

VEXING GIFTS

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It is said in our family that my grandmother, Magdalena, was blessed with a gift. Although as she lay dying, some referred to it as more of a curse.

We had all heard the tales of her prophecies. At the age of five, she predicted a flood would wipe out the town. She was scorned and scolded by the townspeople, but our family undertook the necessary preparations. Sandbags heaved at the feet of doors. Boards nailed over windows. Supplies stashed in the attic. Then a hurricane blew in and dumped so much rain on us that a dam broke, the river overflowed, and half the town was swept into the ocean. The receding tide left a church perched askew on a debris-strewn beach. Our older relatives still recalled stepping through its shattered threshold, sifting through the sands heaped between its overturned pews.

Magdalena said that life was prone to entropy just as soup was prone to congealing; both extremes were equally predictable from her point of view.

Most witnesses to her prognostications chalked her up as certifiable. But not us. We believed. After all, she had saved our family from devastation. And time and again we observed the power of her prophecies, even though some skeptics claimed they were simply self-fulfilling assertions.

The predictions flowed over the years.

She warned her sister Olivia would be impregnated out of wedlock, so our great-grandfather exiled her to a convent south of the border. There, Olivia fell in love with a young priest and ended up pregnant, alone, and excommunicated.

She foresaw weddings and deaths, recessions and booms, wars and scandals. But nobody ever took her seriously, except for us. The townsfolk heckled her with derisive nicknames. And the umbra of her infamy enveloped us all.

On her deathbed, she asked us to bring the newspaper editor to her side so she could report a final, urgent vision. It was crucial that he know. However, this request reminded us her gift was not foolproof. Not only had she not foreseen the Herald's demise, she had forgotten the fact it had already gone bankrupt years earlier.

"Nevermind," she dismissed our feeble explanations, "bring me the anchorman from the Spanish-language TV station. The bald one with the golden spectacles."

He came because his mother owed her a favor granted in exchange for a prophecy revealed. He listened to her, nodding and opening his eyes big and

wide like the matching pair of satellite dishes perched atop the station's roof. Then he absconded without saying a word. We assumed he doubted her veracity because he never aired a story about her predictions. We begged her to tell us but she wouldn't, saying she didn't wish to burden us. She insisted the anchorman would alert us in good time.

As she neared death and had received her Last Rites, she summoned me, whispering her secret into my ear.

"Just in case, Juan," she explained, "because ultimately you can't trust anyone but family." Murmuring something nearly unintelligible about me being her chosen one, her eyes fluttered shut for the last time.

"What did she say?" The others demanded.

Uneasy with being singled out, I relayed only the pertinent information. "She said there will be a monument to fear built on the border. This will be the first sign. Next, it will snow in the middle of summer. This will signal the end is near. She said we should cross the border during the summer snow, or risk being trapped by the monument."

It all sounded too vague and outlandish to even consider. Perhaps the deterioration of her aging mind had clouded her abilities. We shook our heads in rueful astonishment, and we were "we" again. And that filled me with contentment and a sense of safety. It had been too great a burden to carry her secret by myself, even for those fleeting moments.

We stared down at her inert, withered body. It already was growing cold. Soon she would be lowered into the ground and we would stand over her freshly dug grave and weep as mariachis played her favorite songs, which romantically depicted her ancestors' landing on this continent, back when the land we currently inhabited still belonged to the Spanish crown. And in the aftermath of her burial, amidst our grief and pain, filtered by the unrelenting progression of life, her final revelation slipped from our thoughts. It was always preferable to ignore unwelcome improbabilities until they loomed tangibly, casting an ominous and unavoidable shadow.



When the wall was raised it took years and billions of dollars to build. Enormous machines were brought to prepare the earth, cranes to raise the steel beams, mammoth cement turners to churn the sand and water and pour the foundation. Thousands of workers flooded into the border. Scaffolds rose along the river, winding through mountains and valleys, spanning deserts. Yellow hardhats gleamed into infinity, a galaxy of diminutive suns. Sinuous torsos and straining limbs slick with perspiration labored day and

night in orange safety vests, from afar resembling a teeming colony of tireless fire ants.

The wall disrupted our economy. People abandoned their jobs to work on it. Farms sat idle. Crops rotted in fields. Trade ground to a halt over disagreement on who would cover the astronomical costs. Armies were marshaled to protect the structure from insurgents determined to undermine its completion. Helicopters swarmed overhead like voracious mosquitos.

