

*L. M. Lopez*

## **White Radio**

I'll ask Felix to take the box out, she thought. The box in the closet. Felix should be able to do that. Where is Felix? Gone so long. He had beaten the avocados out of her tree with the bat. After enough time passed she'd given him the bat. A Louisville Slugger. He'd been glad to get it. When he smiled he had hardly a harelip at all.

Anna Maria would be coming soon to clean out the drawers, the cupboards, the closet. Felix had to take the box out today. Maybe he would bury it. He is a good boy. Was it Felix or Anna Maria who found the pigeon chicks under the carport? One was smashed in its shell. The other, featherless and reptilian, the children carried in the cup of their small hands and fed dabs of rice from the tips of their fingers.

Anna Maria. That she and Luis, in their plodding ordinariness, should have such a child was a miracle of Jesus and all of the saints. Luis was squat, rest his soul, with the bulging eyes and the fallen jowls of a toad. She was large-boned, tall and strong. Her mild eyes too small for her broad Indian nose. Yet, Anna Maria dazzled. Her face of ovals, her slender neck, the glossy black volume of hair that tumbled down to her waist augmented her astonishing beauty.

Where could Felix be? Our Lady of Guadalupe on the bedstand held her ceramic arms out, the palms uplifted in supplicating inquiry. He didn't usually stay away this long. He came two, three times a day to press his small brown face against her window screen to ask for odd jobs to do for spending money. She kept some peppermint canes for him. She would give him two dollars to bury the box in the closet.

He would bury the box without looking inside. Anna Maria would poke and probe and come away with the darkness of a storm on her face. Anna Maria always had to know and when she knew she became unhappy. Felix would smile, say, sure, and the box would be gone.

Sometimes she thought she saw the cardboard vibrate with the lispig beat of a snare drum and the reedy whine of a saxophone wafting from sealed carton flaps. They called it, Swing, the music of the big bands. She should have taken it to the dump in the pickup, when she was able. She ought to have put it out with the trash long ago. But it was too much a trophy to throw away.

Her grandfather had a broad silver belt with lightning bars of turquoise in the buckle. He'd taken it from a dead Ute after a dance. He kept it all his life and wore it in his grave. She did not like to have the box buried, but it must be done for Anna Maria.

Anna Maria was just sixteen when she returned from an afternoon at the library with a tall redheaded serviceman. Her large eyes had been moist and glimmering with pleasure.

"Mama, Papa meet Cap."

"Pleased to meet you folks."

"He's stationed at the base."

"Had a forty-eight hour leave and decided to see town. Boy, I'm glad I did."

He smiled and squeezed their child around the waist. Elena could smell liquor on his breath. His collar was unbuttoned and a tuft of wiry orange hair sprouted from his exposed undershirt. Anna Maria had never held a man before and his meaty touch put her in his thrall. Luis squinted his distaste.

Elena fixed dinner for them. Steaming platters were her strongest memory. She turned her attention to the meal and kept her eyes averted from her daughter in the arms of that man.

"Is Anna Maria as good a cook as you?"

"Anna Maria is a child."

That was the only time Elena spoke to him that first evening. She would always remember the words she said to him as though they had been significant, or portentous.

Luis never did a thing. It was his way. He kept his lips pursed and knelt to pray at the small shrine of plaster santeros in the backyard. He spent time in the garden, weeding his tomatoes, when

Cap came to visit. He liked to find lizards under rocks and sever them neatly with his hoe. It pleased him to see the separated halves writhe away. Elena served food—rice, chicken, corn, squash. Platter after platter emerged from her small kitchen, balanced on her uplifted, supplicating palms. Anna Maria smiled and blushed.

Luis and Elena resolved to be tolerant, modern parents. They would not interfere with their daughter's love. They knew she would run off if they did.

Cap liked to sneak up on people. He walked on the balls of his feet and approached silently from behind, not speaking until he was sure his prey would be startled.

"Mama, I have wonderful news."

Anna Maria no longer went to the library. She spent most of her time waiting at the window seat or rushing off to the drugstore to use the payphone.

"Mama, Papa, we have wonderful news!"

Once on the porch Elena heard their footfalls as they returned from a movie late at night. Then she heard Anna Maria's angry voice and the quick, dreadful sound of a slap. She rushed out to her daughter. Cap disappeared soundlessly into the night.

