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The Lucky Ones

“You know how when something really touches you...”

--Leonara Carrington

Here I feel welcome. A room of my own, spacious compared to where I lived, that compound cluttered with too many families and our two-room house too small for me and my kids. Here a bare expanse of walls and floor and machines clocking my bodily functions and forcing the life spilling out back inside. Not bad all things considered.

Up until recently our biggest concern had been the drought. For years running the reservoir levels decreasing throughout the country from lack of rain and encroaching desert, forcing each person to take on the burden of rationing water even here in the city.

But we managed. I managed. The most important thing, I had a job, gainful means, and could provide for my family. I had not much else. The type of poverty one can endure. Even be proud of.

I was given to spending time with The Leather Lady every evening after work. We had long been firm friends, from the day my husband and I as newlyweds took up residence in the compound more than a decade earlier. We had developed a routine. Turning away from the compound, we would take a slow spin around the neighborhood, passing by many spots that were hot, dangerous. But we were safe since gangsters never do their dirt at home. Then too she dressed in a way that could not escape notice and that identified her to every beholder, always some combination of brown leather--pants and a top, or jumper, a skirt with and sandals that encircled her calves and shins with straps, even an ankle-length dress. Topped by a leather cowboy hat with small birds perched along the brim. I would observe each bird's strange

plumage, their feathers glued into place when seen up close, their beaks glued open, their glass eyes never shut.

I was always surprised by the ease and swiftness of her movement in outfits tight against her bulk, compressed flesh. Those who had witnessed her on stage in her prime swore that back then she could move any part of her body. Life had thickened her and slowed her down, but she still maintained a plurality of youthful features. Her face entirely made up. Acrylic nails attached to her fingers like colorful beetles.

In the course of our walks she might smoke a cigarette or two, blowing out words about her day. (Now she made whatever she could from babysitting, cooking, sewing, running errands, and other odds and ends.) She never permitted her past to come up in conversation, and she wasn't the type of older woman to know-it-all you, to advise and chastise. Rather, when you wanted her advice of or opinion, she was quick to say, "Oh, I don't know. What do you think?"

The only time I ever heard her speak her mind was when the quarantine was announced. We started out on our nightly walk, surgical masks fitted in place. I asked her what I should do. She offered me a cigarette. Taking no chances, I declined. She lowered her mask. Took a few puffs. She was insistent that I remain at home during the quarantine. Once back at the compound, we sat down on my stoop. The stars were out above us, light pasted to night. Sweating, she removed her hat and used it to fan herself, a circle of birds. For the first time I caught a glimpse of her hair, microbraids patterned into small squares, each braid drawn tightly the next.

After further discussion, we decided it would be best for me to spend the twenty-one days of the quarantine at the studio. Would eat, bathe, and sleep there. And while some in our country would starve, I would continue to earn a wage, and be safe doing so. Of course, I would miss my

children. That would be the worst of it. Still, all things considered...So, when the time came, I kissed them in turn then entrusted them into The Leather Lady's care.

It was a job that never stretched my faculties or talents, but it was a job, no small thing in our country where work was drying up with the water, leaving a desert of unemployment and a few sparse oases of hand-to-mouth hustling. I was one of the lucky ones.

Up until the time that my husband found out about my job, we were the happiest couple in the compound. To this day I'm not sure how he found out, but the night he confronted me I did not lie.

I'm not giving up my job, I said.

No? You'll just continue to let the whole world see? he said.

I'm not giving up my job.

He let the subject drop. Disporting himself to the laws of his making as a man, he stopped speaking to me after our argument. Affected disdain whenever I tried to talk to him and make peace. His voice finally returned after a few weeks on a night when he had packed up his few belongings and was ready to leave.

Do it all on your own, he said, since you like your job that much.

But it required only a few words for The Leather Lady to coax him out of the house, to have him rather than me accompany her on the nightly walk. What would come of it? Much. When he returned to the house, I could tell he was restored to his old self, even if his pride remained hurt, his movements exaggerated.

Then, a few weeks later just as things were getting back to normal, he perished on the job. My husband was always a careful driver so I still wonder if his fate might have been different had he instead of his co-worker been behind the wheel of their delivery truck. I'm left

with the knowledge that the bodies of the two men had to be retrieved from under seven other vehicles piled on top of them. Authorities said they'd never seen anything like it. Like magnets stuck together. Nothing good came out of my husband's death. (What could?) At least the policy provided enough money to give him a proper sending off, and enough food and drink for everyone who knew him to crowd into my home and celebrate his memory. The entire time, The Leather Lady shook her head in disbelief, birds swerving left then right.

My boss was astonished that I showed up for work the day after his funeral. But I am a practical woman. Without his paycheck, there could be no days off and there would be many double-shifts.

I fitted the surgical mask onto my face and snapped rubber gloves onto my hands, left the compound and made my way to the long que of dollar vans, ducked inside the one with the fewest people and paid my fare, then took a seat at the back, trying to make myself small, doing what I could to maintain distance from the other passengers. By then this habit of conducting myself like a leper had stuck, but soon there were too many bodies inside the van. Against regulations, the driver insisted on the van being full before he took off.

The ride took an hour. I exited the minivan and started the long trek up the hill. Before I knew really what was happening, two gangsters came up strong behind me. I refused to relinquish my purse. They shoved and pushed me. I punched and kicked. I would not make it easy for them. We tussled, fell to the ground, and started to roll down the hill, drawn by gravity and the weighted anchor of my purse. Soon, I found myself prone on the ground where I'd exited the van. One gangster quick to produce a knife even before he regained his feet. He slashed the shoulder straps, allowing his partner to snatch my purse from my hands.

Not the first time. And probably not the last. Gangsters are always looking for a jackpot. I could have lost my head completely. Instead, I fitted my mask back into place without a thought and continued back up the hill for the studio. The moment I stepped through the door, the other women (of comparable fortune, poor like myself, survivors, lucky to be working) saw the state I was in and came and stood excited around me. Set about setting me right. Washed away the dirt, cleaned and disinfected my nicks and cuts, put some salve on my bruises. One sister even kneaded a quick massage. Helped. Considerably. I stretched a bit, trying to limber up, still sore, but this would have to do.

I logged onto my laptop and right away a client clocked in his request, a ring-dance around the bed. My limbs moved without thinking, the goal always to stretch the session out as long as possible. And I was doing just that. Then the first cough made my jaw drop like a cartoon character.

I couldn't keep up with all the doctors were saying to me. Too much at once. Breathing like spacemen behind their masks. An intern took notes, writing backward with her left hand, writing forwards with her right.

The nurses flipped through the door with plenty of warm words. Blue-skinned, they swim about my room like dolphins, leaping above me to insert an IV or inject medicine or punch a machine. Then swim away.

I felt the weight of my lungs, water-logged loaves of bread. My skin dry and ashy although pumped full of fluid, memories pumped back in, circulating, my arms and legs filled, engorged, bloated. My chest rising like a parachute catching air then deflating, rising again.

There could be allowed no visitors so I was surprised one day when the door pushed open and a man pushed into my room. A priest behind a black mask and carrying a black leather Bible between both hands. He asked me if I had anything to get off my chest. And when I did not answer he pried my mouth open and put slips of paper on my tongue.

Once, I woke up in the middle of the night and still half-asleep called out for The Leather Lady. The stars outside my window answered back, rattling like tambourines. And that was when I heard something pop balloon-like inside me, then felt fluid gushing out of me and splashing to the floor, rising, volumes, enough to replenish this land.

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