

Guardian Angel

Mariana Enriquez

Translated by Megan McDowell

The two of them were killing her.

Marisa lay awake all night, waiting to hear them. Once they thought Mom was asleep, Inés opened her bedroom door and let him in. But Mom slept even less than Marisa, because she could not rest: her lungs were full of fluid, her heart was heavy, her one leg deformed by swelling, the amputated one still very present with its phantom pain. Obese, Mom sat in bed and listened to them fuck all night long, even though they tried to keep the noise down. Each morning, when Marisa brought her breakfast in bed and saw her crying, she knew that her mother had heard it all, every moan and every grunt, the running on tiptoe, the stifled laughter. And that she said nothing because she was too horrified and sick and disgusted. Maybe she also knew, as Marisa did, that it wasn't their fault.

It was that devil on the ceiling, thought Marisa. It had first sprung from a stain on the plaster. Dad was always fixing cracks in the ceiling, climbing a ladder to cover them with mortar. One of the repairs was right above Marisa's bed, and she had seen its transformation clearly: first it looked like a bird with outstretched wings, but then it shape-shifted until the wings turned into horns and the little feet joined together to make a nose, and the body formed the devil's face. That had been some time ago. The more the stain looked like the devil, the fatter her mother grew. To the point that she had to have the bed to herself: Dad couldn't sleep with her anymore, because she took up the whole mattress. Besides, he bothered her. He moved into the junk room next door to Inés. And when the stain grew horns, Dad started going to Inés's room every night.

But they're not evil, Marisa told herself. She prayed beneath the sheets, because the devil was staring down at her from the plaster. My sister isn't evil; my father isn't evil. It's the devil.

She started to lock her door in case Dad got the idea to visit her as well. She knew that if he touched her, he would pass the devil into her. By now she could tell when Dad wasn't Dad. His eyes turned doll-like, as though made of plastic, and his stiff eyelids closed with a click when he turned his head. Even his eyelashes looked fake. She didn't talk to him when he had the doll inside him. But she would hug and kiss him when he was normal, to see if all her love could drive the devil away. She didn't dare try that with Inés, because she was too belligerent. Every weekend, she'd rinse her hair with Coca-Cola and take the 45 bus downtown. The neighbors said she stayed there all night, picking up guys. Those were commands from the devil, Marisa was sure, and she started to pray at her sister's bed, kneeling. But Inés made fun of her, shouted *goody-two-shoes*, and snorted cocaine off the nightstand.

One night, a hammering sound started in Mom's room. Always three blows, and they rang out when Dad went into Inés's bedroom. "I don't know why the neighbors would hang pictures so late," Mom complained, but she didn't insist, because it was only three blows, after all. Marisa wanted to check it out, but when she politely asked the neighbor, he assured her that everyone in his house was asleep at that hour. Marisa believed him, but she said nothing. Oh, if only she knew how to help them, but all she could do was pray to God. And her mom had gotten worse since the hammering started. Her phantom leg hurt more than ever. There were several nights when they had to call an ambulance because her heart was failing. When she was hospitalized and out of the house, the hammering stopped. It didn't come back once she died in the hospital, after the hammering had gone on for two weeks.

Marisa knew Mom was dead before anyone else. Dad was in the Capital, working at the hardware store; money was so tight he couldn't even take time off to care for his wife. Inés was minding the kiosk where Mom used to work before she was confined to her bed. Marisa had gone home to get clean clothes for Mom, and as she was packing the bag, she heard a noise in the living room. First it was just a flapping of wings, but then there came a whisper and then a thundering sound that made her cover her ears and scream. She was so terrified that she ran out of the bedroom. And in the living room she saw hundreds of sparrows, a brown-and-black cloud of birds crashing into windowpanes and walls and the TV, squawking, and some fell dead onto the sofa. The winged devil, the devil that had once been a bird.

Marisa went down on her knees and folded her hands, *Our father who art in heaven*, and suddenly, as if they'd never been there, the sparrows disappeared. They didn't fly away—it was the dead of winter, and no windows were open. They disappeared as though they had never existed. *But I'm not crazy, not at all*, Marisa thought, and, trembling, she checked under the chairs and on the shelves until she found a single dead sparrow—proof—which she hid in her nightstand drawer. Then she unpacked the bag: Mom wouldn't be needing it now.

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