

Leah

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Puerto Franco Thirty years ago

The day Leah was swallowed up by the ocean, dusk fell at noon.

At three minutes to twelve, the sun was still beating down on the market square where her mother held a packet of sweets open for Sebastian.

‘How many did you buy, Mama?’

‘Six, my boy. Three strawberry and three banana flavours, for you and your sister.’

He reached into the bag with tiny fingers and fished out his share. ‘I’m going to leave the strawberry ones for Leah because she likes pink. Thank you, Mama.’ He lifted his arms up to her.

Cristina crouched and cuddled him. ‘Oh, you’re such a sweetheart,’ she said, pressing her cheek against his. ‘It’ll make her very happy.’

Curled over him, she felt the sting of the midday heat ease off her shoulders. Grateful for the breeze, she tipped her chin to view the passing cloud and crossed herself. Unlike anything she had seen before, a shadow winged its way across the stalls like a phantom fire, bleeding amber and ruby-red over the marketplace. She rose to her feet, arms rigid by her sides. Within seconds, a boom emerged from the darkness. The foghorn. Its regular and foreboding blast, deep and monotonous, muffled the calls of the vendors and the laughter of shoppers. All sound reached Cristina as if she were underwater, legs afloat, disoriented in the expanse of the sea. The bag of groceries slipped from her fingers. Oranges and apples tumbled and rolled between sandaled and filthy, bare feet.

‘Mama.’ The voice of her child. A whisper.

She glanced at Sebastian. His cheek bulged with stuffed sweets. ‘Yes?’ she prompted in a voice that was not hers.

‘I didn’t say anything,’ he sputtered through a full mouth.

Cristina looked about her. The market stalls, pedlars and shoppers melded with the fog. She spun round in the direction of her home, and stared into vapour. She did not hear the wail, but felt it shoot out of her throat as she took to her heels.

She tore across the island, sand stinging her calves, shrub grazing every exposed part of her body. The terror inside her panted in dry bursts that scraped her airways and cranked up her heartbeat. But she pressed on in the wake of fear, the fear for her child.

She charged into the shack, yelling for Leah. Stillness spoke back to her through unmade beds, crumpled pyjamas on the bedroom floors and half-empty breakfast bowls on the kitchen table. She rushed from window to window, palms flat against the frames, as she scanned the length of the beach. That’s when she spotted it. Leah’s blue dress. I’m going for a swim, she’d said. At the water’s edge. Without quite knowing how she got there, Cristina was on the shoreline, her daughter’s dress clenched to her chest. She stumbled in the mire crying out for Leah. Back and forth then straight out into the ocean to reclaim her child.

Hands were reaching out now, holding her back. She fought them off, twisting and yelling for them to let go. They were everywhere, attached to bodies that reeked of sweat, sour breast milk and raw fish. She swatted at them, ripped them off her body. But they came at her again from the sides while the waves pelted her torso and face. Arms locked into hers and dragged her to shore. There, she dropped to her knees. Fingers clawed at her hair, tore her dress. But these she could not fend off. They were her own.

Whimpers filtered through the deafening commotion. Sebastian stood apart, chest convulsing with sobs, dread distorting his angelic features. Cristina held her arms open, ‘Oh, Sebastian, come to Mama.’ He shook his head, ducked behind the crowd. Someone nudged him forward, ‘Go on, *niño*, your Mama is upset, that’s all.’ Eyes veiled with tears, Cristina scooped him up and held him tight.

‘Pray for your sister, Bas. Pray hard for Leah,’ she said, stroking his hair.

She heard fishermen and women speculate in voices too faint to be comforting. ‘She might not be out there, Cristina.’ ‘She might have gone to a friend’s.’ ‘Maybe she’s just hiding somewhere. You know how kids are.’

She shook her head. Her daughter had said something about going for a swim. Had Leah slipped out of the cottage while she was counting out their savings, Sebastian nagging her for a sweet? Cristina had been calculating what they could afford, reordering her mental list of necessities so she could put aside a few pesetas for treats: one for Leah and one for Sebastian.

