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Now that I am Dead

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Now That I Am Dead

REINE ARCACHE MELVIN

IN THEIR EXILE they knew that nothing would last, yet they started to feel at home in the new country. Pilar's father played poker late into the night with other Filipino dissidents who had sought refuge in San Francisco, while her mother pawned her jewelry and threw dancing parties every other weekend. After four years of political exile, the family began to live as if a life away from Manila were possible.

Pilar was preparing for one of her mother's parties when the news came. Her sister Teresa walked into the narrow bathroom where she was washing her hair.

"Get dressed," Teresa said. "There's been an accident. Papa's in the hospital."

The ends of Pilar's hair dripped water down her bare back. From a distance she watched herself, seeing a slow dance unfolding underwater, where neither her father nor her sister could join her.

"Pilar, get dressed. You have to go to Papa."

Their mother entered the room, tugging at the edges of her robe. A tension as thick as seawater pressed down on them. No one could speak. Pilar struggled against the weight, as in the summers of her childhood when she had raced Teresa in shallow water along the seashore, through a barrier that rose and receded around her knees.

She turned to her mother. For one flashing, lonely instant she hoped the old woman would take her in her arms and tell her everything would be all right. But her mother sat on the edge of the bathtub, her fingers clutching her knees.

In the emergency room, they told her that her father was being operated on to remove the bullets that had lacerated his lungs and

throat. For hours, in the waiting room beneath fluorescent lights, Pilar waited. At some point, a stocky young man in a green robe sat beside her.

"The operation's over," he said. "We'll be bringing him to his room in about an hour and a half." He looked into her eyes. "I have to be honest," he said carefully. "He'll probably be in a coma for some time."

Pilar walked to the pay phone and called home.

"My God, why haven't you called?" Teresa said. "How is he?"

"Not good."

"I know," Teresa said. "People have been calling. Everyone knows already." She started talking so rapidly Pilar could only pick up scattered phrases: The dictator's men. Finish him off. And then: Even here, no one's safe.

Pilar pressed the receiver against her ear and tried to understand.

"Mama called her friends in Manila," Teresa said. "They're getting a psychic healer to try to save Papa. They can do it, you know—through long-distance healing. But he has to put up a fight."

"He's in a coma, Teresa. He can't fight."

"Then we have to fight for him. That's what the healer said. Apparently he's a very good healer. There was that high school classmate of mine, Maribel, do you remember her? She went into a coma after giving birth, and everyone said she would die. But her parents went to this healer, and he did something. He said he saw the thread of life like a light rising from her body, and he made it strong again. He gave some of his life to her."

Pilar twisted the cord of the pay phone. Nurses and doctors swung out of doors and swung back in.

"Do you believe this?" Pilar asked. "Does Arturo?" Suddenly she was angry at her sister, at her sister's boyfriend and all he represented. Arturo and his family had flourished under military rule, profiting from the contracts and commissions the dictator tossed their way.

"Arturo's here," Teresa said crisply. "He's very concerned."

"I'm sure."

"Don't start that, Pilar. He had nothing to do with this."

"Aren't you coming here?"

"Someone has to be with Mama," Teresa said.

In a flash, Pilar understood the dispensation in her family. She would always be called on to keep vigil over the dying, while Teresa arranged matters for the survivors.

She hung up without saying good-bye.

At a street corner near the hospital, Pilar waved down a taxi. She told the driver to take her anywhere, as far from the hospital as possible, to circle the streets for an hour and then bring her back to where he had found her.

She pressed against the back seat, closing her eyes. She saw herself in another taxi, in another night. Four years old and crying on her father's lap, her body burned and blistered by an overturned pot of scalding water. Like a tomato plunged into boiling water, the top layer of her skin had peeled off. Her father's arms tightened around her as she struggled against the wet sheets he had wrapped around her body.

The taxi driver's head had twisted over his shoulders. "My brother burned himself like that when he was a child," he told her father. "He still has scars all over his face. It looks horrible, but at least he's a man. What's a girl going to do, with scars like that?"

"It doesn't matter whether she's a girl or not," her father snapped. "Don't you dare talk that way about her, just because she's a girl." And he had cradled her pain even closer to him, whispering words she could not understand.

In the weeks that followed, he took her to the hospital every three days to have the burnt skin removed, so that new skin could form without scarring. She screamed as he held down her body and white-robed men plucked out her skin with tweezers. One day, her mother and Teresa went with them. They watched the men strap down the naked child. Teresa pressed her hands like ears against her head and stared at her younger sister. Then her mother took Teresa's hand and led her out of the room. They never returned.

