

Hereditary

i.

Paternal

Love, his mother used to say, is not pure and unwavering;
not a gift from God, an untouchable entity. And there is some truth to this. In his parent's
marriage, for example, where words are mean and black like bitter coffee and breath is foul;
damp whiskey hands and yellowing skin, lungs like parchment singed from
twenty-four years of smoking two Newports a day. His father sits alone at a hissing stove, alone
on the red-eye train to Medellín, alone on the back steps of the Waldorf Astoria kitchen, smoke
curling into tepid New York air. Love, his mother used to say,
is ugly. Love is *buñuelos*
and *natilla*
on
Christmas Eve; love is putting up with Guillermo's
bipolar schizophrenic tendencies; love is not accompanying your son to the airport because it's
too difficult to watch him duck into the front seat of the taxi cab and know that during the forty-
eight years he'll spend in America while you're alive, you will
only visit once. Love is Gloria's hallucinations, the priest reciting incantations over her quivering
body, and love is sitting by the bedside table, watching her eyes roll back and her fingers curl
and uncurl over the edge of the bedframe like stringy spiders.

My father is afraid of airplanes. Every time turbulence

hits he trembles along with the plane, gripping the seat rest until his knuckles turn white. When the captain announces something over the intercom in a low, crackling voice, my father asks me to repeat it aloud in slow, careful words. My father never gets out of his seat until the plane has landed. During the taxiing and the takeoff, he closes his eyes.

ii.

Maternal

Her mother — her mother is different, with long hair, silver and fraying, pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck until the wrinkles that pepper weathered skin smooth into a blank white sky splattered with moles. Love is not a word spoken in that household, with a cold basement and even colder voices. Her mother's back curves into a sad "C" shape as she plants peppers in the garden, as she kneels on a pew, hands folded, mouth moving in silent prayer. Her father crumples into a black box from time to time, emerges smelling like air freshener and guilt and radiation. Love isn't a familiar word. It's an entire different tongue. Love is looking down at your blood-soaked hospital gown and then back up to the TV, set to the Holiday Carols channel, and not wanting to sing along to "Jingle Bells" because there's a lump in your throat and a purpling fetus in a metal box somewhere close — too close.

My mother is afraid of churches. We go every Christmas and Easter, and each time she smells like patchouli oil; Buddhist beads dangling around her small wrists, specks of myrrh and gold lining her eyelids, a Hamsa hand necklace dotting her chest. As soon as we step between the brassy, wooden doors and shake hands

with a priest, she is silent and reverent. She is humble in the presence of Jesus slung across the wooden panels. Perhaps this is something she inherited from her own mother, too; the fear of fiery depths so deeply instilled within her being that she still remembers the Lord's Prayer by heart.

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