"Mama, don't turn the porchlight on."

She took her daughter in her arms. "You must let him go. I know he is a bad one."

## II

"Mama, we're married. See my ring."

They had no money for rent or furniture so they moved into the quartito, a wooden shack, behind the garden.

One morning, Luis would not get out of bed. He lay with his arm slung over his chest. When Elena shook him, the arm swung free and hung motionless over the side of their bed. A stroke, the doctor said.

Cap liked Anna Maria to stay inside the small house. He did not like her to go to the main house.

"Your mama don't like me none. She give me them hateful eyes and don't say a word. She like to kill me, I know."

He did not re-enlist and could not find a job. The war had ended, jobs were scarce and often he drank too much to make it out

of bed. He lay in bed all morning and afternoon drinking whiskey from a clouded glass, smoking cigarettes and listening to the white radio.

It had been her gift to them. It cost too much. The sales clerk eyed her old black jersey dress and black button-top shoes suspiciously when he brought it off the shelf for her to see.

Instantly, she loved the clean white sides and shiny metal dial. It was broad, modern and beautifully white. She could see her large pocked face in its milky reflection. She had it wrapped and carried the unwieldy box in her lap on the bus.

Anna Maria delighted at the gift. It was the only valuable thing they owned. She glanced nervously at Cap before throwing her arms around her mother in thanks. Elena warned her daughter to keep the door and windows locked now that they had the radio. Cap rolled his eyes, picked up the radio and took Anna Maria home. They would not stay for dinner. Elena ate alone.

Elena often heard the syncopated strains of big band music floating from the windows of their small house. Sometimes the music blasted forth at full volume to mask the smashing glass and shouting within. Elena knelt by the Lady of Guadalupe and passed the rosary beads through her fingers, but transfixed by the votive flames dancing in their beveled cups, she knew it was not enough.

One late night Anna Maria thumped her fist against her mother's door.

"Mama, don't turn the porchlight on."

Anna Maria sobbed, hiccoughing convulsively, in her mother's arms. They sat in the darkness holding onto each other. Elena felt the wet stickiness of blood on her hands when she pushed her daughter's hair out of her face. She led her to the bathroom to clean up.

It had been surprisingly simple from that moment on. She found Luis' gardening gloves in the bureau drawer. She'd bought the bat for Anna Maria's birthday parties, when they would bring it out for the children to strike the pinatas. Elena pulled it out of the closet and placed it behind the front door while her daughter washed. She put her daughter to sleep in the big bed and crawled in with her. Elena waited until her daughter's breathing was slow and deep before climbing out of bed again.

She put the bat under a checked dish towel and tiptoed out of

the house and through the garden. The moist soil clung to her toes. She opened the door to the guesthouse with her own key. She waited, she had time, until her eyes could separate the shadows from the lumpish furniture. She crept slowly, on the balls of her feet, to the bedroom.

The piggish noise of Cap's snoring filled the cramped rooms. He had passed out with an empty bottle of Dewar's in his arms. His face was disfigured by deep sleep. His upperlip receded, baring his gums and teeth. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut under his pink freckled lids. His boxer shorts split at the crotch revealing a darkness within.

The first blow made a loud cracking sound. The next few blows thudded mutely in the fine pink mist. Then Elena plucked a cigarette from the pack on the night stand. It was difficult to manipulate stick matches wearing the heavy gloves, but finally she scraped a charcoal streak in the wall and a flame sputtered to life. She lit the cigarette and rested it in a glass ashtray. She reached to the window to grab the curtain. She dipped a fine gauzy corner into the ashtray. She lifted the radio from its table, wound the white cord carefully around its legs and carried it home with her.

The fire ate through the small house in minutes. When the engines arrived only glowing fragments of the frame caged the rolling, lashing flames. Elena restrained the hysterical Anna Maria in her strong arms. Felix, who was then nine, laughed and danced and clapped his hands in the swirling veil of soot.

When Cap's body was found it was no more than a fusion of charred bone on the steel bedframe.

### III

After enough time had passed, Elena gave the bat to Felix. He'd been glad to get it. He was no longer a little boy, she remembered suddenly. She had seen him in a uniform. Vietnam. He didn't come home. His mother wept. Was it one, two, ten years ago? He had hardly a harelip, at all, when he smiled.