Only Pilar's father had remained constant. Each time the dark wave of pain began, he said: "Be brave, my little one. You're strong. You'll survive." To please him, to seem brave, she had stopped the cries at her throat.

She had forgotten all this. Pain had done its silent, insidious work, effacing all traces of itself. Until this night, when her father was no longer there beside her, and she remembered all she no longer wished to know.

When Pilar saw her father, bandaged and lifeless and punctured by tubes, she felt nothing. She looked at the young doctor beside her. He was standing too close to her, the way men often did. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

"What can I do?" she said, glancing at the motionless man on the white bed. "I can't just sit here."

The man on the bed was not her father. He had always smiled when he saw his daughters. She touched the railing along the edge of the bed, then snapped her hand away from the cold metal.

"You can talk to him," the doctor said. "It helps sometimes."

Her stomach muscles contracted, and she almost doubled over. "I haven't eaten," she murmured. "I should go home and get something to eat."

"Sometimes," the doctor said gently, "when people are in a coma, it helps—it's been known to help—to hear the voice of someone they love."

Her fingers curled over the railing.

"Once we had a child who almost drowned," he said. "She was in a coma. Her parents talked to her constantly, trying to pull her back to life. Even when they went home to sleep, they left a tape of their voices speaking to her, so she would never be without their presence."

"A tape," Pilar repeated. "Could you get me a tape?"

A beat. Then: "I'm sure we can arrange something for you."

He left her alone with the man who had been her father. She dragged a chair next to his bed, wanting to touch him, but afraid to dislodge the tubes. She felt no grief, only a distance as cool as the metal along his bed.

"Papa," she said, feeling like a fraud. She kept repeating the word, the intonation changing each time, until it was more a question than a plea. She shut her eyes, seeing the holes in his body beneath the bandages.

The doctor returned with a cassette recorder. He knelt and plugged it into a socket near the bed.

She stared at his hands, remembering the white-robed men who had plucked away her skin. "And that child in the coma, the one who almost drowned, what happened to her?"

He glanced wearily at the body on the bed. "Honestly, I don't remember," he said.

He left the room. Because she could not look at her father, she sat on the floor beside the tape recorder and pressed the button. She watched the tape turn behind the plastic door. "Papa," she said slowly. "It's Pilar. I'm thinking of you." She felt as if she were memorizing textbooks for a class. "Papa," she said again, and then she could think of nothing to say. Fearful of the silence, of gaps in the

recording, she began to talk more rapidly. "Teresa and Mama aren't here, but they love you. Even after all the things Mama said. She was just scared. She just wanted a normal marriage, like all of us, and a big house in Manila, and money like all her friends. It was hard for her here. It was hard for all of us."

Again she stopped, but stopping meant thinking and she did not want to think. She wanted only to find words to fill the tape so she could go home and sleep.

She tried again. "Remember when Teresa and I were small, Papa?" she said, but at that moment all she could remember from her childhood were the Frank Sinatra records he used to play every night. So she began to sing. She sang "Strangers in the Night" and "My Way," then switched to the nursery rhymes he had sung to her as a child: "London Bridge," "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "Bahay Kubo." The words and rhythms of his voice came back to her as she chanted. "Even now you're speaking for me, Papa," she told the recorder. "I can feel you speaking to me."

Pilar continued to chatter into the tape, reciting snatches of her childhood, repeating phrases other people had used. She heard the sound of her thoughts, unrestricted by any listener's response. She watched the flow of words, surprised by the voices pouring out of her. She would not break the flow with silence. If she hesitated, she knew she would not be able to speak again.

Pilar glanced at the tape. It had stopped turning. She realized she had been talking into the void for a long time.

She left the room without looking at the man on the bed. As she walked down the sterile hallways, her body began to tremble. She pressed it into a telephone booth and called home.

"Pilar," Arturo said. "What's happening?"

"Have you heard from the psychic?"

He hesitated. Arturo had always scoffed at the healers and fortune-tellers that wielded such influence in Manila. Even from the distance between them, Pilar sensed the struggle within him. Then he seemed to make a decision.

"Your mother's friends called from Manila," he told her. "They said the healer went into a trance."

"And what did he see?"

"He said the thread of light was still connected to your father's body. He said your father's going to be all right."

