, just when his convoluted explanation has lost me, he will go silent, look me right in the eyes, and smile abruptly—without a single trace of self-consciousness. He is extremely good-natured.

Maylinda, stepping out of their immaculate car, looks like an entirely different person—like a slightly older sister who is painstakingly groomed. You can see the time spent in front of the mirror carefully curling her hair with a hot iron and applying black eyeliner and mascara. She is wearing a long linen dress and a leopard-print shirt underneath. It has a modest neckline, beginning at her clavicle and is covered in big gold sequins. The only thing that ties this Maylinda to the housekeeper Maylinda are her square, red glasses, which she was wearing on Friday, along with her usual uniform of jeans and a nurse’s smock. She has no need for sturdy shoes today as she adjusts her long

overcoat and walks slowly into the church just behind her mildly hunched-over husband. Her black leather boots have small, thin heels on them, which give her that certain elegance of teetering almost imperceptibly.

For half an hour Maylinda and Richard take me on a tour of their “second home.” They are proud of everything the church is doing. They point out the new bookshelves in the library, the colorfully decorated nursery and a new elevator into the main chapel for people who can’t do stairs. “Isn’t that just great?” They say, almost in unison, about the various projects. They introduce me to every person we see. Maylinda forgets a few names but no one seems to mind. The women offer her a hug, the men offer me a handshake, and everyone nods as Maylinda explains what role they each have. Everyone is introduced as a friend at First Central Baptist and everyone says they are glad to have me here today.

Maylinda’s husband Richard runs the Lord’s Pantry, which serves 350 families in Chicopee every Tuesday with fresh meat and produce. Maylinda is a leader at the weekly Bible study called Senior Saints, which several white-haired men and women stop her to talk about.

In Bible study, Richard and Maylinda sit side-by-side in metal folding chairs, diligently watching the impassioned deacon as he strides around the front of the room reciting verses. They hurriedly flip to various passages at his instruction. Maylinda and the others nod and say “amen” when they are especially taken by what he says. Richard calmly flips through the Bible, though whether he actually heard which verse to be reading is unclear.

Upstairs, an hour later, everyone gets ready for the second service of the morning to commence. The greeters ask me how I am doing this morning, smiling, shaking my hand with both of theirs and giving me a program for the service. We take seats near the front. The youth group of the church stands with instruments on the elevated stage at the far end of the wide rows of pews, waiting for the cue to lead the church in song. The chapel is filled with a bright, clear light of transparent colors from the stained glass windows that line both sides of the high-ceilinged room.

The songs begin. Maylinda, standing, sings loudly in a warbling, high-pitched voice. She closes her eyes and holds out her hands palms-up, swaying to the music. “Shout to the *Lord*,” she stamps one foot gently and lifts her palms for emphasis, her chest drawn up and forward. Not once does she look around, for five straight songs she holds her face relaxed and upturned, singing and swaying.

When the church falls silent, the pastor steps up to the middle of the stage. He is a middle-aged man with a placid face, a tightly buttoned collar and a shiny, bald head. A picture appears on the huge screen behind him of a young white couple in wedding attire. They are standing arm in arm while behind them bridesmaids and best men are posed in a mid-air jump. Everyone is smiling. “Today’s service is for the women in the audience,” he says, projecting his voice over the quiet crowd. The pastor clicks his remote control again; the half of the picture that is the bridegroom and best men blurs, emphasizing the wife, and a huge title appears over the picture which reads, “The Role of the Wife: Submit and Respect.” Maylinda adjust her glasses, looking up at the screen behind the pastor and furrowing her brow.

“The Lord God said,” the pastor begins, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I

will make a helper suitable for him.” Maylinda barely looks up throughout the sermon. She leans forward slightly and stares at the shelf of spare bibles on the back of the pew just in front of her. She squeezes her hands with increasing fervor, kneading the fingers of one hand with the other or scraping at her thumbnail with great attention.

“Wives,” the pastor speaks loudly but not with the conviction of an evangelist, instead slowly as if he is reading a children’s book, “submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.” He pauses and turns to his rapt audience, “This is not about inferiority,” he says, smiling at the crowd, “heck, anyone who knows my wife knows she’s smarter than me.” The women in the pew in front of us chuckle. Maylinda continues to stare down. He turns back to look at the powerpoint behind him and continues to recite bible verses. “For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do *not* give way to fear.”

“Husbands,” he pauses, turning on his heels back to the crowd and pointing his index finger at us. He says slowly with rising inflection: “in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the *weaker* partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” He throws open his arms, “This is God’s plan. Not mine.” He says, very nearly sounding regretful.

When we emerge from the service, Maylinda seems truly exhausted. She doesn’t say goodbye to anyone as she leaves. As we walk down the long hallway to the parking lot she almost runs to catch up with Richard, saying to me, “I don’t usually walk behind

him.” Richard is busy waving goodbye to the youth services leader. “I feel like I have to tell you that now, after *that*.”

She climbs into the passenger side of the car and lets out a great sigh as she fastens the seatbelt. “I’ll tell you one thing, that’s not what *I* do.” Richard nods, smiling absentmindedly as we pull out of the church parking lot. He only began attending church after Maylinda made it a prerequisite for getting married. “I wish you had come last week,” she says, looking over her seat at me, “we had missionaries from Africa.” Shaking her head, she begins digging in her purse for a while and sighs again. “I want to obey God,” she says, now more quietly, losing some of her defiant tone. Her voice sounds aged. “I know that’s how God designed it.” Her brow hasn’t un-furrowed, the wrinkles around her mouth point down in a gentle frown. She settles back into the seat, her curled hair brimming around the collar of her coat and says to herself, “But it’s just too hard.” As we drive back towards Mount Holyoke she looks silently out the window at the brown-green grass that has just emerged from under the melting snow.