She covered her face with her hands. Had her daughter gone down to the beach before or after she had left for the market? She could not remember. Foremost on her mind had been the diminishing coins in the coffee jar and, less so, a glorious spring morning, wild daisies and lilies coming into bloom, waves the colour of blown glass.

How long ago was that? An hour? Two?

Puffs of wind blew around her and her son, alerting her to the thinning crowd. The fishermen had moved off to launch a rescue mission. In their place, children knelt by Sebastian, cued by their mothers to tell the little boy ‘It’ll be all right. They will find Leah.’

Cristina watched the men scramble from firm land to water in fishing boats, barges, rafts in search of little Leah. She did not move from the beach, dusk rolling into dawn, determined to be there the moment Leah was returned to her. Women brought out cups of coffee she did not drink, plates of stews and warm bread she could not look at. They offered to take Sebastian so she could get some rest. But she couldn't bear to let him out of her sight. When she grew too weak to protest, they took him away. For three days and three torturous nights, she looked on an ocean teeming with the boats of Puerto Franco, their lanterns and searchlights a blaze in the olive-green mass. She kept vigil on the shoreline, tears trickling down her cheeks, numb to the sun searing her skin or the night cold cutting through her.

In the twilight of the fourth day, she lay spent on the sand, slipping in and out of consciousness, lips cracked and blistered. She dreamt of her daughter splashing around in the sea, calling out to her little brother in her sweet voice. She then saw Leah point to fishing boats approaching land, the roar of engines drowning her words. Cristina peeled her eyelids open and realised the hodgepodge flotilla of vessels was in reality closing with the land. When the sight of them actually registered, she ran to meet them.

The engines were not going fast enough for her, and she tried to make out a smaller figure among the men on deck, possibly concealed by a blanket. She imagined her daughter saved, dehydrated, hypothermic, but saved.

Before the boats had pulled up to the shore, Cristina was wading between them. In no time, without a word spoken, she read the men's minds through the slump of their shoulders and their averted gazes.

'No! Go back!' Cristina grabbed at the tattered sleeves of one fisherman after the other. 'You've got to find her. You can't leave her out there. She's alive! I know she's alive.'

She dug her nails into the arms of one seaman. 'I beg of you. Don't give up on my child!' She tasted blood, not having spoken for days, and now the cracks on her lips seeping.

'Cristina.' He fixed her with eyes like frosted glass. 'It's been four days. I swear to you, in all the years we've been at sea we've never known such terrifying conditions. The rips are fierce and if we haven't found her by now . . .' He swept his hands over his face. 'Look, the men are tired. No, they're exhausted, they're finished.'

'I've got food in the house. Beds. They can rest. They can eat . . . take as much time as they need. I beg of you.'

'I'm sorry.'

Just then, thunder let loose a cloudburst. She pushed him away and looked around for someone else who might care. Some men stood stiff, their shirts and caps weighed down with water. Others sank down on their haunches, foreheads slumped on shaky arms. One sobbed, his back heaving. Not one of them looked her in the eye. Not one.

'You make me sick!' she yelled at them. 'The whole lot of you. You call yourselves men! My eleven-year-old daughter is out there . . . alone.' She shook an arm towards the sea. 'And not one of you has the guts to save her! Bunch of cowards! I don't need you. I don't need any of you!'

She retreated to her home and never left. 'You must give her a proper burial,' the women urged her. 'How can I when there's no body,' she lashed out at faces slack with pity and despair, 'and you know why there's no body? Because my daughter is alive.'

She banished them, 'the sceptics', from her home. She lined up a plate, a fork and a knife on the kitchen table in front of Leah's seat, and positioned a chair by the window. With the sea in full view, she sat down and waited.

When Leah comes home. . .

*

Cristina's tragedy touched anyone with a heart. The disappearance of a child was every mother's dread and father's nightmare. Women went about their chores in a stupor, eyes trained on their children at all times. They told their little ones to beware the wrath of the ocean and take cover from an electric sky. The men, outdone by rough seas and strong currents, reflected on their failed rescue mission. The villagers set up shrines in hearths and along the coastline in memory of young Leah. Every candle in the village church burned for a mother's loss.

