

Elegy Series: *Martina in her Garden*

Sundays were set aside for our weekly visit to Martina and Valeriano's farm in Brown City. The hour-long trip in the 1968 Pontiac Bonneville with my two sisters and two brothers flew by as we played road games. Our arrival was greeted by our grandma with open arms. In her soiled, blood-stained apron she would present us with a bowl of circus candies to satisfy our appetites until dinner. The smell of chorizo and boiled chicken often permeated the kitchen as our Sunday meal marinated. She was the hardest working woman I knew. She used a *molcajete* to grind corn for tortillas, ones she made regularly. She was tough and yet her gentleness was what most defined her. This was a woman who crossed the Rio Grande with her youthful husband at the age of twenty three not knowing if they would survive the rapid undercurrent. I recall her retelling the story of the day she made the treacherous journey. Her perseverance not only brought her to safety on the other side, free from a revolution that was unfolding in Mexico, but her two infant children, Esperanza and Erasmo.

Of the many experiences on the farm I have this vivid memory of her going out to the yard one Sunday afternoon, cornering a chicken, then ringing it by the neck and chopping off its head on the tree stump near her rose garden. Perhaps cruel but necessary to provide for a family juxtaposed next to the beauty of her rose garden made the scene all the more surreal. It's true what they say - chickens do run after their heads are cut off. This one did for about a minute.

It's been forty-three years since her death. Shortly after her passing I moved in with my grandfather. He could no longer farm and had moved into the city on Wilfred Street in Detroit. My uncle Paul bought the house for my grandparents so the family could see more of them and due to their increasing age. I was attending college nearby so it seemed a perfect transition for me to move out of my parent's house to help with my grandfather's needs. I was a young twenty-three year-old, he was an old man of eighty-four years.

After a long day in studio classes I would return home late to see him sitting in his recliner with the television blasting the sound of gunshots from a classic John Wayne movie. Western movies rekindled his youthful memories as a *caballero* in Mexico. After turning down the volume I would ask if he had dinner and usually the response was, "Esperanza made me lunch and there are leftovers in the kitchen." Esperanza, the second born, lived down the street and came over to check on him daily. By 10:00 pm every night he would begin the fifteen minute slow walk to bed. As he sat up from the recliner I would watch him take a long breath summoning the strength to get up. His Parkinson disease was quite advanced by now. My nightly duty was to get him safely to bed. After a few attempts to rise from the chair he would finally manage to stand. As he shuffled to the dining room to make one stop and pour a shot of cognac, he then

proceeded to the bathroom. My cue was when the light went off I would get behind him as his shadow as inconspicuously as possible. After all he was a proud man who rightly deserved his dignity fleeing a revolution in Mexico in 1918 for a better life in America. He and Martina raised twelve children. My father was the second youngest, named after his mother. Once in the bedroom I would tuck him in bed and turn off the lights on my way out. I often heard him whispering prayers in Spanish as I walked across the hall to my room. I could make out some of the words which were all about family but on one occasion I heard him finish in english, "Thank you, thank you." He was a grateful and peaceful man at the end of his life.

My grandmother's bedroom remained undisturbed since her passing, adorned with photos of a young Martina with her young caballero, Valeriano. Her opaque, antique perfume bottles and oval talcum powder containers lined the top to the ivory color dresser, untouched, as dust formed around the negative spaces of each object. The vague scent from the bottles seemed to remain in the room, which at times gave me a feeling of unease. Could she still be alive? Even the light fixture above the bed reminded me of her lingering spirit. It was one of those halo neon lights that would buzz and flicker every time I turned on the light switch. I refrained from turning it on. I remember feeling as if I was a guest, temporarily sleeping in her room. Her scent made me aware she could return anytime to reclaim the space. I was on my best behavior not to disrupt what seemed to be her permanent shrine. This would be my room for the five years I lived as my grandfather's companion.

In Mexico, La Virgen de Guadalupe is an icon synonymous with Catholic faith and how the divine is woven into everyday life. Images of the virgin are worn and made into statutes. To a young Martina the virgin was revered as she interceded in miracles to protect her and Valeriano through all their hardships. A framed image of the virgin hung over my bed and I like to think she, like my grandmother, was watching over me as I slept. On the adjacent wall near the window, a small framed image of Jesus with long locks kept watch as well. I recall during my youth when they lived on the farm in Brown City my grandma had a Curio Cabinet made of mahogany and glass that she kept locked in the dining room. In it she housed an array of votive candles, ceramic figurines and postcards of various Popes throughout the years. It was a diary of sorts chronicling her travels. As kids we often marveled at the objects that adorned this reliquary. Finding the key to open the cabinet was always the goal but forever elusive. We dared not broach the subject of its whereabouts with our grandma because undoubtedly she would resort to speaking Spanish knowing we *no comprendo*. I'm glad we never found the key even though there were many things I coveted. It's like the forbidden fruit - *You can eat from any tree in the garden except this one*. That's how I saw it as a child. It had a biblical law ascribed to it - *thou shall not touch grandma's cabinet or break into it*.

An annual Mexican tradition is the day of the dead, which is a tradition originating with the Aztecs. They considered souls to continuously live and enter different realms when a body would die. The dead never really leave us. I can still smell the perfume and talcum powder emanating from her bedroom on Wilfred Street in Detroit. I still see the chicken running for its life with no head, counting the minutes, then seconds, to its end. A curio

cabinet becomes a personal archive documenting a life's journey. Pictures distill the moments as references points, markers of time. A photo taken around 1970 shows a woman standing in a field. She appears in a hand-made blue dress, the color of a robin's egg, sewn by her. She stands in her garden with a golden hue of the wheats fields lining the horizon, buttressing her rose garden, a garden planted with her hands lush in green vegetation and alive in pink and red roses.

-Ed Fraga 2020-21