Alarm sirens wailed night after night. Chased by searchlights, brazen spirits strived in vain to scale the southern face of the barrier before it rose too high. Gunfire rattled like popcorn in a microwave. The cries of widows and mothers transcended the soaring obstacle every morning as they picked over the previous night's fallen. Until at last, the wall was completed and we converged like lemmings on its shore. We gazed up in awe. It ascended to such heights that its smooth gray surface blended seamlessly into the heavens.

The name of the notorious tyrant who built the wall was emblazoned across its façade in gold leaf, just as it crowned buildings to the north. We mouthed it in a baffled mixture of wonder, dread and disgust.

We gathered in our ancestral home, the very one that had survived thanks to my grandmother's gift. We sat at her long table—uncles and aunts, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters—fervently discussing our recollections of her final prophecy. Everyone turned to me for confirmation.

“You tell, us Juan. After all, she chose you.”

Squirring beneath the uneasy burden, I corroborated the consensus opinion. She had indeed foreseen this wall, cryptically referring to it as a monument. However, we agreed not to panic. It would never snow in summer. Not in a place where the average daily temperature exceeded one hundred degrees. Nodding in agreement, we settled into the collective comfort of our rationalized relief.

Staring at the television, we expressed our revulsion at the mass deportations that ensued. Swiftly, the army mobilized, its duties shifting from guarding the construction project to marching door to door, removing the undocumented, expelling them through the wall's lone gate. No one would return. Anyone who dared scale the wall would die because the heights were unattainable. Even if someone could climb that high they would run out of oxygen. And if they ascended with air tanks and breathing masks they would be gunned down by robotic snipers positioned in lofty turrets, or incinerated by unmanned drones glowing like fireflies above the wall.

Amidst the chaos of millions displaced, some of us were erroneously ejected alongside the undocumented. Torn from beds in disrupted slumber,

pried from the clutches of screaming children orphaned and left in our care. Dragged through the streets to the exit. After all, we shared the same names, spoke the same language, reflected the same spectrum of light from our sunbaked skin. These were easy mistakes to make, but not so easy to correct.

There existed laborious procedures to retrieve these family members extracted from our corpus like stolen organs, to re-ingest them from the other side of the impermeable wall, but it could take years and thousands of dollars simply to prove that they had been born in our country, and that they had attended school and paid taxes and given birth to children and fought in crusades on foreign sands in defense of our national interests. And while we had time, we didn't have money. We were not wealthy or powerful or influential. We did not possess foreign bank accounts and retain lawyers and tax accountants. We did not revel in the sight of our surnames gleaming in giant gold letters at the pinnacles of skyscrapers or emblazoned across mammoth walls of historic proportions. So we became smaller, diminished by our loss. We grew weaker and more timid. We shriveled and shirked as the military convoys rumbled and rolled through our town's dusty streets, shaking our homes from the faltering foundations to the rattling windows to the creaking rafters. We cowered in the shadow of the wall.

As the deportations continued, new applicants for immigration were compelled to prove their ideological compatibility with the state's shared values. The process was so effective at preserving homogeneity that it was quickly extended to the rest of us. Rigorous examinations were administered. Lengthy questionnaires. Role-playing exercises. Week after week, the bar for citizenship was raised higher. Psychological profiles. Neurological scans. Genetic predispositions. The reasons for removal multiplied. And if we failed the test, we would be deported too, regardless of the fact we had been born here. Our birthright and our papers would be revoked and we would be summarily dispatched through the gate in the wall.

On one of those days, as a broad swath of our ilk faced expunction, a woman racing towards the border checkpoint with proof of her husband's philosophical compliance with the nation's despotic leader lost control of her vehicle and collided into a tractor-trailer ferrying mattresses to the local detention center. The truck teetered and toppled onto its side, metal shrieking, sparks flying, cars and armored vehicles ramming into it as it swung horizontally and skidded across multiple lanes of oncoming traffic on the elevated highway. Ripped into shreds, the trailer spewed its contents onto the roadway and the approaching vehicles flew through the mattresses, slicing them into ribbons. A storm of feathers exploded into the clear blue sky and descended onto the ground below the overpass, the breeze carrying the

light goose down as it floated towards the earth in slow motion before the gawking eyes of stunned onlookers, children in windows, elders tossing their walkers aside and jumping for joy, playing in the summer snow.

That night we reconvened. It was happening. Magdalena's final prophecy was inescapable. We hastily collected fading photographs and keepsakes, and we fled through the abandoned streets coolly reflecting the pale moonlight, silently dashing towards the smooth wave of sleek concrete bisecting our continent as high and as far as the eye could see. We turned ourselves in to the guards at the gate. We professed to be ideologically unfit to remain. We didn't wish to endure the test. We didn't want to be processed. We just wanted to leave. Befuddled, they rifled in vain through stacks of forms, seeking one designed for this unexpected scenario. Stumped, they waved us through and slammed the gate behind us with a terrible clang. On the other side, the suffering was unspeakable. But we were not alone.