Yet it did not escape the villagers' notice that their island had no more seasons. Squalls and tempests flared up unexpectedly on a still summer's day, threatening to uproot palm trees as if they were shoots in a cornfield. Massive swells charged and churned towards the shore in a crush of white foam. Gales whipped up shrapnel of debris and chased the villagers indoors, slamming doors shut behind them, rattling their windows. Fishermen set out in calm conditions only to find themselves stranded in offshore winds.

Families took to their beds praying they would still have a roof over their heads at dawn. Time after time, the drone of the foghorn insinuated itself into their dreams in the dead of night. Run-of-the-mill occurrences in Puerto Franco took on otherworldly significance. The cautionary hoot was the yawl of Leah's spirit; the sea fog, a phantasmal presence; behind silence, even blessed silence, lurked a portent. The freakish weather wore them out, fraying their nerves until they could take it no more.

They called for meetings in the church to debate the cataclysmic phenomena and vent their anger. The storms were wreaking havoc on land and crop, they complained. Produce and fish supplies were dwindling. They faced total ruin. Fights erupted between fishermen in the aisles and even women with old vendettas came to blows. The peacemakers among them urged everyone to stay calm. 'We're in this together,' they said, 'no one is better off than his neighbour.'

Fear honed their tongues and conjecture turned to accusation. 'We don't dare say it, but we all know the cause of this,' said one. Heads nodded in the pews. The climate had changed from the moment Leah had vanished, they all agreed. There could be one explanation and one only. Rumours burgeoned of a curse on Puerto Franco. It was the curse of a restless soul, the wayward spirit of a body lost at sea. Their community, they concurred, was being victimised for its abortive attempts to find her.

But drownings were not uncommon on the island of Puerto Franco, some protested. Admittedly more so among seamen who ventured far, and most of whom were non-swimmers by choice having decided that since they stood no chance against the forces of nature, they could at least spare themselves a hopeless fight. Their wives recognised the risks their husbands and sons took in the line of subsistence. And though they suffered their losses with unbound grief and distress, in the end they accepted them. Not so Cristina.

Their trials wore their patience threadbare. They blamed Cristina for not letting go of her daughter's spirit, convinced that her intransigence had sacrificed them to the fickle

elements. All they had asked was that she lay her daughter to rest but she wouldn't. In time, even those who had shared her grief became resentful of her self-pity.

With bitterness and fear in their hearts, they vowed to stay away from Leah's mother and her only remaining child, Sebastian.

*

Sebastian had given up on his mother tucking him into bed. She never did anymore. She didn't check if he'd washed or brushed his teeth. She didn't ask him if he'd said his prayers. It was great, doing what he wanted, being lazy about things that grown-ups thought were important. But he missed his mother's hugs. He missed falling asleep to the sound of her songs. He missed Leah.

He was being punished, for sure. It was his fault Leah drowned. Because he wanted a sweet so badly and went to the market with his mother. It had to be why. No one was kind to him anymore. At the beginning, the teachers used to ask him if he was all right, patted him on the head, saying 'You poor, poor boy.' *Señora* Maria even stopped caning him. His friends shared their treats with him. Sometimes they brought him pastries. He took everything home and gave it to his mother. He wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to smile. But she'd stopped doing that too.

'Are you cross with me, Mama?' he'd asked her once. When she looked up at him, her eyes frightened him. They were so red and swollen they looked like ripe figs.

'No, querido. I'm not cross with you,' she said, crying. He was stupid to make her cry. Stupid, stupid. He put his arms around her and gave her a hug. She just tapped him on the back.

He too cried a lot. Mostly at night, into his pillow. Because he was sad. And because he could. Leah was not there to tell him he was being a sissy. She used to say that: 'Don't be a sissy'. But she told him once that it was because it upset her to see him unhappy.

