

Blind Spots

by

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Rachel was bitterly disappointed when David, her son, and Frida, his wife, didn't want to go back to Hawai'i for the winter break this year. In the past she and her husband had loved the quiet lagoon and the thatched huts. David explained that there were too many rich people at the resort, and he wanted to go some place where the huts were real and he could talk to people on the street. Mexico, he suggested, where Frida's ancestors came from.

All very well, Rachel thought. She got along better with her children and grandchildren than most people. But with her worry about her eye, she felt even more cautious than usual. The doctor had discovered a black spot at the back of the right one. He said it could become a melanoma, though that happened only in a small percentage of cases. She should watch for worsening of vision, he told her, and pain. Rachel pictured the doctor's sketch with the ominous dot, contained for the moment between two blood vessel streams, and sighed heavily.

She knew better than to say she wanted to be in a place with good medical care. Her children had all complained at one time or another about her privileged upbringing and the prejudices and limitations it brought with it. She tried her best, but they found signs of bad attitude everywhere, even in her aloof tone when she spoke to waiters and the paucity of her tips.

It was difficult to admit, but it hurt her obscurely that David and Frida hadn't felt comfortable in what seemed to her like Paradise, and that they wanted to take her to a place where she was afraid to drink the water. She would be an outsider in Mexico, at a disadvantage, her experience of little use.

Several days before Christmas, Rachel and her husband arrive at the Camino Real in Oaxaca with David, Frida, and their children. The hotel is in a beautiful old convent. After they are shown their garden rooms, they sit at a table under the colonnades and drink margaritas from sea-green glasses; on the nearby grass the children play "Mother May I." Beyond the patio is a sparkling pool with lounge chairs and thick white towels. Thanks heaven, Rachel thinks, relieved that they have ended up in such a fine place: I won't have to worry about the food.

Frida mentions to Rachel that she has brought some packages to give to Maria Elena, a Mexican friend of her mother's.

"Oh," Rachel says, not recognizing the name.

"When Maria Elena first came to Los Angeles, she worked for my mother for a while," Frida says. "Twenty years ago."

Then Rachel remembers Frida's mother telling her at Thanksgiving that when she last visited Mexico, she had gone everywhere with Maria Elena. Driving around in the Mexican countryside alone would have been dangerous because of bandits. Rachel had gotten so nervous listening to her description of the dangers that she had been quite rude and moved to another part of the room.

Just then Tommaso, the oldest child, tags his brother, and the children shriek excitedly. “Maria Elena was only eighteen and didn’t know anything when she arrived in Los Angeles,” Frida says, carefully monitoring the children’s activities out of the corner of her eye. “My mother felt maternal towards her. They became friends.”

Rachel thinks of Frida as something of an earth mother and has always been slightly in awe of the way she combines a full career as an artist with her generous mothering—however much helped by David. Now Rachel wonders how her daughter-in-law feels when she describes her mother’s “maternal” feelings. After all, Frida’s mother abandoned her at her grandmother’s house across town when Frida was little more than a baby. Her two brothers—each of the children had different fathers—had been left there some years before.

“My siblings didn’t like me much,” Frida once told her in a rare burst of confidence. “They didn’t like having a toddler dumped in their laps. My oldest brother locked me in a closet. They often hit me.” Frida had spoken quietly, without rancor. “It was pretty bad,” she finished with the slightest grimace.

Rachel suspects it was even worse than that. She is astonished once again at the strength of this woman who manages to maintain cordial relations with her whole family, including her mother. It occurs to Rachel, not for the first time, that years of endless analysis of her own mother’s faults didn’t really resolve anything for her, just postponed their reconciliation till right before she died. Rachel has to admit that she doesn’t understand how Frida does it. Even though she prides herself on understanding people, she can’t really read her; Frida seems to live in a slightly parallel universe.