"Of course he's going to be all right," Pilar said, remembering the

phrases her father had used as the men in white strapped her to the table. "He's strong. He'll survive."

"Of course, Pilar," Arturo said calmly.

She went home and slept for hours. When she returned to her father's room, she switched on the recording and sat beside the bed. She listened to her cracked voice singing songs whose words she had improvised. She listened to the poetry, the ramblings, the nursery rhymes, the pleas. She felt she was hearing herself for the first time, and she recognized nothing. For three days, she sat and slept beside her father's bed, listening to her voice. Teresa and Arturo came silently to visit, then left. Her mother remained under sedation at home.

On the third day, when the doctor entered the room, she looked at him and spoke over her taped voice singing "Strangers in the Night": "I think if I hear myself five minutes longer, I'll go crazy. Even when I sleep, I hear my voice talking. I don't see anything. I only hear this voice."

He was staring at her.

"I don't want to make a scene," Pilar said quietly. "I only want to know how to stop the singing."

"Why don't you put on your coat?" he said. "I'll buy you some coffee."

She followed him through white rooms and out into the brisk San Francisco afternoon. He led her into a coffee shop and ordered English muffins and cream cheese. She asked for a beer.

He leaned toward her. "What really helped me in all this," he said, "was learning to detach. A doctor who can't detach gets shell shocked right away." He eyed the blonde waitress as she placed the food and drinks on the table. "It's not easy being a surgeon," he said. "I lost my nerve once, when I was a resident. I was assisting at an operation. A nine-year-old girl, with blonde hair. I saw her die on the operating table."

Pilar watched a gold-bordered tooth flash behind his lips.

"I broke down. I lost it. I didn't want to be a doctor anymore. I didn't want to see anyone die anymore. The chief surgeon tried to help me. He said I had to learn not to get bothered."

She sipped her beer, watching his eyes.

"He said I had to focus on my body, just my body. I had to let the thoughts go."

She reached for a piece of his muffin. He pushed the plate to the center of the table and handed her a knife.

"He said our thoughts are like drunken monkeys, tumbling over each other, one after another, over each other, in the so-called temple of our minds. He said I had to dissociate what I was from what I thought."

She stared at the hairs curling on the back of his fingers, wondering what it would be like to feel them on her skin. Her throat tightened.

"It helped me tremendously," he said. "You can't imagine. I worked on it for months, and slowly I didn't get upset anymore. I could detach. Then the day came when I was operating on an old woman, and she died under my hands. It was my first death. I mean, this time, I wasn't assisting anybody. I didn't feel anything at all. Can you imagine?"

He offered her the last piece of muffin. She shook her head. As he spread it with cream cheese, he said: "I remember walking out of the operating room—it was dawn—and watching the sun come up. And I was exhilarated. It was a beautiful sunrise. And I thought: Yes, it's just another day. Life goes on. It was tremendous. My first patient dead, and I was so happy."

She reached for her purse.

He leaned toward her, his face sallow under the yellow light. "I'm sorry, Pilar. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Do you know what I think?" she said. "I think it's over. I think my father's not there anymore."

"You can't know that."

"There's a psychic in Manila trying to save him. And the psychic said he's going to be all right."

"You believe that?"

"In Manila, those things are possible. It's not the same here."

"What would happen if it didn't work?"

She clutched the edge of the formica table top. She had not allowed herself to consider the possibility. Now, as she thought about it, her excitement frightened her. Without her father, there would be no need to remain in exile. They could finally move out of their cramped, lonely lives and return home—to Manila, their house, their friends, their servants, their parties. The anticipation nauseated her.

To end the conversation, she placed a five-dollar bill on the table and hurried out of the coffee shop. She turned a corner and strode up a narrow street, head bent, avoiding the eyes of strangers. She walked for hours, up and down side streets and alleys, skirting the main roads, until night fell and the shadows cast by headlights flickered like tongues around her feet.

As Pilar rummaged through her purse for the keys to the apartment, Teresa opened the door, her face blotched with tears. Pilar walked into the darkened hallway and shut the door softly behind her.

"When did it happen?" she whispered.

"Three thirty."

"He was alone?"

"We were looking for you," Teresa said. "We thought you were with him."

"What happened to the psychic healer?"

"Nothing," Teresa said. She began to cry. "Nothing, nothing. He was wrong. He didn't know anything at all."

