

## Lugar Sagrado: A Sacred Place Bennett E. Vogt

A scream shattered the silence. The sound was piercing because of its proximity, but it abruptly ended and rose up. Up to meet the vaulted ceilings, before coming back down. Down where the scream sounded as if it were from a distance. A whisper of its former shrillness, the sound still made Guillermo's spine stiffen.

He turned around in time to see his mother crumple to the floor, reaching for her leg. Once on the floor she pursed her lips and closed her eyes tight. When she managed to try and get up, her eyes opened wide and another cry erupted from her mouth. This cry echoed again and then was absorbed by the serene space.

*"Mama! Mama! What happened?"*

*"Nada niño. Tell someone to call an ambulance."*

Guillermo turned and saw a man standing in shock. When Guillermo caught his eyes, the man jumped and reached into his pocket. His clumsy hands dropped the phone at first and it clattered to the marble floor.

Guillermo turned back to his mom and held her outstretched hand. Periodic bruises lined the length of her arm up to the edge of her sleeveless white blouse. Her face was illuminated in fine greens, blues, and yellows that came from the stained glass. The light made shadows where the corners of her mouth turned down into a grimace, and a single green tear escaped her closed right eye. Guillermo looked down at his mom's leg. Her foot lay on its instep, and her leg was bent at a grotesque angle from the thigh down. A spot of dark blue was growing under the skin as he watched. He couldn't be sure how long he'd sat there.

His mother opened her eyes suddenly, and by now turquoise mascara was running down her cheeks, and some crimson blood was on her lips where she'd bit them.

*"Niño. Busca agua. I feel warm. Soak my handkerchief for my head."*

Guillermo got up and saw that the man who had used his cell phone was crouching next to them. His eyebrows and furrowed forehead formed a triangle of concern. Guillermo went over to his mom's overturned purse. Next to it was a brown paper bag of fallen groceries. He moved her mascara tube and bible to get at the brown and gold handkerchief.

He ran towards the altar. The marble, while solid, felt so smooth under his feet it seemed like glass. People kneeling with their heads on pew backs glared at him as he sped by along the delicate surface.

The altar had nothing but curious tourists sneaking photos, so Guillermo went around its back. There he found a small chapel with a stone basin on a pedestal. It was made of rough stone hewn by a mason's tools and the whole cathedral appeared to have been built around this single artifact. He stood on his tiptoes to peer into the bowl. The bottom was illuminated in blue and red and green. Colors danced through a layer of water, while the black imperfections of the granite remained steady. Guillermo took the handkerchief and bathed it in the water.

Just then, a young priest in a white robe came into the chapel. He was astonished and came over, lamenting that he would need new water for the baptism later. The priest pulled a brass plug in the bottom of the bowl with a ceremonial flourish. The sound of water flowing was out of place and sounded exactly like emptying a full bathtub. Guillermo ran away before the priest could speak to him.

His mom was lying where he had left her, with the stranger peeking nervously over his shoulder at the front door. Her forehead now had pearls of sweat. The tourists and pilgrims at the

altar were now pointing and talking amongst themselves about what had happened. He put the handkerchief on her forehead, and she sighed, using her arm to wipe some blood from her lips.

“*Chico*. Why is your mom wearing that silly winter cap? Would she be more comfortable without it?” asked the stranger.

“It’s not silly. It’s one of her favorites,” answered Guillermo.

For the last several years his mom had dressed up in hats. Today it was blue with patterns of white snowflakes, but she also wore green ones, and orange ones. Purple ones she saved for special occasions. All of them fit closely and covered everything from the top of her forehead to the nape of her neck and to the tops of her ears. Sometimes people asked her to take them off, but to Guillermo, they seemed like they were just another part of his mother now.

The stranger looked over his shoulder again because he heard the ambulance siren in the distance. Guillermo turned to his mother: “They told you not to go out. They told you -- they told you not to exert yourself.”

“I know, I know *hijo*,” she said. “But you know that coming here is important to me.”

Guillermo shook his head and looked down at her leg. By now, it was very swollen. The mechanical siren scream rushed in through the small door and filled the hall. Now everyone inside was aware of the woman who had fallen.

Guillermo looked up and saw the priest from earlier running down the aisle. He was peculiarly suited to running despite his profession. Each knee bulged from the white fabric of his robe at the pace of a light jog and the rest of it billowed behind him. He seemed perpetually on the verge of tripping on the robe’s hem, but maintained balance nevertheless. He flew over to where the paramedics were taking a stretcher out of the ambulance.

