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### House of God

In the second week of marsh-wet summer God moved into the house next door with scraggly sunflowers that radiated warmth and dripped lemon nectar. We pressed our noses to the windowpanes and stared as he trotted to and fro, hefting lumpy boxes full of who-knows-what out of his trunk. Wool scarves, we guessed. Cans of Italian Wedding soup, a few well-worn asteroid belts. Little Pedro, wedged to the quadrant of the sill, said maybe God keeps his rosaries there, ones of gold beads and stenciled amberwood, and plastic ones that break during Hail Marys at church.

Next morning Mama sent us over to God's house with her welcoming pie: a sugar-crumbled tart bubbling dark red with cherries and dates. She had stayed up all night cracking eggs, mixing flour, and praying with a knotted cord in hand. When the stars slid away Mama roused us up and scrubbed our faces so hard we turned pink and translucent. Our collars stuck up straight as pins.

"Make me proud," Mama said. "Be polite." So we trooped next door with her kisses sticky on our foreheads, brandishing the dish aloft like a sacrament.

God opened his door—just a sliver—and we chanted our greetings: "Morning, sir. We're the neighbors. Ma sent us here to say hello. Here, take this pie, it's so good and still warm too."

He glanced at our seven brown faces and lifted the pie. “Be right back,” he said, then turned around and left. We craned our necks and gazed inwards at the vinyl fold-up chairs, the tapestry of the Virgin Mary in a baby blue bikini, the jeweled beetles pinned on the clock. When God came back we tucked our necks back into our collars and pretended to study the veins on the wall.

“Hold out your hands,” he said, and dropped a chocolate swirl into each of our open palms. “Give my thanks to your Ma.” We waited for God to smile benevolently. To say something holy, something electrifying. But he shut the door instead and our anticipation melted fast and thick, like the chocolates in our fists.

The next day was a sunless Sunday. God’s telephone rang all morning long as prayers rose up from the church spires in wreaths of rose colored smoke, covering the sky. They spiraled into his chimneys. Paper doves dotted with tiny-lettered notes crisscrossed through the smoke. Sometimes the doves collided with the smokestack, ampersand bellies jiggling as they crumpled back.

Mama herded us single file to the Lady of Guadalupe Church, our discounted dress shoes biting our toes. Inside Mama sat at the front, pink-mouthed with all the other jewel-clicking ladies. We sat in the pews. Silence sat heavily on our backs, dragging down our heads. Father Sanchez, tall and bald and wheezing, delivered all the weekly sermons. His voice pendulated across the room, swinging into squeaks before dipping into growls. The seed pearls on his rosary clicked against each other, *rat-tat-tat clink rat-tat-tat*.

Father Sanchez spoke of how God loved us so much, yes, that he came down to earth to live amongst us. Specifically, he chose *our town*, which offered no swimming

pool and only one church with scant refreshments and a serious cockroach infestation. It was a miracle, indeed. The Lord has come to reward us, he claimed. In fact, he had recently visited God himself with a request.

Father Sanchez bent his shiny head real slow, and revealed a thin patch of brown hair sprouting from the peak. *Rat-tat-tat.*

By Monday, there was a string of visitors on God's doorstep, carrying requests of all shapes and sizes and colors, stretching into a run-on sentence with no period in sight. Some of the visitors were missing an arm or a job or a lover. Others had too many arms or jobs or lovers. They slept in his cabbage beds, sat cross-legged under the shade of his sneezing pines, and licked the honey oozing out from his flowers.

From our own porch, we waved at everyone we knew. We saw Governor Lopez slurping watermelon guts, and spitting the seeds out when he thought nobody was looking. His second wife, Maria Lopez, whose brown-velvet belly swelled like a parenthesis, had a cigarette stuck between her lips. At the back of the line was the school janitor, Diego Maldía, his face stippled with blood sores. Quiet in his decay. Little Pepita was curled asleep on his back, one pudgy hand wrapped tightly around his freckled collar.

From his porch, God fiddled with his golden halo and listened to their requests. Nodded a lot. Spoke a little. Dropped a chocolate into open hands. Bid everyone a good day.