Shadows flickered across the ceiling and fell like ladders down the wall. Pilar watched the wall carefully, wanting to see every shade of light and every change in the darkness. Teresa put on her coat in silence, and the sisters walked out of the apartment without speaking and without touching.

No one came to the wake. For six days and seven nights, taking shifts, Arturo, Teresa and Pilar sat next to the closed coffin in a chapel. They kept their mother under sedation at home. Every day they spread a table outside the chapel with Filipino food, but no one came, no one wanted to be seen with the family of the assassinated man. On the sixth day, Pilar called the hospital and asked the doctor to attend the funeral. After a short pause, he accepted. On the seventh day, the corpse was buried in a Catholic ceremony attended by his widow and daughters, Arturo, the doctor, three American journalists and one photographer. Pilar held her mother's hand and did not cry.

When the ceremony was over, Arturo invited the doctor to join the family for dinner. In the apartment they ate in silence, listening to the cries that erupted periodically from the old woman's bedroom.

Over coffee, Teresa said: "We're going back to Manila."

Pilar stirred a sugar cube into the black liquid, crushing it against the sides of the cup.

The doctor, the only American in the group, was the only one who thought it necessary to respond. "Is it safe to go back?" he said.

Teresa and Arturo glanced at each other. Pilar stirred another sugar cube into her coffee.

"Teresa and I are getting married," Arturo announced. "I'm taking everyone back to Manila. They'll be safe there, as part of my family."

Pilar took one sip of the sweet coffee, then pushed it away from her. "Your family," she said angrily. "Your family's friend, the dictator, killed my father. And now he'll take care of us?"

"*Por Dios*," Teresa said, standing up.

Arturo reached for his fiancée's hand. "Pilar's upset," he told the doctor. "She hasn't really rested since all this happened."

"At least I'm not marrying the godson of the man who killed my father," Pilar said. "At least I'm not out to save my neck at all costs."

She walked out of the room. The doctor shook Arturo's hands, then hurried after her. In the hallway he told her: "Do you want to have a drink somewhere? It might be good to talk."

She followed him to the parking lot in the basement and slipped into the front seat of his car. He started the engine.

"Where do you want to go?" he said.

"I don't know."

He glanced at her, then placed a heavy arm around her shoulder. Because she could not speak, she pressed her body against his. She imagined he was somebody else, a man she did not know. She wanted to feel desire, to go through it to the end, like pain, like death, but everywhere she touched him she kept hitting the walls of her narrow, frightened self. She looked at his closed eyes and half-parted lips and thought of all the women who let themselves be sucked and touched and bitten by men they did not want. For the first time in her life, she was scared she would become one of them.

She pulled away. He brushed back his damp hair with his fingers. She wanted to talk to him, to reassure him, but she could not. She could not look at his face again. She did not want anyone's skin against her body again. Something had closed inside her.

As she walked past the rows of parked cars to the elevator, she felt, for the first time since her father was shot, close to tears.

The airplane hit the pavement and bounced several times before gliding to a stop. The family gathered their bags and stepped out the cabin door into the heat of Manila. Grasping her mother's elbow, Pilar moved cautiously down the staircase to the tarmac. The old woman could hardly open her eyes in the light. Pilar had forgotten the power of the sun in her country. The heat and light seemed to flatten everything, casting all movements into a slow and stylized dance.

As her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she saw a sea of white flags silently waving from the roof deck of the terminal. White, she said to herself, and a moment later she understood: white, the color

of the opposition. And then she began to hear. A brass band was playing the melodies of her father's favorite songs: "Strangers in the Night," "My Way," "Te Quiero." In her mind, she heard the hospital tape of her broken voice, improvising the lyrics.

"My God," Teresa said. "They're here for us."

"There can be trouble," Arturo whispered. He pointed at the military police barricading the crowds on the roof deck.

Slowly they advanced across the bright hot pavement, the other passengers hurrying ahead of them. The band continued playing.

Pilar kept her eyes on the waving white flags. She recognized the banners: the public arm of the outlawed Communist Party, the extreme-right faction of the military, the religious left. All the fractious opposition groups had come together at the airport to welcome the family of the dead man. She saw the university students, housewives, clean cut young soldiers, nuns, priests and schoolchildren, all waving white flags as the band struggled through the refrains of "Strangers in the Night."

Slowly, like the wind welling before a typhoon, a chant began. Then it grew louder, more penetrating, rumbling down from the rooftop and drowning out the music. They were chanting her father's nickname: Carlitos, Carlitos. Pilar's mother began to weep. A cortege of military police looped silently around them.

