

## 2024 ADULT SHORT STORY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

### **Maria and Maria and Maria**

By Silvia Spring

July in Boston was an ocean of heat that kept Mari indoors, on the couch next to the air conditioning, which hummed at a middle setting. Buses hissed down the street outside. Squirrels panted as they clawed up the trees by the window. She'd leave next week for a YMCA camp.

She looked at the dial on the A/C and thought of her mother leaving the apartment that morning. "If I find that thing on HIGH when I get home tonight," she had warned. "I swear to God, Mari."

Mari's sixth-grade summer reading books, full of dull sentences that took her nowhere, lay on the table. She wandered in circles around the house, opening the fridge to its plastic-wrapped contents, eating a cup of Jell-O, picking at the hard stain of something spilled and dried on the carpet, and opening her mother's closet and letting her hands run through her blouses, which stirred with the smell of perfume, a bitter orange.

In the back of her mother's closet, behind rows of blouses and dresses and the rack of leather shoes with worn-down heels, three cardboard boxes sat stacked in the corner, "Perez" scrawled across them in permanent marker. Mari knew they held her grandmother's things. Her grandmother, Wella, was, in her mind, both the old woman curled in a wheelchair, chewing her food so slowly that Mari couldn't stand to watch, and the beautiful young one in the photo on her mother's nightstand, posing in her wedding dress, an angel to pray to before bed.

When Wella died a year ago, Mari had tried to comfort her mother. She held her hand as she sobbed, the phone to her ear, hearing the news. The idea of losing a mother was terrifying to Mari. Like considering her own death, it opened a pit in her stomach. What could it feel like to be left behind without your mother, your only parent?

"Do you wish you could see her again?" Mari asked.

"More than anything," her mother said. "I'd give everything for one more minute."

Mari had grown up on family stories. Wella had been courageous, leaving Havana alone with her only daughter to wait in Boston for a husband who never followed. She left her life behind to create a better one for her daughter—and granddaughter. The sacrifices had been enormous, and Mari's mother, Toni, reminded her of them, over and over, anytime her daughter complained about the bus that took forever, the gross food at her school cafeteria, her old sneakers.

“Think of everything Wella did for us,” she said. “Imagine having none of this. Nothing.”

Wella had earned most of the money that paid for the apartment Mari and her mother lived in, money Wella had saved for over 30 years working as a secretary in a dentist’s office. Her handwritten recipes for *arroz con pollo*, *plátanos* and flan peeked out of her row of cookbooks on the kitchen counter, recipes Toni never made. In death, Wella was a spirit larger than both of them, the one they prayed to for help finding lost keys, a parking spot, or passing Mari’s fifth-grade math tests and her mother’s nursing exams.

“Mami, Mami, Mami,” Toni would say under her breath, a prayer for whatever she needed.

It was Toni’s birthday, and when she got home from work, they planned to go to the Lucky Garden for pork dumplings and fried rice. Mari’s stomach rumbled. She wanted to do something special for her mother, a surprise better than a construction paper card, something that would get her attention, delight her, make her laugh, roll her shoulders down from where they stressed up by her ears all day. Mari wanted to show her that she wasn’t some demanding baby who needed to be scolded before she’d even done anything wrong. It was just the two of them—it had been since Wella moved into a nursing home—and Mari felt that she was growing up. She could be someone her mother could trust, lean on, even talk to.

The cardboard boxes peeked at her through the blouses. She bent down and slid them out one by one onto the carpet next to her mother’s bed. She looked at her grandmother’s wedding photo, in its silver frame, a rosary hung over its side, its wooden beads careful to overlap only over the train of the veil.

Mari had an idea.

She went back to her room to get the scissors from her desk. The tape cracked as she opened the first box to find a small blue vase wrapped in newspaper and a wooden cigar box full of paper cards, each decorated with its saint on one side and prayer on the other.

*Dios te salve, Maria.*

*Llena eres de gracia.*

Mari’s mother never spoke Spanish with her, so she couldn’t understand the words. She opened the second, which was packed with folded tablecloths. The third box had what she wanted. Inside a plastic cover with a long zipper, she could see its white lace and pearly buttons. She pulled it

out by the hanger and laid it across her mother's bed: her grandmother's wedding dress, which Wella had always said would be hers one day.

