

*the*  
*Memory*  
*of Light*

FRANCISCO X. STORK



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CHAPTER  
ONE

“Victoria.”

I open my eyes when I hear my name.

I’m lying down. A white bed. To my left a window. Pale-blue sky. To my right a face. The same lady from last night. Underneath her white coat, I see a shiny green dress.

She told me her name before. In the emergency room when they brought me in. I am in a different room now.

Dr. Desai. I remember.

My head is full of words, floating unconnected, moving in slow motion. Dr. Desai is talking. Sounds without meaning. Some of the words are coming from her and some of them come from someplace in me.

“Victoria,” I hear Dr. Desai say again in the distance. “People call you Vicky.”

I nod.

Dr. Desai pulls up a chair and sits, but my bed is so high I can see only the top of her gray head. She pushes a button beside the bed to lower it, but nothing happens. She stands and moves back a step or two to give me space.

“How do you feel?”

I can tell she’s asking about my body and not my mind. I touch my throat, noticing soreness there for the first time.

“From the stomach pump,” Dr. Desai says. “I can give you some lozenges if you like.”

I shake my head. I remember waking up, gagging, a rubber tube in my mouth and a woman with dark hair holding my shoulders down. Then I must have passed out again.

I'm wearing a hospital gown. I wonder what happened to my clothes. The skin on my chest is scratched and raw.

"You're at Lakeview Hospital. Your father agreed to let you stay here until tomorrow, but you can decide to be with us longer if you want to," Dr. Desai says.

*Want. Decide.* The words are like the *cascarones* we used to decorate for Easter when my mother was alive. Eggshells empty of all life, meant to be admired. What I *want* now is the silence I glimpsed last night.

"Do you feel like talking a little?"

"Not really," I whisper hoarsely. I mean that I don't know what there is to say.

Dr. Desai offers me a glass of water and I drink from it. I give her back the glass and she places it carefully on the nightstand next to the bed.

"I'm happy to just be with you without speaking, if you wish."

"Okay."

We are silent for a while, and I don't mind the silence. I think of the times when I would sit by my mother's bed after she became ill. I read to her from her favorite poets, and sometimes she would fall asleep while I read and I would just sit there watching her. I look past Dr. Desai and see an empty bed with magazines on top. I hope whoever sleeps in that bed doesn't talk.

“Do you know who found you?” she asks at last.

“Found me?”

“You would surely have died if you hadn’t been found. Another fifteen minutes and you’d be gone.”

I guess it was my father and Barbara who found me after they got home. But neither of them ever comes into my room. So how was I “saved”? Who is responsible for prolonging this mess?

Dr. Desai opens a brown file folder. “The paramedic wrote in her report that a Juanita Alvarez called 9-1-1.”

“Juanita.” Something breaks and burns near my heart. A block of frozen shame dissolves and I am flooded with it.

“Apparently,” Dr. Desai says. “You didn’t know?”

“I don’t remember much. . . . I took the pills. A pain in my chest. My throat. The ambulance.” I remember suddenly the scared look on my father’s face when he and Barbara came to see me in Intensive Care.

Dr. Desai waits for me to say more.

“Juanita is my nanny. Since I was born.”

“She must love you very much.”

I look around the room for a place to hide my eyes.

“What happened last night?” Dr. Desai asks.

I bite my lip. Last night. Was it me or someone else who saw my father and Barbara leave, who said good night to Juanita and waited for her to go to sleep? The letter I wrote to her. Did I manage to tape it to the back of the painting?

“Vicky?”

I wait until the pressure in my throat loosens enough for me to breathe. “How can you love someone and still try to kill yourself?”

Dr. Desai does not answer. She hands me the box of tissues, and I stare at it until I realize there are tears streaming down my face. I wipe the tears away.

“Would you like to call Juanita?” She reaches into the pocket of her white doctor’s coat and pulls out an old-fashioned cell phone, the kind that flips open.

No. Yes. How can I feel both with equal force? I’m so ashamed, but I want to hear her voice. “She’ll want to know why” is all I say to Dr. Desai.

“Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Then say you don’t know. That it’s something you’re trying to figure out.”

“She’s going back to Mexico soon.”

“Oh?”

“Her arthritis. She can hardly walk. My father and step-mother thought it better if she was in Mexico. With her family.”

There’s something like disbelief on Dr. Desai’s face. Then she nods with understanding and says, “I’ll let you have some privacy.” She stands and hands me the phone. She walks out of the room and closes the door gently behind her.

It is after one p.m. That’s when Juanita sits down to have her *café con leche* and a slice of white bread with peanut butter. That’s all she ever has for lunch. I let the phone ring once, hang

up, and dial again. Barbara has told Juanita not to answer the phone because of all the messages she has bumbled, but Juanita and her friend Yolanda have devised this secret code to signal a call for her. The phone rings and rings, and just when I am about to give up, I hear Juanita's voice.

"*Aló.*"

"Nana. It's me."

"*Hijita, hijita.*" Her voice is weak, fragile, tearful. "You okay?"

"I'm okay."

"I so worried about you. You at the hospital? Your father say you come home tomorrow. I want to go with you last night, but the ambulance men say no. I can't believe I hear your voice. *Es un milagro* that you're alive. Thank you, *Diosito*. Thank you, *Virgencita de Guadalupe*.