Arturo lifted his face to the crowd on the roof deck and, like the politician's son that he was, smiled and began to wave. The chanting erupted into hisses.

"You're on the wrong side of all this," Pilar told him.

"Not anymore," Arturo said, his smile frozen as he surveyed the crowd. "He's my father-in-law now." He grasped Teresa's hand, folded her fingers into a ball and raised their clenched fists high over their heads as they walked toward the terminal. The soldiers watched him warily.

"I've never seen anything like this," Arturo said as they entered the building, his fine-boned features flushed with excitement.

One of his relatives rushed them through customs and escorted them to a waiting limousine. They drove through dusty crowded streets, past old men on bicycles and stray dogs limping beside street vendors. The sun was so bright Pilar could not talk. The old woman stared silently out the window.

"After all these years," Teresa said. "If only Papa could have seen them."

"They're just using him," Arturo replied. Then he smiled and slipped his arm around his wife, as if to efface his words.

Later they looked back on that day as the beginning of the revolution that would drive people into the streets and the dictator into exile. The family lived through the year of turmoil in seclusion, waiting to see which side would win. Toward the end, Arturo's family transferred its support from the dictator to the opposition candidate. A week later, a U.S. military jet spirited the dictator and his family out of the country. In the streets of Manila, people danced, hugged strangers and shouted Happy New Year although it was the middle of July.

And then, slowly, life returned to normal. Pilar returned to her parents' home in a once-fashionable district of Manila and lived alone among the toys and photographs of her childhood. Her mother, lapsing deeper into grief, stayed in a shuttered room in Arturo and Teresa's home.

At night, Pilar paced through the wooden house. The tapes of her father's songs no longer played in her head. She watched black-and-white films on television and tucked flowered sheets over her narrow bed. She had her life, her little jobs and a dozen lunch companions, but nothing opened in her.

One evening, Teresa called her. "We're giving a dinner party on Friday," she said brightly. "I want you to come. You haven't been anywhere in ages."

"That's not true," Pilar said, irritated with her sister. Teresa was safe. She had her husband's home, her husband's family, her husband's money.

"And I want all colors," Teresa was saying. "Parties are so boring. I told Arturo we have to do something different. I want lots of blues and greens and pinks. Green rice, purple fruit, blue roses. I want nothing to look like itself. Are you going to come or not, Pilar?"

Pilar saw her sister at the other end of the line: the thin, pinched face, the fragile body only slightly disfigured by pregnancy.

"I always go to your parties," Pilar said.

"I think you stay alone too much," her sister answered. "I think you should move out of that house."

As night settled over the untended garden, they said their good-byes.

Pilar turned on the radio, switching from station to station until she found dance music. She stretched her arms and legs in rhythm

to the music, glancing at her image in a stained 19th-century mirror. Her body felt like an icon, dissociated from her. The body always met the world head-on, while the woman who was not her body remained one or two steps behind, watching the reactions. Always there had been this sense of two selves: the body, which strangers desired, and then, darting behind it, the frightened rabbit's eyes.

To keep herself safe, she stayed alone. She did not know how not to be alone. People who came too close made her rabbit's heart beat too rapidly. There was only this: the sense of a tiny crack inside her, where she was always afraid.

She strode across the spacious room, unlocked her parents' bedroom and entered it. Their bed was still covered with the faded blanket she remembered from her childhood. Suddenly she was afraid to turn around, to look at the antique furniture and Ming vases her parents had collected. In Manila, no one wanted to live among the possessions of the dead. People said that spirits who died violently kept returning to the persons and places they had known, seeking to establish contact with what they didn't know they had lost. Pilar hiked up her skirt and knelt on her father's bed, then pressed her black hair against his pillow and said: Papa, if you're here, show me something.

She willed his presence with all her force. She stood and walked around the room, touching his things, calling upon him. But nothing happened. She remembered jumping up and down on the bed and flinging herself into his arms, and her father whirling her around until they both collapsed laughing on the bed. Now there was nothing. No presence, no spirits, no sign of the life that had filled those rooms. She thought perhaps she should cry then, for the absence that kept him present in her life, but the moment for grief had passed. Life had returned to normal, eroding the significance of all that had happened before. No one talked of the past. No one wanted to return there.