Mari was named after her mother and grandmother, all three Marias. Her mother went by her middle name, Antonia, or Toni, and no one ever called Mari her full name either. She had curlier hair, a darker complexion, than both of them.

Mari was 11, still growing, but she couldn't see how her short calves and round face would ever lengthen out into the graceful beauty her grandmother had possessed. There was a refined and delicate world her Wella had come from, a black-and-white Caribbean, that she couldn't touch and even her mother said she couldn't remember. It was lost, but maybe there was a way for Mari to bring it back, just for today, to show herself and her mother that she could be glamorous too. They were all so alike, the three of them, and wouldn't it make her mom happy to see that?

Wella had a beautiful life when she was young. Married young to a handsome doctor, she lived in a white house near the ocean, with her own seamstress and fruit trees in the backyard. Toni remembered the mangos well enough to know that nothing in the US tasted nearly as good. And forget the guavas.

All up and down their sea-breezed block lived their extended family, Wella's parents next door, sister and brothers, great aunts and uncles, all with names that sounded to Mari like children's book characters—Tiki and Pollo and Chea and Juanpi—all of them dropping by for parties, games of tennis, drives for ice cream. Toni didn't talk much about those memories, but all the photos mixed with Wella's stories made Mari feel she had seen it, been there too and missed it awfully.

"*Mi Cubanita*," Wella called her, letting Mari sit in her lap.

"Make sure that media-Cubana's gringa bones don't crush you, Mami," Toni had warned, always nudging her to give Wella more space.

When the revolution came, Wella and her husband had decided she should take Toni to Boston, where he had attended medical school, to wait safely until it passed. Wella got a small apartment she paid for with the cash she had snuck out, rolled up inside a pack of cigarettes. They had only a few suitcases. It was supposed to be temporary.

But they stayed long enough for Wella to realize her daughter's braces needed attention. She made an appointment with a dentist she found in the phone book, and when she couldn't pay the bill, offered to work in the office organizing the files she saw were obviously a mess. The dentist

laughed and accepted, not imagining she'd stay with the practice for decades, long after his son took over.

“What about your dad?” Mari asked, and her mother would shrug. There were rumors. He was in Mexico. He'd run away with a nurse from his practice. She heard things from her cousins.

“I didn't need one, and neither do you,” her mom always said. Toni had never married and said she never would.

But Wella didn't stop hoping her husband would arrive. The buzzer on her door read Dr. and Mrs. Perez until the day she moved into a nursing home. She never moved her wedding photo from her dresser. She was buried with her rings.

Mari unzipped the plastic cover and ran both hands over the dress's bodice. Sequins spiraled all over the lace, hand-sewn in a pattern that narrowed at its waist. Its sweetheart neckline, rounded like the top of a pair of lips, felt stiff in her hands, its delicate piping yellowed. As she lifted it, layers of the tulle skirt unfurled under the silk. When she moved her hand, it left behind a red Jello thumbprint. She hoped her mother wouldn't notice.

Mari checked the clock: it was just after three. Her mother finished her shift at the hospital at four, so she still had time. She stood in front of the full-length mirror and took off her clothes, staring for a moment at her white cotton underwear and training bra. Sweet Nothings, the tag said, which had made her mother laugh and laugh at the department store.

She turned the dress around looking for a zipper. Instead, a line of silk buttons ran down the back, each a delicate knot to be undone. She wiped her hands on her mother's bedspread and got to work. Each loop a thin thread, several burst from the seam as she tried to untangle them, but she made her way carefully to the bottom, where the skirt began, and she saw with relief that she would likely be able to fit it, snugly, around her waist.

She put it on as she did all her dresses, over her head. She got lost in the skirt several times, its dusty citrus smell caught in her nose, but finally emerged, as if from underwater, and patted the fabric down around herself, smoothing it like sand.