The chocolates all melted, for some reason. People always held them too tightly, too nervously, until the waxy shapes flattened into syrup and dripped onto the porch. Some of us began to tell stories: the chocolates came from God's castle in the sky, yes;

sculpted by the angels themselves, who spliced cloud floss into sugar and harvested the cacao beans from Eden. Señora Valencia from across the street claimed the chocolates came in boxes hand-delivered by Jesus. Said she saw his car parked on the Lord's driveway one night.

“A black sports edition,” she told Mama, “Expensive. Painted with flames across the sides. So bright against the night, I nearly thought they were real.” Señora Valencia swished her doughy arms back and forth, purring like an engine.

June mildewed into damp green August so quickly we couldn't even recall July. We dipped our fingers in strawberry cake mix, tickled the cicadas and watched their legs oscillate, and kept an eye on the house of God.

At the beginning, the town marveled over each miracle. Governor Lopez's spine unhooked itself overnight until it became as straight as a wood slab. His wife Maria stopped smoking and started sealing her lips shut with bed red lipstick. The two started sleeping in separate bedrooms, or so we've heard. And, after three days of praying, Diego Maldía's blisters aged into scabs that flaked away. He started smiling more. Started idling around town. Started pushing Pepita in a tiny baby stroller because we loved to pinch the pinks of her cheeks white. Started flirting with women in a voice thicker than lust.

The days lengthened, as did the line waiting outside our home. Many folks came twice, thrice, twenty, thirty times, holding their burdens outstretched as if carrying unwanted toddlers. They were eager to unload them. To exchange them for swirls they do not know how to eat. Father Sanchez came over every Monday with fresher, more lustrous hair. Flat pageboy cuts. Irrigated braids. Toffee-lightened center parts. Meanwhile, Maria Lopez's speckled collarbones hollowed into a smooth cavity. You

could see the slim curves of rib under her breasts. Diego Maldía asked for a new gold saxophone and began playing love songs that made your bones ache. Sweet strains that made the young women nostalgic for memories that weren't theirs, that made the old girls long for times they never had.

Even Mama approached God with a few entreaties, although she didn't like to ask for favors. Truth is, Mama wanted her pie dish back but she was too polite to say so. Always ended up asking for small wishes. Pedro's socks started folding themselves into pairs. Slugs seeped away from Mama's tomato stalks, tracking mucus on the asphalt. And the cracks on the cereal bowls squeezed tighter and tighter, until they disappeared entirely.

August darkened into September, and the leaves stripped themselves and shriveled off in flakes. And one day, Diego Maldía left town with Maria Lopez. Her lipstick prints glimmering across the planes of his cheeks, his music jangling on her jean hips like loose change. Streetlight streamed around their linked arms, filtering through the gaps. They looked so bright, so gorgeous, walking through soft dusk like that. So young we didn't even recognize them at first. We didn't even think of Pepita, by then a dust mote that had escaped Diego's peripheral vision; her hands outstretched towards his head, as if trying to reach his collar and tug him back.

Some things, Señora Valencia claimed, stayed forever in a town. Memories that calcified into sediment, crunchy underneath our feet. That year we remembered the damp heat of autumn, which rubbed its face against our bare calves and purred fiercely whenever we scratched behind its ears. And the shape of little Pepita's watery-pink eyes,

as she watched Diego shrink into the infinite distance. And how Governor Lopez's spine crooked back into a question mark, after he came home to absence. How grief caught between his eyelids, stinging.

And we couldn't forget Diego Maldía and Maria Lopez, clutching each other's hands in the back of God's pickup truck. They were caught a week after elopement in a no-tell motel three towns over, lying on the hasty bed they made. We saw their wide-eyed expressions in the back seat as God drove by. Their bare kneecaps still kissing, still pressed squarely together. Those limbs got minds of their own. Still mouthing words into each other, over and over like a naked melody: "Love you. Love you. Love you."

"The Lord took them to Hell," Señora Valencia whispered when we asked where they were going. She picked the words carefully out of her teeth. "The two did something very bad, niños, to go to such a terrible place."