On the night of the party, Teresa's garden was illuminated by torches. Pilar hesitated at the entrance. She had expected seven or eight guests at a dinner table. Instead there were over a hundred people in the garden, not including the dozens of uniformed waiters, maids and bartenders. Faces she had seen only in newspapers were eating and talking and drinking around a table laden with blue roses and colored dishes: fish spread with blue mayonnaise, green potato salad, brown bowls filled with steaming saffron rice, yellow bread rolls.

Teresa walked through the crowds, her pregnancy almost dissimu-

lated by a high-waisted cotton dress, her black hair curled around silk orchids.

"I thought you wouldn't come," she said, pressing a cool cheek against Pilar's flushed skin. Teresa had become a politician's wife: her clothes elegant but not sensual, her makeup discreet, her smile professional.

"There are people here I'd like you to meet," Teresa said cheerfully, as if she were talking to a stranger.

Pilar made the rounds with her, wandering from one cluster of guests to another. Under the mango trees, politicians mingled with bejewelled society matrons, hacienda owners, foreign diplomats, psychics and journalists. She shook hands with the deposed dictator's defence minister, who had signed her father's arrest warrant and now headed the new government's military operations. She scooped out a piece of blue fish next to the former cabinet members who had betrayed her father and, for a price, orchestrated their exile.

She walked away from the party and into the house. In the kitchen, Teresa was supervising her husband's maids and arranging slices of roast pork on a silver platter.

"I can't stay very long," Pilar said.

Teresa looked up impatiently, her face older and harsher under the fluorescent light. "Don't start acting up again," she snapped. "Make an effort."

Pilar stared at her sister's rounding belly, envying the fullness inside her, the bustle all around them. "How could you have invited all those people?" she said. "When I smile at them, all I can think of is what they did to Papa."

"Then don't smile at them." Teresa's black eyes met hers, and Pilar was afraid, as if she were a child again and confronted with her sister's sudden, violent tantrums.

Teresa tucked a stray lock of hair behind an orchid. "I wouldn't be the one to judge," she said softly, arranging parsley sprigs around the sliced pork. "I'm just trying to get on with my life."

"And our father's life?"

"Papa's dead," Teresa said, her eyes as cold as the blue fish on the garden table. "I'm not."

Pilar walked out of the kitchen. In a corner of the garden, away from the noise and lights and conflicts of the party, she saw Arturo seated at a table. She sat beside him, glad to be away from the crowd. He poured green champagne into a flute and handed it to her. "My sister-in-law," he announced to the group.

He introduced her to the guests: a few government officials, a dark man wearing a batik shirt and black sunglasses, and an elegant Chinese in a pin-stripe suit. The Chinese was a Hong Kong real-estate broker—a very successful one, Arturo said—who also dabbled in Taoist magic. The man with the dark glasses was a psychic healer, one of the dictator's favorites.

Pilar settled into her chair and decided to listen. She had long ago lost faith in any higher or lower powers, but tales of magic and supernatural grace continued to fascinate her.

"I don't charge for my interventions," the Chinese broker was saying. "For me, magic is a service."

A maid came and poured red water into their glasses. A belly dancer began to undulate around the crowded tables, to the hoots of drunken officials and business tycoons.

"Can you help people?" Pilar said suddenly.

"I do what I can," the Chinese said. He leaned closer to her, his lips curling under a thin moustache. "Last week, I got a call from one of the wealthiest families in Chinatown. Their eldest daughter had been in bed for months, unable to get up. The doctors said there was nothing wrong with her. She was depressed, they said. Her father was desperate."

Arturo wiped the perspiration from his brow and glanced at the storm clouds forming above them.

"So I went to see her. As soon as I entered her room, I saw what was wrong. Beside her on the bed was the spirit of her dead lover, who had committed suicide because of her. I knew then that I could not take away her sickness. That was her destiny, to be tormented by the spirit she had hurt. I could do nothing. She had to be punished, to suffer, to work out that destiny. Only that could free her." He sipped the red water. "It's a touchy thing to try to change people's destinies. Things go wrong. The forces are disturbed, and then they can rebound."

The psychic reached for a cigarette, his eyes invisible behind the black glasses. He turned to the Chinese broker. "But Taoists practice black magic as well," he murmured. "You tamper with the dead, don't you?"

A hot and sticky wind licked Pilar's bare arms.