“*Va a la izquierda* and take the ramp!” he instructed them. The paramedics did and soon were also at the side of Guillermo’s mother. A curtain-like crowd began to surround the scene. Many held hands in prayer. Guillermo’s mother winced as the paramedics felt her leg. One reached into his bag and took out two pieces of plastic and some tape. They placed the pieces on either side of her leg and wrapped the tape around efficiently. She grimaced again as they hoisted her into the stretcher, the handkerchief still clutched in her hand.

She made the paramedics stop rolling her so she could speak to the priest:

“*Por favor* look after my *niño* for a little while. I do not want him to see me like this anymore.”

“*Sí señora*.”

“I’ll be back later *niño*,” his mom whispered. “Be good to *el padre*.”

With that, the stretcher was wheeled out the way it came, and the ambulance drove away. The crowd dispersed, taking the stranger with it, and Guillermo was left alone with the priest. The siren faded and was absorbed once more by the space. Guillermo and the priest began to pick up the fallen groceries in the light of the stained glass: bluish oranges, yellowish tomatoes, and greenish potatoes. Then together they sat on one of most rear pews.

The priest settled into a relaxed posture, with his elbows resting wide on top of the pew’s back. The two passed some time enjoying the newfound silence of the space before the priest spoke.

“Your mother is very brave and strong.”

“My uncle says *Mama* is dying of heartbreak because Dad left.”

“Well, God makes all of us,” said the priest as he leaned forward. “Every person, every dog, every stone in this cathedral, and every particle of light that comes through its windows.”

He pointed upward. “Then one day it is time for all things to return to God. That is what we call death, but it’s really a reunion.”

“Is it time for my mother?” asked Guillermo turning to the priest with concern.

“Only God knows,” he said. “But there’s something inside taking her closer to God faster. It makes her mind tired, her body weak, and her bones fragile.”

“Is that something inside of everyone?”

“Well, sickness is connected to the soul sometimes, the part of everyone that always seeks to be with God.”

“But why would her soul want to leave me alone?”

“The soul does not understand life here on Earth,” he said and put a hand on Guillermo’s shoulder. “It does not understand the joy and love of family members. But your mom does understand. She’s fighting to stay. Just look at her hats. She’s lost her hair but not her will to live and love.”

“But will God let her stay?”

“That is up to him, but I believe that you gave her a great gift,” he said pointing toward the chapel behind the altar. “I was confused at first, when you stole that water. But now, I know why. That font is ancient, older than the rest of the church. It’s one of God’s many connections to the world, and from it he grants miracles unimaginable. You were God’s instrument to help your mother. All that we can do now is pray.” Then the priest kneeled and prayed toward the altar. Guillermo did the same. He didn’t know what to say, but he thought of all the pleasant moments he’d had with his mother: going to the beach, making empanadas, shopping for hats, and reading stories before bedtime. He thought of her face in the summer sun, and her voice singing Christmas carols. He thought about her holding him close.

Guillermo then remembered that his mother’s purse was still lying where it had fallen. It had been neglected in the confusion with the paramedics, so he got up from the pew and went back to where it had fallen. The priest glanced at him out of the corner of an eye.

He was grateful to find everything where it had fallen. He put her mascara tube and address book back into the purse before laying a hand on her bible. It was worn leather and had a gold trim framing the cover. Sometimes *mama* read to him from it, so he knew it as a collection of stories. Stories of people as old or older than that font in the church. It was about people and about life.

Why would anyone ever want to leave this life when it was so wonderful and exciting? Life was so special and dear that even in a book about the importance of the afterlife, people mostly told stories about life. The fact that people had to die didn’t bother Guillermo, it was just another thing that made life more special in the moment.

Guillermo couldn’t understand what the priest had said. He did not feel two parts of himself tugging in opposite directions: one toward god and another toward his family. He felt whole. He wanted his mom to live with all his being, and he knew she wanted to live with all hers.

What was the afterlife supposed to be anyways? An end to suffering? An end to woe? What was life worth without some suffering, some struggle? He knew his mom had been fighting all along. She was fighting a disease, she was fighting to raise a family without a father, and she was fighting to still go to church.

He realized that his mom probably did not believe what the priest had just told him. She believed in a book that was a collection of profound stories about life, and about a man who lived well. Coming to church was a reminder to her, a reminder to celebrate love and to live well.

As he held his mother's bible to his chest, the choir filed into place around the altar for practice. Like the priest, they too were all dressed in white robes. Their voices filled the space with soothing music that never seemed to fade.