In the mirror, there was too much dress. The hem tangled around her feet, and she saw that in several places it had torn slightly, despite her extreme care. The bodice hung loose, and she realized there was no way for her to button it up behind her back. She swiveled it around and did as many as she could, breaking a few more of the gentle loops, until she got to the top. She was pleased it wasn't too small but now realized the two cups where her breasts should be were

empty, sweet nothings. She walked carefully in half steps to her mother's sock drawer and took two pairs, balled them up, and tucked them below her neckline. Perfect.

Back in the dress's storage bag, the veil tied to its golden comb lay wrapped in its own layer of tissue paper. She raked it into the top of her head.

Her reflection looked back at her, a doll in costume. She wouldn't be able to move very far without the dress shifting down her body, making her trip, or the socks wriggling out, but she didn't look awful. She looked, actually, good. And how amazed her mother would be, to see Mari in the dress she prayed to every night. She'd laugh, of course, and the silliness of this unexpected vision, but then maybe she'd help Mari do her make-up, her hair, to complete the look. She'd send a picture to all her cousins, like, *Can you believe this kid?*

Mari looked back at the photo and tried to recreate Wella's modest pose, her head tilted down over her left shoulder, eyes closed, her right hand resting gently on the silk of the skirt.

"Mari, what in God's name?"

She opened her eyes to her mother in the doorway, home early. Sweat stained small circles under the armpits of her scrubs. Flowers leaned against the inside of a paper grocery bag, a present to herself. She dropped her purse and put both hands to her forehead.

"I wanted to surprise you," Mari said, less certain, "for your birthday."

Her mother looked around the room, to Mari's shorts and T-shirt on the floor, the open boxes, and the Jell-O container on her dresser.

The sun leaned hard against the windows, the day nowhere near over. Sweat tickled Mari's back, somewhere deep under the buttons she would never reach.

"What have you done?" Her mother asked, even though Mari had just told her.

Mari didn't answer.

Her mother spoke slowly. "Take that dress off. Immediately."

Mari thought her mother might help her, but she didn't move. Instead, she stared at Wella's photo, the most beautiful bride, in the pose Mari could never match.

Mari twisted the back of the dress in front of her chest so she could get to work undoing the tiny loops. Her mother moved toward her and ripped the dress apart down its middle, sending the buttons flying in arcs like grains of thrown rice, a few tapping against the mirror before landing on the rug.

“Not even on my birthday can you give me one day of peace, one day for me,” she shouted into Mari’s face. “Do you have any idea what this dress meant to your poor grandmother?” She pointed to the framed bride, who looked solemn now, frozen in her place.

Mari shook her head. “Wella said this dress was for me.”

Her mother’s eyes had followed the small shower of buttons on the floor, considering the mess, before she looked at Mari again. She shook her head. “There is nothing for you in that dress,” she said. “Mami had a terrible life. The selfless forever wife with no husband. Pining for someone who abandoned her. That’s no way to live.” She slapped her own chest, jolting the gold chains around her neck. “I’m not raising a daughter on some romantic tropical fantasy, so you—” She punched Mari’s chest with her finger, again and again. “You don’t even think about it.”

Mari stood in her bralette and underwear; the veil still light on her shoulders. She reached up and took it out carefully, handing it to her mother, who tossed it on the bed.

“Go take a shower,” her mother said, quietly. “With soap. That dress was filthy.”

In the bathroom, Mari looked at her own reflection, stripped back down to her bra, the temporary magic of the dress, and all the promise it had held all those years that she imagined it waiting for her, gone. She stepped toward the shower and felt something under her foot. It was one of the silk-covered buttons. She squeezed them in her hand, a small piece of Wella she could keep for herself. +

When Mari looked again, days later, the boxes were gone, broken down and thrown out. Her mother’s sewing kit was in the living room, maybe a sign of mending. Mari searched for the dress under her mother’s bed and in the hall closet, hoping to see it and touch in one more time, but she couldn’t find it anywhere. She had wanted it to be hers and now it was gone. Months later, looking for bobby pins on her mother’s dresser, Mari found two silk-covered buttons inside a small ceramic box, like pearls inside an oyster. She took them and hid the three surviving buttons together in her room, where she hoped her mother wouldn’t find them.