The Chinese lowered his fork and pushed aside the blue fish. "In Hong Kong, it's true, there are people who do things like that," he said, a diamond-ringed finger tapping the base of his glass. "They can conjure entities—spirits which aren't quite human—and attach them to people. I've never done it myself, but I know men who've

brought dead children back to life. By diabolic means, evidently. It can be dangerous. Sometimes another spirit inhabits the child's body." Guests in the surrounding tables applauded raucously as the belly dancer finished her danced. "There are all these spirits around us, even here in the garden, hovering, waiting for a way back to life."

Pilar crossed her arms over her chest and pressed her knees together. In the end, they were just men—these psychics and spiritual masters, manipulators of the future and healers of the dead. She wondered about their lives, whether they were married, whether they were good to their wives, whether their children loved them. That was what mattered. The rest of it was a spiritual circus, diversions for people who had nothing left to believe in.

She glanced around her. A few guests lingered on the terrace. On the buffet table, blue roses drooped. Teresa, barefoot and wan in her cotton dress, wandered through the cigarette-littered grass and settled into a chair beside Pilar.

"Isn't there a more practical way to use your magic?" a businessman asked the Chinese. "Can you use it on the lottery?"

"To some extent," he replied. "The other day, I was playing mah-jong. Supposedly, it's a game of chance. The blocks are distributed at random. But then, as the game went on, I saw that one man was on a winning streak. Nothing seemed able to stop him. I realized I had to interfere. I had to confuse the energies."

Pilar lifted a spoonful of egg-yellow cottage cheese, now lukewarm, to her lips. "So what did you do?"

"I lied. I announced that I had won the round, even though it wasn't true. Of course, I had to show my hand, and people saw that I was bluffing. But by declaring that I had won, by lying, the energy got jumbled up. The winning streak was broken. The next round was played, and we all started out equal again. Equal in the sense that no one was favored to win. You have to do that in your life as well, or in other people's lives. Disturb the pattern, disturb the energies. Lie. Otherwise you're like a river condemned to flow always along the same bed. Block the flow, or divert it, and there can be new movements."

"But when do you stop?" Pilar said. "If someone asks you to do something—to save someone who's dying, for example—how do you know whether you should? How do you know whether you're interfering in their destiny?"

She had spoken to the Chinese broker, but it was the psychic who twisted slowly in his seat and answered her. "This happens sometimes,"

he said. "People come, blindly, they ask us to change their lives. It happened to me not long ago. A man was dying. His family told me they didn't want him to die."

Teresa's eyes flicked edgily. In the man's black glasses, Pilar stared at her own distorted image: her neck elongated, one cheek flattened. A maid extinguished all the torches except for the one under the mango tree, which cast a web of shadows across the table.

"I tried to save him," the psychic said. "I entered into a trance. And there I saw the thread of light emanating from his body. And I strengthened the light, I strengthened the attachment of his spirit to the earth."

Arturo stood behind Teresa, his fingers curled around the edge of her chair. Pilar felt their tension lock into hers.

"Then, in a dream, the dying man came to me and said: Let me go, it's only you that holds me here. And I understood. He had seen the other side, and he wanted to go there. So I told him, in the dream, that I would withdraw my force, and we'd see what would happen. If his family wanted it badly enough, their desire would hold him to life. A few hours later, he died."

A warm wind swept through the garden, almost eliminating the remaining torch flame. Teresa, her eyes smudged by blue circles, turned to her sister.

"You're wrong," Pilar said, her voice cracking.

Teresa reached under the table for Pilar's hand, then beamed her professional smile at the man in dark glasses. "Such stories," she said lightly. "And do you ever do anything that makes people happy? Did you ever manage to bring the dead back to life?"

"Not back to life, but back to rest," the psychic said placidly. "We encounter spirits all the time in our work, spirits who die violently, who haven't had the time to sever attachments." He smiled mirthlessly. "In China, there are stories of zombies—the dead walking at night through villages, travelling for miles and miles to return to the village where they were conceived. There the circle ends, and they can end their lives."

A silence suddenly descended over the table.

"Do you feel it?" the psychic whispered. "Something's here."

The guests shifted nervously, searching for something no one could see. Pilar closed her eyes, letting the presence enter into her.

"Go in peace," the psychic said. "Go back to where you came from."

She could not see what he was looking at. Her hands began to

tremble. She turned to Teresa. Her sister, still forcing a smile, had tears in her eyes.

Arturo gave a small, tight laugh and said: "Well, I guess that ends our party."

