

Prayer

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Cette nouvelle est tirée du recueil Sexy Mama qui montre des femmes à différentes étapes de la vie — de la grossesse, au veuvage et même au delà — qui se réapproprient leur sexualité. Ici, une mère de quatre enfants prend une journée pour conduire, seule, jusqu'à la côte est des États-Unis. Là, loin des eaux chaudes du Mexique où elle a grandi, elle réfléchit sur ce qu'elle a perdu depuis son arrivée aux États-Unis: sa langue, une intimité avec sa mère, et son rapport à ses propres désirs.

As a teenager, Julia had spent the first days of every school year correcting her new teachers' pronunciation of her name. "Julia," they would say, and then, "Montana," like the state, and she would say, behind thick black ringlets partially covering her black eyes, "YOO-leeah MON-taahn- yaah." And they would look down at their papers again, maybe make a note in pencil to remind themselves, maybe try to pronounce it themselves, and the whole thing would go on just one or two beats longer than it should when inevitably a popular boy who played soccer or basketball with the name of John or Dan and Mike, something healthy and monosyllabic, would say something that Julia could not quite hear but which would cause several of the adolescents around her to laugh.

This was how Julia felt right now, as she drove under a murky sky the seventy-three miles it took to reach the broad eastern coast of the American continent that her ancestors had never landed upon. Well, yes, maybe one had. Maybe. She didn't know. As far as she knew she was Mexican, she had spent the first thirteen years of her life in Mexico, and all of her relatives were from Mexico, and maybe way back when one of them came from Spain, but she didn't know.

There was so much she didn't know.

Just as when she had first moved to the States, half understanding what the kids around her were saying, sure only of the pronunciation of her name, she was clinging to this road heading east now as if it held a language that could help her understand.

For there was still much, after twenty years here, that she still did not know.

She had never been apart from her children before, for example, and she was not sure if this was a good thing or a bad one. Her own mother had never left Julia or her two brothers, not even for a day trip, like this one. Certainly not for the two or three nights a month that her friend Kate left her own daughter so that she could "recharge."

Did American mothers run on batteries, Julia wondered? Had Julia's own mother, and all the mothers she knew in Mexico as a child, operated from some unseen but neverending source of power? Is this why her mother had never felt the need to leave the land of her birth? Was it why, even now, her mother refused to come live with them, even though Julia cried on the phone and begged her?

And had Julia become an American then, after all, if she felt within herself this need to get away? Had her husband's creamy skin entered her when she got pregnant, somehow disengaging her from the energy her mother's body was plugged into?

She felt the air around her grow more humid as she neared the coast, and she lowered all the windows to let it blow against her skin as it had as a child in Veracruz. As she did so, a memory came back to her of a night on the gulf's shore, when she was about twelve, right before her parents divorced and her father brought the children with him to the United States.

She had been walking on the beach, alone — the thought was unimaginable to her now, as she contemplated allowing her own twelve-year old daughter anywhere alone, God forbid a beach, and at night — and she had seen a ship's light on the horizon. The beam had illuminated the inky water in a curvy line, as if God had taken a pencil, and with the lightest of strokes, sketched a light between this boat and Julia's body. She sat down, right there, on the sand, letting the line follow its path, opening her legs and meeting the light with her own fingers, lightly at first, and then harder, until it seemed that the ocean's water had crashed under her hands and swept through her whole body.

This had been Julia's first taste of pleasure.

She parked the car in a metered spot, close to the shore, already smelling the salt and iodine that she craved, and as she began walking toward the beach, she reflected upon these original ingredients for a recipe of pleasure: solitude, nature, light, and God.

Her life now afforded none of these.

Her first daughter's birth twelve years ago had introduced her to the zombie shadow that walked behind her and devoured all pleasure. Although, like many women (her friend Kate had assured her of this), she had felt increased desire during her pregnancy, afterwards it had plummeted into a laundry pile that smelled of milk and shit and vomit and Julia had never really been able to get it clean again.

And while, when Sarah (they named her that because there would be no need for correction; Julia's relatives would only pronounce the first "a" a bit softer, nothing like the whole consonant change that Julia's name necessitated) was a baby, Julia had been able to simulate a kind of solitude while the baby napped and her husband was at work, since Luke's birth one year later (his baptismal name was Lukah, but eventually Julia gave in when boys at school started teasing him and they had been calling him Luke since he was five), and then the twins' birth two years after that (they called them CJ and BJ; these were their actual names: letters), she had had no time to herself.

So solitude was out, Julia thought to herself as she walked barefoot on the sand along the shore, but perhaps nature hadn't totally been lost. They lived, after all, only an hour and a half's drive to this great body of water, and on the other

side of them, only two hours away, were mountains. So getaways like these were possible. True, this was the first time she'd actually taken one in her twelve years of mothering, but it had always been there: the possibility.

Julia had turned to gardening as a way of touching dirt, once all four kids were in school. It started with pots of pansies or geraniums or mums, depending on the season, but then she started digging, and she went crazy with perennials and border beds until she was out there every day before dawn, even on Saturdays, and she couldn't walk from her front door to the car without compulsively picking a weed here and there, until finally her husband said, Jesus, enough with the flowers already, and she stopped.

She stopped, again, now, and sat on the damp sand, and realized that she was never alone at night, outside, anymore. Perhaps the phase of gardening before dawn had been an attempt at being alone, outside, at night. But even then she had never allowed herself to surrender to pleasure for fear that one of the children would wake up just a few minutes early and see her.

And God. She slowly unbuttoned her blouse — she'd put her bathing suit on underneath her clothes before leaving home that morning — and thought about the thick smoke of incense, heavy like the scent of sex, in the church she had attended as a child in Veracruz. It was nothing like the bleached white pine pews of the church they attended now.

She was sweating between her breasts, she could see the beads of moisture that were forming there, as she removed her wine-brown blouse and let the sea's breeze tickle the skin of her shoulders and back. Heat. Heat and God were mingled together for her, as she remembered the crowded pews and the smell of sweat on hot Sunday mornings and the almost naked body of Christ hanging above them all. Now, her church was air conditioned almost to the point of freezing, and so God and heat never had a chance to meet at all.

She lifted up her rear as she slid her black shorts down her legs and let herself fall back heavily against the grains of sand, grinding them into the backs of her thighs as she sat back down.

All the time she'd spent blaming her husband had been wasted. A diversion. Her lack of desire had never had anything to do with him, really. It had to do with this — the mother's lack of solitude, the suburban home, the life of temperate interiors, the absence of a fierce and naked, sweating God.

For as Julia Montaña-James waded into the cool Atlantic, she began to say a silent prayer, asking forgiveness for blaming her husband for all those years, and she told God that she should not have blamed her children either — Sarah, Lukah (she still called him this to herself), CJ or BJ were not at fault — for it was only she herself who had strayed so far from her own soul's desire, and it was only she herself who, she promised, her body fully submerged in water now and safely invisible to those passing by, could satisfy this need. She alone knew its name. She alone knew how to pronounce it. She alone knew the taste of it on her tongue. And so she opened her mouth and let it come.