"You know what happen last night?" she continues. "I in my room asleep and I hear the *gato meow, meow* outside my door. I never heard him meow like that before, like someone pulling his tail or something. So I open the door to see and he's *meow, meow*. I follow him and he run upstairs and on top of the stairs, *meow, meow*. I don't know what, but just then I felt something in heart so heavy. I know something very bad. I climb stairs on hands and knees like a baby. I knock on your door but you don't open, so I think maybe you're not there. But the *gato* is *meow, meow* there by door, going loco. Then I open door and see you in bed with eyes closed, so I think everything okay, you asleep, but the *gato* runs in and jumps on top of you, meowing and pulling your shirt with his nails."

I touch my chest. So that's where the scratches came from. Galileo.

"I saw the empty bottle. I know they sleeping pills from Barbara. I call 9-1-1 right away, then your father on his cell," Juanita continues. "*Es un milagro. Tu ángel de la guarda* made that silly *gato* save you. He climbed tree, went through window, saw you, and climbed down to my room to get me. *Es un milagro.*"

"Galileo?" All that energy and movement are so uncharacteristic of Galileo. He is as serene and lazy and content as only a well-fed eight-year-old neutered tomcat can be. The thought of him meowing or doing anything in a hurry is so strange.

"What happened, *mi niña*? Why you do something so horrible? Something happen in school?"

"No, no."

"Do you miss your mamá? I miss her too. Your mamá wouldn't want you to do this."

"I know," I say, rubbing my eyes with my hands.

"Who hurt you, *mi niña*? Tell me."

"No one, Nana, no one hurt me. It just hurts inside, I don't know why."

"Is it Barbara? Is that what happen?"

"No . . ." I have no answers to these questions, no explanations that make any sense. I feel my head shrinking, tightening with pressure, as if I were taking an exam in a foreign language on a subject I never even knew existed.

"She okay. She tries. She needs learn to smile. So serious

always. But she not bad inside. Your father, he loves you also. They sometimes confused about how to love. But they okay.”

It is so painful to hear Juanita’s voice. Why? “Nana, I have to go. I wanted to let you know I’m okay.”

“I be here, my Vicky. I don’t go to Mexico until you come home. I stay here with you if I could always.”

“Nana.” She hasn’t seen my letter, so I need to tell her. “This thing I did. Taking the pills. It doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“I know that, my *niña*, I know. I no never have doubts. Don’t worry. I be here waiting for you. Don’t forget the *gato*. *Diosito* didn’t want you to die.”

“I have to go now, Nana.”

“Don’t cry, my little baby. Everything okay. You see.”

The call ends. I lie there for I don’t know how long, my hand on the telephone, as if I’m afraid to let go of the voice that flowed through it. It is possible, I realize, to have people in your life who love you and who you love, and to still want to kill yourself. It’s almost as if part of the reason you’re doing it is for them, because you are not worthy of their love, and you want to stop being a burden to them, contaminating their lives with your moodiness and grumpiness and miserableness. I feel Juanita’s love now. I even feel Galileo’s love. And it makes me feel so much worse.

There’s a gentle touch on my shoulder, and I let go of the phone and look up to see Dr. Desai.

“My cat,” I say.

She sits down in the chair, her hands folded.

“He meowed outside Juanita’s room and took her to my room.”

Dr. Desai doesn’t look one bit surprised, as if in her experience, saving lives is standard cat behavior. “I’m glad your cat saved you,” she says. “Are you?”

“No.” The word rises up on its own, a lone air bubble from some drowning breath. It surprises me to see it there, floating on the surface between Dr. Desai and me.

She nods as if she appreciates the honest answer. “Vicky, I’m going to recommend that you stay here for a couple of weeks, if it’s okay with you. I think it would be helpful for you to be in a different environment for a while. You can come to our daily group therapy meeting. There are three other young people currently attending, and it would be good for you to be with others . . . like yourself, in many ways. You and I would also meet regularly, and a few hours of your day would be spent helping around the hospital. I believe this combination of talking, listening, doing something useful, and being around other young people who are learning to live will give you some tools you can use when you return to your previous circumstances.”

“Tools?” I imagine a hammer and a chisel, my life inside a boulder I need to crack.

“A greater understanding of who you are and what you need to do to be at peace with your life.” She pauses. “At the very least, a time for the thoughts of killing yourself to quiet down.”

I look up at her quickly.

“Do you have anything you want to say to me or ask me?” she says.

I want to tell her that she’s right, that I’m going to try again. Sooner or later, the days, hours, minutes, and seconds of my life will slowly choke me until I feel like the only way to breathe is to die. All the group therapy meetings or private sessions full of talking or comfortable silences are not going to stop me. She shouldn’t feel bad when that happens. I want to tell her this because I like her. I want to spare her whatever it is she feels when she fails.

But I don’t tell her any of this. I don’t even know if I could find the words, because the sentences that struggle to come together inside my head get gobbled up by the silence that I’m yearning for, the one I know is always near.

She continues, “Just think about whether you would like to stay here. You can let me know tomorrow morning.”

Two weeks, two days, two minutes, it’s all the same. Lakeview or home, here, there — does it really matter?

Sooner or later, I will kill myself.