Pilar strode through the windy garden and into the street. She kept sensing a white face just over her shoulder, and she thought that if she turned around she would see it. But it was Arturo who appeared beside her.

"Don't mind them," he said. "It's the wind, the night, the drink. Don't believe what you felt in there."

The first fat raindrops splattered on her skin.

"Hurry," he said. "It's going to rain hard." He kissed her on each cheek.

Inside the car, she revved the engine impatiently, wanting to rush, to run, to flee. The car bounced several times and then stalled. She pressed repeatedly on the accelerator, but the car would not start. Rain broke all around her, so heavy and grey she could not see the road in front of her. She clutched the wheel, still pressing on the accelerator. Then she stopped trying.

Rain strummed the metal roof, pushing her deeper and deeper into herself. She sat inside the little car, in the black night, and the narrow world she had built broke open with the rain. Everything was still there: the presences all around her, the past she had shut away, her father's being, her father's death. For the first time since he was shot, she began to cry. She cried for the presences she felt and could never speak to. She cried not for having lost him, but for having him still, for her inability to truly end his life. She cried not because he had died, but because he had not died enough. His presence was all around her, and nothing could take that presence away.

She bent over the wheel, wanting to be contained within the small metal box, within herself, but instead she felt the surfaces of her life collapsing, and a dark hole opened inside her. For one long moment, everything came rushing in: the endlessness of the rain, the wandering spirits, the lives and loves and losses that went on, without her, outside the small wet windows of her car. She pressed her face against the wheel, unable to bear what she had glimpsed: the immensity, the littleness, the permeability of her self.

From beyond the rain, she heard an insistent tapping. She looked up. A pale face floated behind the rain-streaked glass. Pilar's eyes suddenly focused. It was Teresa, holding an umbrella, her white dress

stained with dark circles of rain. Pilar unlocked the door, and Teresa stepped into the car.

"Did you feel it, what happened in the garden?" Pilar whispered.

Her sister lowered her head.

"He was there," Pilar said.

Teresa turned to her. "Come inside," she said. "You can't go anywhere in this rain."

They lowered the umbrella against their heads as they ran through the rain to Arturo's house.

In the living room, Teresa kicked off her shoes and sat cross-legged on the leather couch, her belly rounding over her legs. The branches of mango trees lashed against the windows.

Pilar searched through the stack of records next to the stereo. She pulled out a scratched Frank Sinatra record that had belonged to her father. As the man's voice played over the rain, Teresa said: "Do you really want to listen to that? I haven't been able to, ever since."

The sisters sat in silence, listening to the music. With a reckless smile, Teresa pulled Pilar to her feet and draped her arms around her. Awkwardly, Pilar returned the embrace. She had not held anyone in a long time, and the warmth of Teresa's body unsettled her. Pilar felt her heavy breasts press against Teresa's fragile body, and beneath her breasts, the pressure of Teresa's pregnant belly. In that way, their bodies locked into each other.

Teresa's hips began to sway, and Pilar absorbed the rhythm. The sisters danced slowly around the room, their bodies tentatively embraced and explored, as if they had not known each other before.

The two women began to laugh.

Suddenly, Pilar felt a flutter against her stomach, where Teresa's belly protruded into hers. She held Teresa closer. Again the kicking, which sent waves through her body. She felt it was happening inside her.

"You feel it?" Teresa said triumphantly. "It's been doing that for three weeks now."

Pilar felt the child moving between them.

"Quickly," Teresa said. "Make a wish."

"A wish?"

"Yes. At the moment you first feel it. You have to give it something."

Pilar closed her eyes, hearing the rain. Then she said: "What can you give someone, Teresa? A life? An ordinary life."

Teresa backed away. "No," she said. "Not that." She pursed her lips and blew out air, as if to disperse the thought. "An ordinary

life, that doesn't exist. No one notices a life when it's ordinary. Again, quickly, something else. I want something good."

Pilar lowered her face against her sister's hair, feeling her warmth, and she understood suddenly that it was right that Teresa, who had always despised weakness, should carry new life within her. And she, Pilar, who had spent the last year grieving and seeking a phantom, in the end had become what she was looking for: she had become his ghost.

Pilar knew then what she wanted to give the child: a life as strong and as ruthless as Teresa's. But she would not tell that to her sister. The wish was a gift for the child, not for the mother.

Instead of speaking, Pilar pressed her sister and her sister's child closer to her, and the three of them circled slowly through the darkened room, to the rhythms of music the dead man had loved.