Frida has brought gifts from her mother not only for Maria Elena but for her three daughters as well. She calls her up and they make a plan. One night they all go out to dinner at a restaurant, sitting at a table outside and watching the Christmas floats go by in flatbed trucks: youthful madonnas in white, monks holding the Christ child. Between the floats, huge paper mache giants with big breasts make feints into the crowd, eliciting squeals of pleasure from the children. Though the meat at the restaurant is tough and they can't hear each other over the noise, Rachel is pleased that her husband takes the check. It seems the right thing to do. But Maria Elena is clearly embarrassed; she's chosen the restaurant and feels she ought to have treated them.

The next day Maria Elena invites them over to her house for a meal. One of her daughters, Chrysimia, comes to drive them there, fifteen minutes away. Rachel's husband has a mild flu and is in bed with a novel, and the rest of them, Rachel, her son and her daughter-in-law, pile in the back, the children on their laps. Chrysimia drives badly, taking the curves wide, lurching along over the ruts. Back home she wouldn't even be driving. She is only fifteen.

The house is much larger than Rachel expected. After seeing some of the outlying villages, she'd been braced for a shack and outdoor toilets. I haven't the slightest idea of how people live here, she thinks. But was it much different when she was in New York, growing up on the thirty-sixth floor of a skyscraper? She remembers looking down from her balcony at Central Park after a snowstorm, thinking how peaceful the scene looked. How the small brownstone houses just a couple of blocks away in Harlem looked like gently mounded drifts. But under the snow, people were packed in with cracked walls

and bad plumbing, with cockroaches and rats. It was like a foreign country just two blocks from where she lived. She had been taught by her liberal parents that the Black people who lived there were to be respected, defended against injustices of all kinds. But still, you shouldn't get off the subway at 125th Street, and you didn't go to Harlem at night. No one really went there. Not even her liberal parents.

Maria Elena greets them at the house, her youngest daughter in her arms. The front door opens directly to a dramatic outdoor space, and Rachel gasps. An architect friend designed it, Maria Elena explains shyly. The building is tall and narrow, and would have been dark if the architect hadn't opened it up with two small courtyards so that the light pours down along a brilliant orange-ochre wall and into the windows of the rooms. With the blue sky above, it is vibrant, perfect.

"It would cost a million dollars to buy such a house in Los Angeles," Frida tells her. Maria Elena laughs in disbelief. She doesn't seem to realize how special her house is. They are taken upstairs and shown the spotless bathroom, the bedroom with a satin spread, the children's rooms filled with what seems to Rachel to be an over-abundance of stuffed animals and dolls and toys.

A tiny poodle is yapping from the roof, and a small boy—there are three or four underfoot—runs up a spiral staircase and brings him down. "My brother's children," Maria Elena says, resting her hand briefly on the shoulder of the nearest one. Her brother is working in Los Angeles, and his wife left him—so for now, she has seven children in the house.

Rachel wonders if she is pregnant. Her belly is huge. They pass the kitchen where Maria Elena's sister is preparing lunch. Not lunch really, but a feast. Two types of fried fish, a plate of chicken wings and thighs, chile rellenos, plump and green, dishes of eggplant and tomatoes. As Rachel takes in the food on the kitchen table, she realizes that they have planned a meal for gringos, safe foods and bottled water. There is even French bread. "You've probably had enough tortillas," Maria Elena sister says, as she points out the spaghetti with meat sauce for the children.

But before they have the meal, they are invited into the living room and ushered to a flowered chintz couch. On the table in front of them are a bowl of black olives and a bottle of white wine. A photo of Chrysima hangs on the wall; she's wearing an emerald green evening gown, shot with silver. When they admire the photo, they are asked if they want to see a video of Chrysima's fifteenth birthday celebration, her *quinceanera*. Rachel is hungry but curious, too.

