



The Wall

Melissa Mandel

A dirt road separates Cordero from La Colonia de Eden Gardens like a scar across an angry man's face, pocked, barren, prickly. Nothing grows there. It is more of a marker than a road, a solemn and permanent reminder of lines crossed and lives destroyed.

From her fifth floor apartment at the Carmel Valley Senior Home, the tallest remaining building on what was once the Cordero compound, Elizabeth Geary spots a man walking along the south side of the road, her side. She leans forward in her overstuffed armchair. A floral teacup rattles on its saucer in her arthritic, trembling hand. She track's the man's movements, towards St. Williams, then past the abandoned Victorian. He stops, looks both ways, and jogs across the road before disappearing on the north side into Solana Beach. Ms. Geary sets the tea down and reaches for the long, cold barrel of an AK47 she has propped next to her chair. She tips the shotgun towards her face and inhales. The metallic smell ignites the front of her brain like the pilot flame on a gas stove. She squints hard to make sure the man is gone. Her eyesight is not what it used to be, but it will be good enough to get the job done.

A masked, faceless worker scurries in through the side door, darts into the kitchen without looking at Ms. Geary and drops a plastic wrapped cupcake on the kitchen counter. "Happy birthday!" the busy worker shouts in a voice that sounds like she's smiling. "102 years! Wow!" She scurries out and closes the door behind her.

During the quarantine, most of the residents entertain themselves by plotting ways to get the culinary workers to hang around when they deliver each meal. Needs abound; a burned out lightbulb at breakfast, a lost pair of glasses at lunch, a broken TV. The pleas for help become more desperate as the day passes and more difficult to resist by caretakers retrained to isolate and ignore. By dinnertime the voices join together in a haunting chorus, a wailing accompaniment to the delicate dance of the last departure of the day.

Ms. Geary is uninterested in the worker or the cupcake. Her gaze is drawn to the ruins of a masonry wall along the south side of the road, next to the abandoned Victorian where shredded curtains float through broken windows. A flash of sorrow charges through her, an illusion or a memory, an unfinished citadel, a pile of rubble, a broken boundary.

She fingers the shotgun and feels satisfied by the neatness of a bookended life, the aloneness, the prospect of justice and revenge. Alone now because her nieces cannot

visit during the pandemic; alone back then because her family was dead, all four of them except Elizabeth, a red-cheeked fussy thing who proved to be the sturdiest of the family. The second wave of the Spanish flu had ravished through Cordero but the Geary's loss was unprecedented, and Elizabeth's survival was a statistical longshot, an omen or a miracle, depending on your perspective. The few gamblers within this pious community sensed a missed opportunity somewhere, but the magnitude of this misfortune among the many misfortunes was decidedly not a random stroke of bad luck according to rampant gossip among the ranch hands, the cooks, and the girls who worked in the kitchen. It was a message about the Gardeners, their neighbors to the north, who the benevolent Carmelite Sisters of Mercy had welcomed naively into their midst.

One of those neighbors, Xavier Oscar Herrera III, before he became a fleeing felon and unwitting executioner, was a quiet and charitable young man who traveled the short distance from La Colonia de Eden Gardens every Sunday to attend church at St. Williams and give thanks to God for his good fortune. Herrera had been a fisherman living alone in Veracruz when a stroke of luck and a kind uncle connected him to a job in the orange groves in Rancho Santa Fe. In exchange for the Sisters' hospitality, Herrera stayed at the compound after services each Sunday to work the farm with Ralph Geary, the hearty toothless Irish-American in charge of crop growth.

It was springtime. Everyone's guard was down. The Spanish flu was gone because it had to be, because resources and reserves were decimated, because there could be no more dead and orphaned children, ravished bodies alone in boarded rooms, helplessness, quarantine, starvation and waste. As seedlings popped out of the soil, desperate faces popped out of the darkness craving work and worship, normalcy and connection. Every person who ventured outside confirmed to others that it was safe to do so. Eventually they all emerged, returned to work, and claimed victory, an illusory claim as it would turn out to be.

Herrera went to church one Sunday with a light and hopeful heart. He attributed his aching muscles and fatigue to his long hours at the orange grove. But after services, out on the farm, a freight train tore through his skull, his stomach churned violently, and he collapsed. Months earlier, such an event would have prompted a sterile and heartless response. But those horrific times had been relegated to the past, memories buried to make space for the new hungry faces the Sisters welcomed to the compound. The Spanish flu was long gone, as evidenced by the children who had returned to school and the crowds at the baseball games. It was dehydration or exhaustion, Geary assumed, when he brought Herrera into the family's Victorian house to rest and recover.

Herrera fled when the first daughter fell. The Carmelites mobilized an army to build a wall to keep out the Gardeners, but the damage was done.

Elizabeth shifts in her chair, pushes the shotgun aside and sips her tea. Her nieces stopped coming around even before Covid hit. They think she is a racist. They are kind, like the Carmelite Sisters of Mercy.