Then, many sleeps after Leah was gone, everyone stopped being nice to him. His friends ran away and hid from him when he wanted to play. He thought it was because he stank. So he washed. They still ran away. *Señora* Maria acted as if he didn't exist. Even when he raised his hand in class and jumped up in his seat, she never called on him. That's when he really wished Leah was still alive. To tell off the boys who were being nasty, make fun of the teachers behind their backs. She used to make him laugh when she did that. Standing on her bed at night, cotton wool stuffed in her cheeks to imitate the way fat *Señora* Maria scolded. Leah knew how to make things better. Always.

Because he was too scared to go to school, he pretended he had a sore tummy. When his Mama said nothing, he did the same the next day and the day after. So that too was good. Not having to go to school. And really, he wasn't lying. His tummy often hurt now because there was never food in the house. His mother had stopped eating. So, when he went hungry, he stole. Not really stole, but picked fruit from the trees when no one was looking. Like he used to do with his sister.

Leah was never scared of anything or anyone. Not even the sea. They weren't allowed to swim far, but she did anyway because she was such a good swimmer. And because she didn't always listen to their Mama. Then she'd sneak up on him underwater and tickle the soles of his feet. He would bolt out of the sea thinking he'd stepped on something slimy. And she'd laugh and laugh, run after him and give him a bear hug. She loved playing games.

The day she comes back, he won't be lonely anymore. His Mama said 'Leah is not gone'. When he stopped going to school, he spent his time looking for her because their Mama was so sad. He got home late once and thought he would get into trouble. But she said nothing. So he did it again, to see if she still loved him and would look for him. He wanted her to worry about him, like she did about Leah. Maybe not as much, not to make her too sad, but just enough to let him know she cared.

Then one afternoon, when he got home from the beach, there was another woman in the kitchen sitting close to his Mama. She did all the talking. His mother just stared at the floor. He could not hear what the woman was saying. It must've been a secret or something bad, because she was whispering. Maybe she'd seen him picking fruit and was telling on him. When she saw him, she got up and smiled. 'Sebastian, my name is Clara,' she said, 'I'm going to look after you.' She boiled water, and cooled it in a bucket. Outside, she washed him and scrubbed his scalp and body raw. Then she made his Mama clean herself up. She looked really pretty again and smelt like a rose. 'Don't go anywhere,' Clara said to him and left. She brought back a basket full of fruit, vegetables, and some meat. She cooked supper and stayed up with his mother who seemed to choke on every bite.

Clara came almost every day after that. She cleaned the cottage, shopped and cooked for the two of them. One night he woke up and heard his mother speaking softly. He peeked out of his room, thinking Clara was there. But his mother was alone. She was talking to an empty chair and caressing the air. It scared him so, he didn't dare leave his bed after that. Not even when he dreamt of ghosts and ghouls. He began to say his prayers again. He knelt next to the bed and squeezed his eyes shut. He prayed his father would come back from the mainland. He prayed Leah would come back from the sea. And he prayed his mother would come back to him.

God was the only one who loved him still because he answered his prayers. One evening, his mother, her hair plaited and smelling of powder, set the table and called him to dinner. She'd made his favourite dish: a meat stew with potatoes and no other vegetables. He wolfed down his food and drank three glasses of milk. At bedtime, she told him a story and smoothed down the sheets over him. She kissed him on the forehead and cuddled him like she used to.

'Sleep well, *querido*,' she said, 'from tomorrow, everything will be better, I promise.' And she smiled. At last, she smiled.

As soon as she left the room, Sebastian jumped out of bed and got on his knees.

'Thank you, God,' he said, 'for bringing Mama back to me.'

He made to get up then half-knelt again.

'And thank you for Clara. I pray she brings pastries tomorrow.'

He heard his mother singing softly. He peered through the window and saw her sitting inside a small circle of candles just outside their house. The light was enough for him to watch what she was doing. She put his sister's blue dress against her cheek, kissed it, and hid it deep into the ground. She then scooped up sand with both arms, covered the hole and patted it, just like she did when she put him to bed. She took something off the ground and placed it on top. Sebastian squinted to see it what it was: a wooden cross made of two branch sticks and decorated with flowers. It was so pretty, it made him want to cry.