Maria Elena goes to a shelf filled with videos—there are no books, Rachel notices—and takes down the video and inserts it into the oversized television. The video takes place in real time and shows Chrysima dancing in front of the guests seated at tables in a great hall. "We invited 200 people," Maria Elena says proudly, pointing out the most important relatives to Frida. The camera zooms in on Maria Elena's husband, a slender, worn-looking man with parched skin. He works in Los Angeles illegally, in a restaurant, and had to slip across the border at great risk to be at his daughter's celebration. Next year he'll have to do it again for his second daughter. Ten years later, for his third.

All Rachel can think of as she watches Chrysimia dance slowly and formally with her male relatives is how much money the *quinceanera* must have cost, and how her father risked his life to give it to her. Rachel is appalled at the thought of this man sneaking across the border. She doesn't know anyone who has done this. Did he meet someone at a place in the desert? Hide in the back of a truck with other illegals, crammed in a wooden crate, nearly dying of thirst? Or did he walk for miles along a wire fence until he got to a place, maybe a ranch, where the rancher was friendly and gave him food and water? Rachel wants to ask Maria Elena about it, but aside from the fact that she can't speak Spanish, she senses that it would embarrass her.

The image Maria Elena wants to present of her family is this picture of her daughter, dressed up like a cotillion debutante in her emerald green gown, her hair up, her shoulders bare, and the family watching, dressed in their finery. For a moment Rachel feels the word "debutante" vibrate negatively in her head with its associations of snobbery and shallowness. When she was young, the girls who had coming-out parties were Christians, exceedingly rich Christians, society girls. Jewish girls by definition weren't in society. They might have clubs or parties of their own, but it was understood that they were on a separate track.

None of Rachel's memories predispose her to appreciate this *quinceanera* as much as she would, say, a teeth-filing ceremony in Bali. She lies back against the sofa cushions, telling herself to forget her associations. They're beside the point here; nothing is excluding her except her own lack of sympathy. Seeing her pensive, David puts his arm around her shoulder. He jokes that it's just as well her husband has the flu because he likes entertainment with punch and wouldn't be able to sit still for this interminable slow

dancing. Rachel laughs and relaxes; it is always a relief when they are pleased with her. On the TV screen, a small girl solemnly approaches Chrysima with a doll and hands it to her. Chrysima cradles the doll tenderly and dances with it, rocking it gently, then hands it back to the little girl.

“Now she is a woman,” Frida explains. “She has to give up childish things.”

Rachel feels tears prick at the back of her throat.

Chrysima comes in, carrying a bowl of tortilla chips and some salsa, and fills their glasses. She is wearing her jeans and an American T-shirt. With her hair down, she looks much younger than she does in the video. When Rachel and her family compliment her on her celebration and the beautiful gown, she shrugs and lowers her eyes. She seems to know it isn't going to lead to anything good. She already has told David that she wants to be a lawyer. Rachel can see he likes Chrysima and wishes he could do something to help, maybe invite her to live with them in Los Angeles. Rachel can tell by the way he shifts his weight and moves his hands that his mind is working on it. She remembers when he first moved to Los Angeles and let somebody he'd just met sleep in his car. “It could have been me out on the street,” he said, when Rachel worried about the car getting stolen or ruined. “It's just a fluke that it wasn't.”

“I wish I could be with my father in Los Angeles,” Chrysima tells them. “It's not fair that my sister can go because she was born there, and I can't. I need to go.”

Rachel smiles at her encouragingly. Her own father died when she was just this girl's age, fifteen. She too, would have given anything to be with him.

Tomorrow is Tommaso's birthday, and to her surprise Maria Elena has made a party for him in the courtyard with a huge chocolate cake. She gathers the scattered children, and they watch while she throws a rope to her sister at an upstairs courtyard window and hauls up a pinada in the shape of a donkey. The children shriek and take turns hitting it with a broom. Then Tommaso blows out the candles on the cake, and Maria Elena cuts it. Even with seven children and five adults, there is still a huge piece left.