Later, we imagined flames embroidered into their puckered skins, unfurling clots of sizzling blood. Angry threads punctured through their bodies; a mesh of golden-white. Blistering roses blooming in a bubbling ocean of fire. Diego Maldía and Maria Lopez, forever intertwined, burning and helical and too in love to untangle.

Afterwards, God's doors remained as sealed as a prayer, the keyholes coated with sheets of glossy wax. People stopped coming over, anyways. They all left in a rapid exodus of sorts. We sat outside with lollipops dissolving in our mouths and spit souring neon. Watched the air choke on silence until its face turned red, then blue, then a bruised purple. The quiet lingered, disquieting.

This was the aftermath of disillusionment. This was as if, for the first time, we saw God as something unlike ourselves—something primordial and powerful that didn't belong in this town. As an otherness that jutted out amongst our unbroken line of picketed fences and color-coded lawns.

The fog joggers and dog walkers began to skirt around his house in ever-widening concentric circles. Rumors spread quicker than winter frost. Some folks whispered that God's gifts were tainted miracles. That the chocolates he handed out were laced with sin. Mama, who usually scoffed at such talk, stopped using cereal bowls and started pouring the breakfast milk into her fancy wine goblets instead.

Last Sunday, Father Sanchez showed up to church with a clean-shaved head and his clinking rosary beads. Spoke about the importance of fear, of the holy. His fingers periodically spasmed, as if fighting to push back his missing mane of hair. The fake chandelier glowed overhead as he marched up and down the pews, charting our confessions one by one. Pedro, who was caught napping during the ladies' choir, was sentenced to a prayer of contrition.

"Dear G-God," Pedro stuttered. "I am s-sorry for having offended you, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I resolve with the help of your g-g-g-grace to confess my sins, do p-penance, and to amend my life. Amen." He puffed out a tiny crooked vapor. Mama winced.

At noon we tottered out, clutching paper cups of grape juice and soda crackers. Sister Francesca who is always sucking bitter tequila candy shouted at us to get off the nice church grass. As we hurried off, Pedro tripped over his tight dress shoes and fell back onto the grass. His cup spilled everywhere, soaking the chlorophyll purple.

“Nasty brats,” Sister Francesca shrieked. Bad temper shimmered off her like a mirage. “Go burn in hell!” Star-rust smoke streamed from her mouth, the acrid tang smacking the air, spiraling up and away. We stepped back nervously, Pedro scrambling up, and she snarled, revealing four rows of yellow snaggleteeth.

So we turned and ran. Peeled our shoes off and ran in our socks. Left behind fourteen scraps of cracked leather, bunched in a line like beads on a rosary. Go burn in hell. Go burn in hell. Her condemnation fractured in our ears, and we bolted into our paper-thin house and locked it thrice. Our sides stitched themselves in protest. We imagined periwinkle fire, hungry and long with longing. We thought of boiling in a lake of brimstone and flames forever. We thought of Mama sitting at home by herself, surrounded by seven untouched goblets of milk. Outside the window, the misshapen sunflowers shone threateningly.

A light tap came from outside. We made Little Pedro unlock the door and he did so, fingers shaking. He gasped and we peeked above our couch ever so slowly, our hearts throbbing in our ears. God stood at the entrance holding Mama’s polished pie plate, looking confused.

“Please don’t take me to hell,” Pedro blurted.

“What?” God asked. And so we told him—in gasps and stutters—what Sister Francesca had sentenced us with.

“You’re not going to Hell,” God said tiredly. “Sister Francesca doesn’t decide who goes and who doesn’t.” We felt better instantly, and the stitches in our sides untangled themselves so we could breathe. Then we remembered our manners and offered him the best seat on the couch. Offered him black perk-up coffee and Mama’s

homemade peanut cookies, but there was no coffee left so we poured him a glass of cold milk instead.

We crowded around him like skinny-ribbed crows hankering around a hunk of greased bread. Pedro started to fan the prayer smoke away from God's jacket. God chewed slowly, his jaw sliding back and forth. The flowers bordering his house swiveled their necks around and began illuminating our walls. His halo pulsed with soft starlight.

"Do you like being God?" Someone asked as God licked the peanut butter off his fingers. He paused and thought for a while. "I don't," he answered firmly, then resumed licking.