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Strays

She bursts through the door as though hurled in by the hot wind. Hunched shoulders, scrawny, grey hair pulled back into a tight bun, pointy nose, long black dress worn for a baby daughter who'd died at birth long ago, she reminds me of a crow. She's carrying two metallic knitting needles, large tongs and scissors in her hand. My knees wobble. What is Crow going to do to my aunt Luisa?

She waves at my mother but doesn't seem to see me, then hurries to Aunt Luisa, who's waiting in her bedroom. My mother said I could help, so long as I didn't go nosing into the bedroom or yap all over town. "I don't fancy the police at my door or having to listen to Father Batista's sermons."

"What's Crow doing to Aunt Luisa with those knitting needles?"

"She's not a crow. She's your grandfather's cousin. She's family. Show some respect."

"*Sim, sim*, but what is she going to do to Aunt Luisa?"

"Oh, the baby came too early. People will talk."

Aunt Luisa and Rafael, my mother's younger brother, had been married for five months. It was a wedding that wasn't a wedding. Aunt Luisa had showed up at my grandparents' house (next door), where Rafael lives, one afternoon, crying. I'd never met her before. I thought her pretty, but fat. The next day she and Rafael went to see Father Batista. Afterwards, there were small cakes and Port wine, no white dress or veil or dancing or guests.

"What will happen to the baby?" I ask.

"The baby! Don't you worry about the baby. He'll be in God's keeping."

My mother too hurries into the bedroom, next to the kitchen, the house only having two rooms. Aunt Luisa is crying. As my mother opens the door, I peek. Crow is holding up Aunt Luisa's bare legs. They're white, bloodless looking, like the whites of eggs. The door shuts with a bang.

Thunder begins to roar in the distance. My grandmother, (who went away for the day, not wanting to be around), believes the devil is more powerful than God, and will burn us to death one day. Thunder is his warning. "Why will he burn us?" I once asked. "For all our sins." I started praying every night.

I say an Our Father and an Ave Maria. Maybe this time the thunder will mean the end of the world. Maybe the devil has grown tired of warning us.

My job is to cart pails of water from the well in the middle of my grandparent's garden. The pail is heavy, bumping against my skinny legs, half of the water spilling out, wetting my feet and shoes.

In the kitchen, I ladle water into a large pot over the kerosene stove. I watch it boil for fifteen minutes, “To kill the germs,” my mother had warned.

I keep my eyes on the clock on the kitchen table. Above the clock, hangs a large wooden crucifix. A tear, in the shape of a tiny pear, runs down Christ’s cheek. I wonder if he’s crying for us. Is he also trying to warn us?

Steam fills the dark kitchen. There are no windows and my mother insisted on me keeping the door shut.

It’s hard to see and breathe.

Crow reappears through the fog. Knitting needles and scissors held up in the air. She seems to be grinning, as she dips the needles and scissors into the boiling water. She hums some song I don’t recognize.

She shakes her head and clicks her tongue, *itch, tch*, as she passes me. Once she’s back in the bedroom, I hear her say “The girl shouldn’t be here.”

I glance again into the opened door. My mother rocks aunt Luisa in her arms like a baby.

Piercing screams shoot through the closed door.

I cover my ears with my hands. I’ve never heard such howling, was never this close to such suffering. Christ keeps crying. I’m sure his tear is further down on his cheek.

Eight pails of water, five boiling pots, four hours later, the bedroom door still shut, Luisa’s screams dwindle to a wail. Tired, hungry, my shoes and feet soaking, I regret having offered to help. I want to go home, eat, put on dry socks and play with my doll.

Crow reemerges from the bedroom, a smell like throw-up wafts out. Nauseating. I lose my hunger. She holds the knitting needles and scissors, up-high, like a bouquet. There's blood on the needles. This time I'm sure she's grinning. "Revenge," my mother said later. "For the child God took away." I don't know what revenge against God means but I don't ask any further questions.

My mother comes out next. She carries a large pail covered with a bloody rag.

I want to see Aunt Luisa.

"Let her sleep," my mother says.

I help her carry the pail to the open sewer running between my grandparents' house and mine. Water from the outdoor cement laundry tub, dish-water, rain, runs through it, forming a permanent puddle by my garden gate. Sometimes cats drown in it, rotting until my father buries them.

Dusk descends; a drizzle begins to fall. The thunder moves closer.

"Good," my mother says, "Rain will wash-away everything."

She lifts the bloody rag from the pail; makes the sign of the cross. I do too, not knowing why I'm doing it. In the darkening light, the pail's content looks like pig's blood. I help my mother lift the pail and tilt it. It's heavy. Everything spills out. My mother cries. A gust of warm wind blows drops of the dark blood onto my legs.

I scream, "The baby, the baby!"

"Don't be silly child, the baby is in heaven with God." She wipes my legs with her apron.

In the night, Aunt Luisa's screams silence the earth. Crow hovers over me with a grin as big as the moon. Then she flies away, behind the moon, large wings flapping over our house, over Amendoeiro, over the clouds, black skirt thrashing in the wind like a giant sail.

I wake panting. Get out of bed; open the window, dawn beginning to break. The air is dense, sticky. I dress, hurrying to the garden to see what's left of the blood.

At the garden gate, I gaze at the puddle, now overflowing from last night's storm. The rising sun shines on something white, a cloud of flies above it doing a mad dance.

I step outside the gate. Before I can tell what the white thing is, two strays appear. These are wild dogs, fierce and famished, stalking the old dirt road and fields behind my house.

I hurry behind the gate. Shut it.

One dog picks up the white *thing* with its teeth, the cloud of flies lifting in unison. The other snatches it from him. They growl at one another, facing each other, like two men in a duel, drool and blood dripping from their mouths and teeth. They gnaw the white thing to shreds.

Is Jesus watching?

"Luisa was mumbling and hot-to-the-touch all night," Rafael said, as my mother and I walk in. Dr. Souza arrives a little later.

"Butchers," he says, to no one in particular, after taking Aunt Luisa's temperature. We are all in the bedroom — my grandmother having returned from her visit the evening before. "You should all be in jail but I'm a Christian man," Dr. Souza points at my mother and grandmother. Then he notices me, "The girl shouldn't be here."

Hours after Dr. Souza left, Aunt Luisa quiet and sleeping after the pills he gave her, my mother says, "Let's go and have lunch." Rafael stays watching over aunt Luisa.

Outside the door, women have gathered in the courtyard. They are mostly old, deeply wrinkled, dressed in black clothes and black scarves, widows or those who've lost a child.

More Crows.

One says the rosary out loud. Others repeat her words in unison. There's something eerie about them, reminding me of funerals.

"Will she live?" Someone grabs my mother's arm.

"Vultures and mad-dogs," my mother whispers, as we walk away. "They've smelled death and can't get enough of it."