Rachel thinks Maria Elena has been extravagantly generous, and it makes her ashamed of her own holding back. While the children are eating, clustered around the table, the grownups sit on the courtyard steps and watch benignly. Rachel can make out enough Spanish to understand that Frida is telling Maria Elena how much she likes Oaxaca. She describes their visit a few days ago to the nearby village where they saw the artisans making the fantastic carved animals and working their looms. She says she would like to come back for a summer and paint, bring the children and have them learn Spanish.

"I'd like to buy a little place here," Frida is saying.

Maria Elena is shocked. "Oh, no," she says. "There is nothing here, nothing." She gestures toward the blue mountains in back of the house. "You have Disney, Las Vegas."

Rachel's nose wrinkles in distaste. She hates Las Vegas, refuses to visit it, as though kitsch were some sort of infectious disease.

Maria Elena comes into the courtyard with an armful of packages for the grownups, wrapped in shiny paper. She hands a soft irregularly-shaped package to Rachel. Rachel is taken aback. Certainly she has done nothing to deserve a present from

this woman—she has even had thoughts that David and Frida, if they could see into her mind, would surely find disturbing. She unwraps the shiny paper warily and finds a woven shawl that surprises her with its loveliness. It is blue like the mountains, and the gray-green of young olive trees, and a border of pale wheat. She runs her fingers over the fabric, which has the responsive feel of natural fibers, then shakes out the shawl and puts it around her shoulders. “Thank you. It’s beautiful,” she says to Maria Elena, smiling.

Rachel sits in the courtyard with the shawl around her, watching Maria Elena give presents to Frida and David, and remembers the women she had seen weaving on their handlooms in the village they had visited a few days ago. Squatting on their heels in the dust, they had long braids tied with colorful ribbons. How sure the women’s hands had seemed, the shuttle flying almost by itself through the web. The children, her grandchildren, had squatted next to them in the heat, trying to make out the emerging pattern. The weavers had no drawing or design that Rachel could see, but they seemed to know exactly when to change the color of their thread, trusting their fingers to create the same design woven by their mothers and grandmothers.

Rachel remembers how Frida had felt the cloth in that village, rubbed it gently against her face, bought some to take home. She thinks about Frida’s wish to be here, how much she loves the culture. It strikes her that this is real: Frida might buy a place. And suddenly she is frightened of the change that might bring to her life. Rachel feels her throat go dry, contemplating their moving away, their loss to her. Always her first fear is that something will interfere with her access to her grandchildren.

Frida is laughing at something one of the children said, and hugs him, her face radiant, her eyes squeezed shut. Rachel reluctantly concedes that this place is good for Frida and the children.

Later in the day, sitting with the sun barely visible above the wall, Rachel feels something loosen within her. It isn't something violent like an earthquake, more like a silent shift in the massive plates that shape the earth. She closes her eyes so she can better grasp what is happening.

Chrysimia comes over with a cloth dipped in lemon water. "Your son told me you have trouble with your eyes. This will make them feel better," she says, looking at Rachel with concern.

"Thank you, dear," Rachel says, putting the cloth against her forehead.

Something in Chrysimia makes her think of the Mexican girl she'd read about who had died of a heart attack when her house collapsed in a recent flood. She had been helping to support her mother and grandmother on three dollars a day.

Rachel has a sudden view of herself from the outside—her way of seeing people faintly, murkily, everything referred back to herself, her anxieties, her vision blurred by her own image. A black spot distorting the view.

"That helps a lot," she says to Chrysimia, who is hovering near her. She motions her to sit down. Rachel has a big house back in the U.S., empty now with the children gone. Suddenly it seems perfectly clear what should happen. If Chrysimia could manage to cross the border, she could stay with her. Maybe teach her Spanish. Rachel doesn't say

any of this yet. But she knows that all she has to do is to hold the end of the brightly-colored thread in her fingers, and little by little the pattern would emerge.