We found our grandmother's nephew. Olivia's son was decrepit now, but he was still one of us. We had stayed in contact. We had gone to each other's weddings and funerals. We had shared images on social media before the wall had gone digital to prevent such ideologically contagious interactions between the people of our diverging nations. He welcomed us into his home. It was modest but it was safe from the tumult outside, where masses gathered in roiling protests at the wall, and the drug cartels cannibalized each other amidst gunfire and clouds of cocaine. In his living room, we huddled around an archaic television set. The plastic box was powered by a vacuum tube. We wrestled pointlessly with the metallic bunny ear antennae protruding from its back. It gave us something to do so we persisted, fiddling with anachronistic knobs as the picture twisted and distorted, scrolling up and down, a black line dissecting every frame.

The anchorman reported in Spanish, a flickering and nearly indistinguishable face, hairless and bespectacled, that spoke in a familiar voice. It was the man who had visited Magdalena long ago. He spoke of a historic rocket launch north of the border. It was to be of epic proportions, he claimed as we expressed our surprise that he had not yet been deported. The rocket—destined for the deepest reaches of space—would be propelled by a record-shattering volume of rocket fuel.

We leaned forward in our seats, gazing at each other expectantly, our eyes pregnant with dread.

Mid-air, before its tail of fire disappeared from sight, the rocket lurched sideways and arced downward. The newsmen's eyes widened in terror. Twin satellite dishes. The cameras rolled as he reached for his cellphone and yelled in despair, "¡Es verdad! Doña Magdalena told me and I didn't believe her!

Take the children and run! I'll meet you at the gate.”

We scrambled outside. A fleet of fire engines jammed the plaza in front of the wall's solitary opening. The firefighters furiously sprayed cement into the aperture. No more deportees would come through. After all, the illegals had already been repatriated.

The mammoth rocket's fuselage plummeted towards the ground north of the border, crashing into an oil refinery whose silver spires and giant drums brimmed with highly flammable fluid. The rocket's stores of liquid hydrogen combined with the oil and gasoline, detonating an infernal radius of rolling flames. Hellfire rained down, torching the roofs of buildings. The explosion obliterated our old town's lone evacuation route. The ground shuddered throughout the continental shelf, triggering tremors and earthquakes along major fault lines and fracking fissures. The wrathful blaze ripped out from the refinery, sparking pipelines spidering towards the great cities of the north. Entire cities tumbled into the oceans, along with the arrogant towers that bore the reviled wall builder's name.

With nowhere to run, the remaining residents banged their vehicles stubbornly into each other, like children in bumper cars, as they desperately turned south and headed for the gate in the wall. They ran through the streets dodging fiery hail. Yet those who reached the gate found nothing but an arched scar in a dense wall of cement where the deportation tunnel had gaped. Consumed by fear in the shadow of its soaring and impenetrable monument, they drowned in a flood of fire and heat.

The wall itself held the disaster at bay, protecting the land to the south. But in doing so, it served as a dam. Instead of allowing the destructive miasma to dissipate, it reflected the eviscerating waves of fire and toxic fumes ever northwards.

At dawn, we walked in a daze through a persistent rain of ashes carried over the wall by mournful winds.

Our grandmother's final prophecy proven right, we could at last live outside her long shadow. But what would we do? Some of us dropped to our knees and wept for our lost nation. Others clustered in circles and prayed for the souls of the dead. And at that instant I understood something my grandmother had whispered into my ear the last time she spoke, “Juan, you are my chosen one, the one to lead us forward. Fight your fear. Remember, the best time to lead is not when the future is clear and crystallized, but when it is murky and undefined. Then it is yours for the shaping.”

I knew then I must scale my own wall.

I gathered my family and urged them to begin anew in this land where our genes were no strangers. We thanked our cousin, accepted the supplies

he generously provided, and headed south on a shattered road littered with the carnage of drug lords who had turned savagely on each other upon losing their prized market to the north.

Without looking back, we ventured towards Veracruz, where our ancestors had first landed. Troubadours and sailors they had been, gypsies with hearts of pirates, some born with vexing gifts like foretelling the future and remembering the past.

As we left the wall behind us and faced an uncertain tomorrow, we knew one thing for sure. The monument to fear had served a purpose; just not the one its builder had intended.